**Ethnos theory of the 1970s and 80s at the Soviet periphery**

By Sophie Roche

In 1969 Yulian Vladimirovich Bromlei¹ wrote an article titled “Ethnos and Endogamy” in the journal “Sovjetskaya Etnographiya” in which he displayed his ideas and further developed the ethnic concepts of Sergei Shirokogorov, an ethnographer of the early 20th century.² In this article Bromlei redefined ethnos as a biological construction beyond the markers that had been accorded to ethnic groups since Stalin: language, culture, and territory. Endogamy, or more generally marriage within a group was the main mechanism that sustained ethnic unities over long periods and against socialist evolutionary theory, which had predicted that ethnic groups would merge into nationalities and finally into a socialist society.³ While language, culture and other social determinants can be found in many social groups, the ethnic group has a “genetic barrier” that, if broken, leads to the dissolution of the ethnic group. In the words of Bromlei “ethnos though in various degrees, functions as biological unifier.”⁴

Bromlei was a specialist in Slavic studies but was made Director of the Ethnographic Institute in 1966 by the party itself, rather than through competition with the much elder ethnographer L. P. Potapov (1907-2000), who specialised in the Turkic population of the Altai and Central Asia.⁵ Bromlei’s ethnos theory was much discussed and became controversial among ethnographers; it highly influenced ethnographers during the last decades of the Soviet Union.⁶ In the eyes of his students, Bromlei’s primordial ethnos theory directly contradicted the conservative Marxist approach of historical materialism, and was hence received as a fresh idea by many ethnographers, who started to investigate ethnicity in all its facets. Tamara Dragadze (2011)⁷ remembers that “The beauty of ethnos theory was that indeed one criteria of an ethnos was that it should encompass more than one class. In Moscow academic circles, this was much appreciated,” (p. 29) According to Faizulloev, Bromlei

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¹ Until today Bromlei is discussed among ethnographers working in and on Tajikistan. He has left lasting ideas on ethnicity.
² S. M. Shirokogorov (1887-1939) was an ethnographer specialised in the Siberian population. He moved to China in the 1920, and it was only in the 1970s that Bromlei reused his theory of ethnos in his own theories. Frédéric Bertrand 2002. *L’anthropologie soviétique des années 20-30*, pp. 326-7.
³ For a concrete example of how the evolutionary model of society coined as „pyatichlenka“ was used, see T. Tchoroev 2002. Historiography of post-soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, pp. 351–374.
⁷ Presentation of Sergei Abashin, p. 20.
openly questioned the whole project of the Soviet Union during his lessons, which shook many students’ secure frame of reference. Although Bromlei did not reject history as such for the concept of ethnic group – the reference for ethnographers remained human history and the history of mankind (Dragaze 1990: 207)⁸ – he did identify that ethnic groups resist or at least readapt to the grand development narrative of historical materialism. The ethnographers Polyakov and after him Bushkov and Faizulloev grew up with these ideas.⁹

In the writing of the ethnographers, ethnic theory replaced all other types of possible identifications, less in the ethnographic material itself than in the conclusions and interpretations until far into the 1990s.¹⁰ In the studies on Central Asia, ethnic theories became the major framework, following Bromlei, to contextualise ethnographic knowledge that is increasingly being replaced by the concept of Islamic or Muslims’ society. Depending on the level of analysis, Tajikistan was divided into the four ethnic sub-regions of Leninabad, Kulob, Karategin and Pamir, then into sub-ethnic groups that could be as small as one village.¹¹ The ethno-regional groups were later identified as being congruent with political identities that formed the basis of the parties during the civil war of the 1990s in Tajikistan (see further down).

The national ethnic narrative (narodnost’) was a conscious project within the Soviet Union, a project upon which the Tajik historian Bobojon Ghafurov (1908-1977) was going to write the script for Tajikistan.¹² When the Soviet Union collapsed, Muhiddin Faizulloev knew Tajikistan in its “ethnic diversity”, not as a national project but as a collection of jokes and nicknames, and a plurality of languages, professions and occupations, as well as practices. The plurality of possible identification in Soviet Central Asia became a way of integrating into the ideological whole – like the saying “the five fingers of a hand are all different”.

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⁹ In 2000 Valery Tishkov took over the post as director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow and re-launched the discussion on ethnicity and nationalism in 20th century. In his book “Requiem for Ethnos” he screens the notion of ethnicity and nation, and concludes that the latter is harmful to people and should be given up. His debates no longer influence Tajik ethnographers, who themselves have been co-opted by national history and ordered to write about authentic traditions and historical Tajkness. Valery Tishkov 2003. Requiem for ethnos. Research in social and cultural anthropology. Moscow: Nauka.

¹⁰ See, for instance, studies in the journal of an academic institute in Moscow Mezhnatsional’nye Otnoshenia v Sovremennom Mire, Rossiyskaia Akademiya Nauk, Institut Etnografii i Antropologii.

¹¹ Sergei Abashin 2007. Natsionalizmy v Srednei Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti. Instituta etnologii i antropologii RAN. Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteiya. This sub-ethnic theory was applied to the analysis of the civil war in Tajikistan, which was described as regional (mahallgoroi), a notion that translated back as “ethnic sub-groups” I. Jean and P. Mullojanov 2008. Reflecting on peace practice project. Conflict and peacebuilding in Tajikistan. Cambridge: Collaborative Learning Projects.


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Similar to the nationalizing of ethnicity, the Soviets followed the project to lead society towards a “Soviet culture” to which all people would eventually aspire. Soviet culture was an imagined common culture of the elite (concerning politics, sciences and cultural producers like artists, musicians, architects, etc.) that was sometimes more and sometimes less aspired to by ordinary people and the cultivation for folkloric specificities, as well as tolerance for local practices. This Soviet culture was based on Russian standards and ritual practice and was expected to be adopted and standardised over time. Even literature was produced on how this Soviet culture would look like and to what degree it was to be practiced. Even nowadays we can find certain elements from this Soviet culture in the ritual practices of marriages in Tajikistan (e.g., the bride’s white clothing and the so-called Komsomol tūy).

“They used to say, today we have the Soviet Union. And this Soviet Union has its culture (farhang), and within this culture they would look down or up to society and culture (depending on the “level of development” a people had acquired) – all were parts of the Soviet Union. Bromlei was a very big person. He used to say, ‘we haven’t reached the Soviet Union yet, we will never become a Soviet Union.’ We were scared of his words – how could it be that we still hadn’t reached the Soviet Union (in which we all had learned to believe)? … He would argue: ‘The states are artificial states, everything is artificial, how could we then claim to be a Soviet Union?’ But the Soviet Union existed, even if there may have been regions like the Baltics, the East, and Central Asia, and we knew we were Tajiks. We used to speak of the Soviet civilisation (tamaduni shuravī), the Soviet culture (madaniyati shuravī), or Soviet tradition (farhangi shuravī, an’ana). Sometimes the authorities would bring examples and write books about it. They felt we should all turn to one kind of material culture (madaniyati moddi), we should all share one ideology – the Marxist Leninist one – the Bolsheviks. We should all follow the one custom and tradition (urfu odathoi an’anavi shuravī). Sometimes they would urge us to report about the use of these artificial practices, to the degree that – and I know it definitely – when a person died in Central Asia they would pressure to bury him like in Europe. Although what we saw as ‘European’ was in reality Russian, I think about, for instance: to leave the dead and organise a meeting around him. In Islam when a person dies – when he dies according to the shari’a – they put him in a separate room to wash him, either by the relatives or the corpse-washer, depending on the region. They prepare him quickly, they wash him, they clean him and bid farewell in order to bury him. Towards the end of the Soviet Union these practices had

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14 Here, Bromlei, in the words of Faizulloev, used America as the naturally-grown and much stronger Soviet Union (shuravī).
declined. In order to push these things (Soviet rituals) so that they would become general Soviet practices, they even had books ‘Sotsialisticheskaya obryadnost’\textsuperscript{16} on socialist rituals.

They would also speak about marriage and international marriages (nikohi baynalmilālī) as Soviet rituals.\textsuperscript{17} “… Then during the Soviet time local people would try – whether they managed or not remains to be studied – to break down their walls and veils and to break with religion. They used to pay great respect to a woman who had become a leader or gained a prominent position and call her a ‘European woman’; they would take her with honour and respect. This did exist. … We lived in a completely different world. …

Many countries have lived under empires, each one with its traditions and religion; the last empire was the USSR, the Soviet Union (shuravī).” (Interview with Faizulloev 16.3.2014)

The work of the ethnographer was not only to document national or Soviet customs. Instead, the 1980s were marked by a search for more and more detailed customs and traditions of “ethnic groups”. In the diaries of Faizulloev we find detailed descriptions of small groups each with an own term and identity. Difference is established not only on linguistic base but more importantly on marriage practices and more generally life cycle rituals. Such groups were identified based on Bromlei’s concept of intermarriage and ethnicity, not only in Central Asia but throughout the Soviet Union. The reports appearing in the faculty’s publication “Institut Etnologii i Antropologii RAN SSSR. Issledovaniya po prikladnoi i neotlozhnoi etnologii” from the 1980s and 90s is proof of this approach. The journal contains – almost exclusively – reports on ethnic groups and interethnic relationships. Hereby, ethnic specificities are turned into the main problem for increasing tensions during perestroika and immediately following independence.

The detailed knowledge of single villages, districts and regions that Muhiddin Faizulloev accumulated over the years made him, on the one hand, an incredible source of information. On the other hand, Faizulloev’s knowledge made him a suspicious person for the newly-independent state, which tried to impose its own national narrative. In this new narrative the “ethnic differences” were considered dangerous. Thus he was warned: “keep the knowledge you have with you”. He kept his knowledge with him for two decades, but at the cost of losing prestige and access to resources. He hardly worked as an ethnographer anymore; sometimes authorities came to consult him about details in order to re-traditionalise Khujand, and he was given an office in the administration building of the university.

\textsuperscript{16} Zakovykh et al. 1986. Sotsialisticheskaya obryadnost’.

In 2007 the Tajik government passed a law that was meant to restrict the expenses of life-cycle rituals. While the law’s primary goal was economic, its secondary goal was to standardise Tajik traditions. Life-cycle rituals in particular differ from village to village and are subject to lively discussions. Against this background it is impossible to speak of a “Tajik wedding” or a “Tajik funeral”. The law was meant to establish “the Tajik rituals”. “I told them already then that it was not possible to create one standard ritual practice. Whose rituals should become the standard? For instance, there was a Pamir person in the committee working on the law who wondered what ‘domodtalbon’ is and who suggested to simply forbid this ritual, of which he had never heard, among the Pamir people. He did not know that it is central to the wedding in Khujand,” (private conversation 18.08.2014). The new law allows a maximum of 15 people for domodtalbon while in Khujand this is perceived as the second wedding from the bride’s side, and before 2007 up to 1500 people would be invited to this event.

A year after the law on rituals was implemented, Faizulloev was asked to document its success at introducing traditional standards. However, the booklet that he produced is only partly a success story because the book brings to mind a plurality of Central Asian life-cycle rituals. He nevertheless attests to its success: “This way, through the interference of the leader of the country... from the point of view of the people (khalq), the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan ‘about traditional customs and celebration and ceremonies of the Republic of Tajikistan’ from the 8th June 2007 (No 272) has established a consensus. ... The acceptance of the law has promoted regulation, (allowed for) savings and (secured) the quality of celebrations,” (2008: 54). The book is a kind of guideline to authorities and people how to adapt feasts to the law and provides arguments for understanding how and why the new cultural standard (that the law has introduced) is appropriated, namely because they are rooted in Central Asian pre-Soviet traditions. For Faizulloev, the book has yet another meaning: it acknowledges “local traditions” against current efforts to Islamise life-cycle rituals, that is, to cleanse rituals from non-Islamic elements.

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20 Domodtalbon is the welcoming of the newly-married couple to the bride’s family. Today domodtalbon is celebrated in restaurants rather than at home. The domod (son-in-law) is accompanied by his relatives and received by his wife’s relatives. Both sides give the couple gifts such as washing machines, refrigerators, air conditioners of fans, stoves and other expensive items.
21 M. Faizulloev and A. Abdurqodirov 2008. Marosimu ma’rakahoi Khujand. Khujand: Maqomoti ijroiyai hokimiyati davlatii shahri Khujand. Interestingly, the picture on the 60-page booklet shows the hukumat (state) building, not a wedding or any other traditional feast.