Ferdowsi and Tajik National Identity

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Literature has its roots in folklore--Gorky

Abstract

Ferdowsi's life and works have been claimed by many nations as their own. As national boundaries have changed over the years, Ferdowsi's cultural contribution to the nations of Southwest Asia has grown. He is not just the author of a great epic poetic work, but the founder of a great ethnic identity. Nowhere outside of Iran is this seen more clearly today than in Tajikistan. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the new nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States had the difficult task of choosing national identities and national symbols for their people, particularly their children. The people of Kirghizstan have made the epic of Manas central to their national identity. Uzbeks have chosen the figure of Teymur-lang (Tammerlaine). Tajkis, as the only Persian speaking people of the region, have made the work of Ferdowsi a central feature of their conception of themselves and their nation. Drawing on research in Tajikistan spannning two years, I document some of the formal and informal ways that Ferdowsi's life and work is being used today in the construction of Tajik national identity, and discuss the implications of this process for the future of the Tajik people. In this paper I will focus on informal traditions regarding Ferdowsi and on the recent State-sponsored celebrations of the 1100th Anniversary of the Samanid Empire.

Introduction: The multi-cultural Dilemma for New Nations

As Lloyd Fallers observed more than two decades ago in *The Anthropology of the Nation-State,* the greatest national challenges do not revolve around economics, or politics, or defense. They are more often challenges concerning intangible symbols. All successful nations possess core symbolic elements that serve as touchstones for their citizens. These symbolic elements inspire loyalty, concretize feelings of personal pride and honor, and underlie the moral basis for public participation in national defense,

politics and social and economic institutions. New nations must decide consciously or unconsciously what symbols they wish to use to represent their feelings about themselves individually and collectively. New nations in the 20th Century have faced a great struggle in constructing national identities for themselves. The problem is particularly acute when a given nation encompasses more than one ethnic, religious or linguistic group. One can note the problems with new nations of Africa, some of which have dozens of groups with their own local loyalties that supersede their loyalty to the state.

Such nations do not choose to be multicultural. They have multiculturalism thrust upon them, and their citizens must make choices concerning the particular mix of attention they will accord to the various elements that may be incorporated into public expressions of identity. Such expressions are wide ranging. Choices of cultural emphasis in public education, festivals, monuments, emblems and public display of symbols are examples. Every time a national leader makes a public remark, or supports a public event he or she affects the public perception of this identity. It is a delicate matter, because groups that feel excluded are likely to grow alienated and hostile over time. Since new nations have a hard enough time maintaining basic services, this kind of social division is dangerous.

Let me be clear. The selection of national symbols always involves a degree of fictionalization of historical and cultural fact. A nation *constructs* its symbols to solve social problems, and to help its citizens feel part of a whole entity. As I will argue below, the figure of Ferdowsi and the Shμhnμmeh have played an important role in concretizing Tajik identity. They have been used by Tajik leaders as a symbolic means of providing

their nation with a clear vision of its own cultural history, and helping to resolve many ambiguities in Tajikistan's sense of itself and its own destiny.

Identity in Tajikistan

The new nations in the former Soviet Union face many challenges in the near future of the kind just mentioned. No nation in the FSU has more symbolic resources, and more confusion about how to marshal them than Tajikistan.

With this in mind, it is my aim in this paper not to rehearse the political dynamics of Tajikistan, but rather to present the cultural dilemmas that the Tajik people face in trying to forge a new nation out of their former Soviet territory. Most of these choices do not involve questions of the use of tangible resources, but rather decisions about symbolic resources. Moreover, these choices involve much more than simply choosing from a menu of identities and symbols. These intangible resources are still ambiguous and somewhat unformed. They will undergo manipulation and concretization in the next few years as Tajikistan creates itself.

The process of symbolic nation construction is already well underway in Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakistan. A national epic and hero in Kirghizstan, Manas, has been incorporated into the constitution. Uzbekistan has decided (for better or worse) that Teymur Lang (Tammerlane) is a suitable national hero. The Kazaks are a bit more conflicted about their dual national identity but they have moved their capital closer to the center of the nation to split the geographical distance between the principal ethnic groups that make up their population. These nations have the admirable advantage of having financial resources to plan and build. Kazakistan and Uzbekistan have potential

oil wealth, and Kirghizstan substantial finacial assistance from the United States and other Western nations.

The Republic of Tajikistan is the smallest and most isolated of the new nations of former Soviet Central Asia. With a population of around 6 million, and virtually no arable land, it is also the poorest of the new Republics. Devoid of virtually all natural resources save hydroelectric power, the Tajiks have a very difficult economic future.

The ethnic composition of Tajikistan is approximately 55% Takik, 23% Uzbek, 10% Ethnic Russian and 2% Other. Tajiks also live in neighboring nations, notably Uzbekistan in the largely Tajik cities of Samarkand and Bukhara and the areas surrounding them. The most notable fact about the ethnic composition of the nation is that its population is virtually an island of Aryans in a sea of Turks. The nation thus has a greater cultural affinity with its Afghan and Pakistani neighbors to the south and with its Iranian neighbors to the west than with its immediate neighbors in the former Soviet Union.

Another serious geographical dilemma for the nation has to do with the mountains that split it into three parts that are for all intents culturally separate. One cannot travel between them by road for most of the year. In addition, one of the three regions, the Pamir or Gorno-Badakhshan region has a population which is 95% Ismai'li, owing allegiance to the Aga Khan. This is in sharp contrast to the rest of the nation where the inhabitants are Sunni Muslim, or atheists. The Badakhshan region was an autonomous oblast under the Soviet Union, and has retained this status in the new nation of Tajikistan. The residents of Badakhshan do not speak Tajik or Russian as their first language, but

rather a variety of Indo-European languages—practically one for each of the isolated valleys of the region—that are largely mutually unintelligible.

Tajikistan has suffered under a civil conflict (Abdoullaev 1993, Bushkov 1997, Roy 1993) that has debilitated the nation for close to ten years. The conflict seems to now be over, or at least in abatement. I visited in January and again this past Summer, and the reduction in arms was noticeable. Recent correspondence tells me that the streets of the capital and other larger towns are now relatively safe. The cessation of the conflict between the Taliban and opposition in Afghanistan has been an important factor contributing to peace in Tajikistan. The Afghan conflict had spilled over the border in many ways exacerbating the Tajik civil conflict.

Nation-building and identity

With peace breaking out, the Tajiks can now turn seriously to the problem of nation building. In a sense, the Tajik nation is a step beyond the notion of an "imagined community" as described by historian Benedict Anderson—it is a community of necessity. Tajiks have been given an impossible piece of territory with a disparate population and have been forced to make a nation out of it. Had the Soviet leaders been more perspicacious and anticipated that the Tajiks would have to go it on their own, they might have dealt them a better hand, and allowed them the great cultural centers of their past—Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Marv, but it was not to be.

Still, the unification of the nation requires the use of some symbolic core. The Tajiks face a large range of choices in this matter. Here are the contrasting dimensions from which they must choose: If the choices were clear-cut, they would be easier, but in every case they are ambiguous.

A. Religious identity: Islamic—Secular

The recent civil conflict actually had as its base regional rivalries that date back to the 19th Century. However, the post-Soviet conflict has manifested itself as a rivalry between Islamic and secular forces. The accord between the secular "government" and the Islamic "opposition" in which the opposition assumes responsibility for about 30% of the rule of the nation is virtually unprecedented in the world today. The recent history of other nations that face this choice, notably Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, the Sudan, and Libya suggest that the sharing of power in this manner rarely works. This leads to a re-examination of the Tajik rivalry itself. Given the regional roots of the conflict, the depth of the commitment of the Islamic representatives remains an open question. There is no doubt that it has been advantageous for the opposition to espouse a strong Islamic stance; it has gained them financial support from other nations that have a commitment to Islamic government, and it has gained them adherents within Tajikistan that they otherwise might not have attracted. On the other hand, the "secular" government retains the support of many nominal Muslims.

B. Ethnic Community Identity: Tajik—Russian—(Uzbek)

The choice of a language, and by extension a writing system, for Tajikistan is a serious question. National sentiment favors using Tajik as the official language of the nation. Political speeches by both government and opposition are given in Tajik. However practicality demands that Russian be retained as an official language, if only a secondary one. The difficulty is made clear when the instructional system is taken into consideration. In post-Soviet Tajikistan the government would like all school instruction to take place in Tajik. There are several obstacles to this. One simple obstacle is that there

are still a large number of people in the country who do not speak Tajik well enough to be educated in the language, whereas Russian is a *lingua franca* that nearly all adults understand. A second obstacle is that there are simply not enough instructional materials in Tajik to carry students through a full high-school curriculum, much less a college curriculum.

The public media is fully bilingual at this time. Newspapers in both Tajik and Russian appear, and Russian and Tajik television programs are available.

The question of the use of Uzbek poses a separate dilemma. Uzbek is primarily used in the Northern "Leninabad" region of the country in the Ferghana valley north of the Fan mountains. In this region, an attempt is made to educate children using Russian, Tajik and Uzbek. The financial and administrative strain of this effort is very great.

At some point the nation will have to make a major language policy decision. For the time being this decision is in abeyance.

C. Regional Identity: Persian—Central Asian

There is no question that Tajik culture is inextricably tied with what one might call Greater Iranian Culture. The question of how far and how deep these ties go is one of the most burning cultural issues in Tajikistan. Whereas the historical Iranian roots for the nation are acknowledged, revered and strong, the modern state of Tajikistan barely has a history.

Ancient Khorasan was a unified cultural area from ancient pre-Islamic times. The pre-Islamic roots of the area are seen today in the extensive Now-ruz (New Year's) celebrations that are observed even among the Turkish populations of Central Asia at the Spring equinox. Many scholars speculate that Zoroastrianism was founded and grew in

this region, and others even claim that it was the original seat of ancient Indo-European culture.

The important empires that grew and flourished here from the 10th through the 16th Centuries served to unify the region culturally, and that unity persists today. Residents of the area, whatever modern state they belong to, remain justly proud of the achievements of the poets, writers, scientists and artists of the region, whose works constitute a large part of the canon of Persian cultural heritage. Indeed, Khorasan can claim to be the cradle of the modern Persian language, for the earliest poets writing in modern Persian, such as Rudaki, came from this region.

Modern Tajiks acknowledge the close cultural connections with Iranian literature and art, but are uneasy with the religious and political orientation of modern Iran. Iran has tried to make cultural inroads in Tajikistan, only to be held at arm's length by both the Tajik government (largely secular in orientation) and the opposition (who are Sunni). Eventually this ambiguity will have to be worked out for the Tajik people.

The Samanid Celebration

Progress in working out these cultural ambiguities was seen in the decision last year to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid dynasty in Tajikistan. Using Samanids as symbolic figures solve a great number of cultural problems for the Tajiks even though this requires bending and reinterpreting a large number of historic facts. In embracing this empire (as the Uzbeks embrace Tammerlaine and the Kyrgyz embrace Manas) the Tajiks are creating a "Samanid cultural complex" upon which to build their sense of their own civilization. As I will argue below, Ferdowsi and the Shμhnμmeh play an important role in this complex.

The Samanid Empire lasted only about 200 years from 819-999. It coexisted with the Abbasid Empire in Baghdad, and was a source of Persian inspiration for the Islamic world. It was the source of support for many of the early poets and artists, Rudaki, Manuchehri and Ferdowsi being the most prominent of them. Arguably without the Samanid influence, later developments in Persian culture would have not taken place. More importantly, it is seen by Tajik nationalists as a continuation of the Sasanian Empire, the Arab conquest being seen as a kind of interregnum.

The Tajik government has decided to embrace the Samanids as the symbolic embodiment of Tajik civilization. Although the true Samanid seat of government was Bukhara, now of course in Uzbekistan, the Tajiks feel confident in this identification.

The Samanids make ideal symbols. They were Sunni Muslims, living long before the establishment of Shi'ism as a state religion in Iran. They are primarily known for their cultural patronage rather than their religious beliefs (indeed, Rudaki is claimed by the Ismai'lis), and their civilization spans the geographic region encompassing all of the territories Tajiks see as their cultural realm.

Throughout the country culturally significant structures are being rebuilt in the name of the Samanid celebration, even if they have nothing to do with the Samanids. In anthropological terms this is a good sign that the Samanid complex is working as a general symbolic consolidating force. A good example of this is the reconstruction of fabulous 19th Century tea houses in the northern Ferghana Valley city of Esfarah. The government opposition forces, who embrace religious symbolism, are reconstructing historic mosques for the celebration. Additionally, an extensive scholarly conference was held with not a single paper or discussion devoted to the Samanids.

Left out of the cultural equation in the Samanid complex are the troublesome symbolic elements that pull at Tajik identity. Russian culture is of course absent, but so are Modern Iranian elements. The re-creation of the past thus contributes to a re-formulation of modern Tajikistan. One Isma'ili scholar breathlessly proclaimed a "Samanid Revival in Tajikistan[1]"

We can expect that this process of cultural reformulation and juggling will continue for some time to come. If the current political coalition holds, the chances of seeing a stable symbolic identity in Tajikstan in time are great.

The Role of Ferdowsi and the Shμhnμmeh

The Shμhnμmeh plays a special role in the Samanid complex. It is not only a symbol of Iranian civilization, it is a symbol of the era of Iranian civilization that was created in Khorasan during the Samanid Empire, and hence by extension, in today's Tajikistan. For Tajikistan, it is more than that, however. For the Tajik people, the Shμhnμmeh is an essential emanation of their homeland, perhaps in a manner that is even more fervent than in Iran. This is based on several selective facts cited to me on a regular basis by Tajik folklorists, scholars, and ordinary citizens.

1. Ferdowsi is a native of the region.

This very special claim can hardly be denied. Although born at Tus, this was Samanid territory, and he was a citizen of the Samanid Empire. His statue, as well as statues of Rudaki and Ibn Sina, is prominent in Dushanbeh.

2. The Shμhnμmeh is derived from folk tales and legends that are seen by the Tajik people as originating in Tajik territory.

This is a selective perception. Scholars of the Shµhnµmeh know well that the origins of the Shµhnµmeh predate the great Khorasan civilizations. A first group is an ancient mythological collection of folk origin that has affinities with the most ancient Indo-European legends[2]. A second group of stories is the so-called "Alexander cycle" with examples spread throughout Southwest Asia. Finally, a Sasanian group of materials with some Achaeminian elements mixed in. These include the various lost works such as the The Khodµy-nµma, "The book of kings" was the Sasanian text appearing under Khosro-Anushirvan (531-579) and in a final form under Yazdigerd III (632-51), a translation of the history of the Sasanians for Caliph Hishµm (724-43) now lost. The Garshµsp-nµma yielded a work called the Kitµb-e Garshµsp which may have been part of one of these compilations[3]. However, there is other evidence that indicates that Ferdowsi did quite a bit of independent research throughout the Samanid Empire. Some of the facts continually cited by Tajik scholars include the following:

a. The direct inclusion of the thousand verses by Daqiqi, who was, of course, a Samanid courtier.
b. The story of Rustam's death was reportedly obtained from a poet named ¥zµd-Sarv, a poet who lived with an Iranian patriot named Ahmad b. Sahl in Merv (Rypka 1959: 152).
c. In a story about the Askhanians he quotes a villager from Chµch in Transoxania.
d. Some material seems to have been derived from the Committee of Four Zoroastrians convened by Abu-Mansur Muhammad b.

'Abdu-r Razzaq, the feudal ruler of Tus who completed their task in 957 of compiling material.

3. Shμhnμmeh stories still circulate in Tajikistan and Tajik areas of Uzbekistan.

The continuance of popular tales related to the Shμhnμmeh has been documented not only in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but also in Iran Anjavi-Shirazi (1975, 1976, 1985) and Blum (1972). Popular editions of stories of Rostam (Rostam-nμmeh) and other Shμhnμmeh heroes are available in Tajikistan today. In traditional teahouses, particularly those of the Ferghana Valley, most especially in the city of Esfarah, stories from the Shμhnμmeh are recited, not in the *naqqali* style, but in a seated recitational style.

4. Claims are made that in remote areas the Siavoushμn, ritual mourning for Siμvush is still practiced.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to document this surprising claim. However, the survival of such practices would not be surprising, since dirges based on the death of Siμvush from Bukhara have been historically documented.

All of these reasons give Tajiks a special claim to the Shμhnμmeh that makes it in some sense more uniquely "theirs" than anyone else's. For this reason, it can serve as a strong symbolic expression of who Tajiks are, and what they represent to the world.

Conclusion

The special place held by the Shμhnμmeh in the symbolic construction of Tajik identity is remarkable and interesting. The Shμhnμmeh itself has some of the qualities that make it a perfect representation of the Samanid civilization, and by extension, of the

Tajik civilization that citizens of Tajikistan would like to see for themselves, namely a secular society, culturally Iranian and proudly nationalistic.

It would be a mistake to see the question of Tajik national identity as a settled one. There are still important countervailing tendencies in the form of strong religious elements. Moreover, Russian and Uzbek cultural elements may yet exert a strong influence in Tajik life. However, with the celebration of the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid Empire, and the strong role played in the veneration of Ferdowsi and the Shμhnμmeh in that celebration, it is clear what the current regime wishes to do. It has created in effect, a paradox: a myth out of a myth. It has taken this vital literary work and used it as part of what I have called the Samanid complex.

I would not like to leave anyone with the impression that I disapprove of this process. On the contrary, I see it as inevitable for every civilization. All people must have symbols to concretize their common bonds, and we all mythologize the symbols we do use for this purpose. Indeed, the Shμhnμmeh itself is just such a mythologization. The Tajiks could have done much worse than to choose Ferdowsi and his great work as the centerpiece for their aspirations as a people.

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[1] Datoo (2000). See also Bashiri (1997)

[2] C. Scott Littleton notes, for example, that the triumverate Jamshid, Zahhμk, Feridun, all with Avestan names, parallels the Greek sequence of Uranus, Kronos, and Zeus. Additional parallels are found in Babylonian, Indian , Hittite, Norse and Phoenician legends (Littleton 1970).

[3] A prose Shahnameh by Abu-l Mu'ayyad is claimed as the source of the Kitab-e Garshasp by M. Bahμr.

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