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**Variations on Uzbek Identity: Strategic Choices, Cognitive Schemas and Political Constraints in Identification Processes**

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“Variations on Uzbek Identity” is a comparative analysis of Uzbek ethnic identity as it has emerged historically and as is expressed today in four diverse regions of contemporary Uzbekistan: Bukhara, Khorezm, Ferghana and Shahrissabz. The book is organised around a close description of these four settings (one chapter per fieldsite), together with an introduction, a conclusion and an opening historical overview that traces the Uzbeks’ ethnic history from “nomadic conquerors to post-socialist farmers.”

The primary fieldwork data, collected in the early 2000s, consists of kinship and marriage patterns, local commentaries on language use, and an analysis of degrees of perceived cultural closeness and distance elicited through interview questions and cognitive tests. This is coupled in each case with a detailed discussion of the geographical setting and of the historical interaction between settled and nomadic populations, providing the context for current negotiations of identity and popular dynamics of differentiation according to language, dialect, economy, or mode of life.

Collectively, this material constitutes the framework for an extended reflection upon the question of “who are the Uzbeks” (or as Finke puts it in a final section of the conclusion, “What Then is an Uzbek?”). More specifically, the monograph seeks to explain the persistence and attractiveness of Uzbek as a category of identification for linguistically and culturally diverse populations. In contrast with traditionally pastoral or transhumant Central Asian groups such as the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, Uzbek identity is primarily a territorial rather than a genealogical category: one can become Uzbek through co-residence and cultural borrowing. Drawing on rational choice theory, Finke argues that groups “owe their existence to the benefits they can provide for individuals, in particular their ability to reduce transaction costs” (p. x). Being Uzbek has historically provided such advantages: as a flexible and locally adaptable category of identification, it is “more accessible for those who choose to switch group affiliations, because it does not require that they change their entire way of life” (p. 23).

The empirical diversity of variations upon “Uzbekness” that are documented here makes the text a valuable contribution to regional literature. Uzbekistan remains under-studied within the growing anthropological literature on Central Asia, and the systematic approach allows for close comparison between research sites along dimensions of geography and history, contemporary social organisation, kinship patterns, language use and local discourses on closeness and distance. Scholars of Uzbekistan will no doubt find details such as the discussions of inter-generational Uzbek-Tajik bilingualism in the Bukharan oasis, the models of social distance that are invoked from historically nomadic populations, or the persistence of salient dialect differences in neighbouring

villages of Qashqadaryo to be of interest. Finke provides persuasive refutation of the claim that the ethnic category, Uzbek, was simply “invented” by the Soviets and had little local resonance prior to the national-territorial delimitation of 1924-27. He also shows how the internal diversity of the category “Uzbek” has allowed it to become very attractive as a category of identification, particularly for marginal or minority groups—and that this dynamic existed irrespective of the well-documented attempts by Soviet authorities to impose “Uzbek” as a passport nationality (*natsional’nost’*) on non-Uzbek minority groups.

For all of its empirical detail, however, the text ultimately provides a rather static picture of Uzbek identity. In part this is an artefact of the research design and textual organisation. Each cluster of villages or small towns is approached, methodologically, as an autonomous unit, with little investigation of the patterns of trade, military service, or seasonal migration that might link it into broader regional or trans-regional networks. Likewise, each cluster of villages is taken to “stand for” a broader region of contemporary Uzbekistan. This leads to some rather problematic generalisations about local identities, particularly for the Ferghana valley, the extensive internal differences within which have been well noted in the extant ethnographic literature but which receive little attention here. The lack of attention to urban settings means that the complex and many-layered registers of identification that characterise such settings fall from view. Moreover, the textual organisation of the monograph, which privileges fieldsites over themes (language use, kinship models, cognitive schemas, etc.), means that the macro-level argument can often get lost in the detail of empirical description.

A more substantive critique, however, concerns the very approach to ethnic identity that underpins the analysis. In the model adopted here, Uzbek identity is conceived as a “strategic choice” that maximises benefits to individuals within a given social system, and that social order is in turn “the result of repeated interaction among self-interested actors” (p. 15). Like all rational choice models, this account borders on the tautological (it is unclear here how a “non-rational” individual action would be identified). It also follows from this approach that identity is conceived as a thing that can be known unambiguously and elicited empirically through standardised tests drawing upon pre-given, bounded categories of identification: in this case, the ethnic categories of Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Kazakh, Afghan, Karakalpak, Arab and so on which interview respondents are invited to group together according to degrees of similarity and difference) Critiques of such substantivist approaches to identity that have been developed in recent anthropological and sociological literatures are acknowledged in the introduction, but are not systematically engaged in either theoretical or empirical terms.

In sum, while the monograph provides some interesting insights into how ethnicity is talked about and how ethnic differences are rationalised—in particular, local discourses concerning comparative degrees of civilization and hospitality to be found among different ethnic groups—the privileging of standardised tests and formal interviews over participant observation means that we get very little sense of how ethnicity is *done*: that is to say, how and when ethnic boundaries are invoked or ignored, emphasised or de-emphasised in the

everyday run of trading, farming, feasting, gossiping or joking. Identity in this approach is treated as something essentially singular, unambiguous and transparent both to the interview subject and the interviewer. Ultimately, therefore, the monograph is more successful in documenting local discourses concerning the specificity “Uzbekness” in cultural, economic and linguistic term than it is in capturing, ethnographically, the variable salience of ethnic identity in daily life.

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