Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC CLASSIFICATION OF THE TURKESTAN POPULATION IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Ismoiljon Khujakhonov
Associate Professor, Department of History, Oriental University of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Candidate of Historical Sciences

Abstract
This article analyzes the historical-political and methodological approaches to the ethnographic classification of the Turkestan population during the Russian Empire. It examines classification efforts by imperial administrators and researchers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, based on language, lifestyle, religion, and physical appearance. The article highlights the ambiguity and confusion in the use of terms such as “Sart”, “Kyrgyz”, “Uzbek” and “Tajik”. It emphasizes that the primary goal of ethnographic studies was to facilitate administrative control and organize an effective tax system. The role of language and anthropological traits in ethnic identification, as well as the stance of local intellectuals, is also addressed. The author demonstrates that the classification process was marked by significant uncertainty and inconsistencies.

Keywords:Turkestan, ethnographic classification, Russian Empire, ethnographic studies, ethnic identity.

INTRODUCTION

The process of ethnographically classifying the Central Asian population based on language and origin began during the Russian Empire. Within the framework of colonial policy, imperial administrators and researchers conducted extensive ethnographic studies aimed at exploring the lifestyle, culture, religious beliefs, customs, traditions, and psychological characteristics of the local population. Although these studies amassed a wealth of information, they were often shaped

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

by the interests and ideological approaches of the empire. Moreover, the ethnographic classification of the population was characterized by numerous ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties, which hindered a comprehensive and accurate analysis of the region's complex ethnic composition and historical-cultural processes. As a result, the ethnographic classification of Central Asian peoples during this period lacked a definitive scientific foundation and remained subordinate to political and administrative imperatives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article draws on scientific publications, statistical data, and periodicals from the Russian Empire period. Documents compiled by the empire's administrative bodies, particularly the 1867 "Regulation on the Administration of the Semirechye and Syrdarya Provinces" and the 1897 population census materials, are significant for analyzing data on the population's language, lifestyle, and ethnic composition. Ethnographic and anthropological works published by Russian Empire researchers, such as A. Shishov, N. Ostroumov, and others, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provide analyses of the ethnic classification of the Turkestan population based on their language, religious beliefs, and lifestyle. Written works by local intellectuals in Turkestan concerning ethnonyms such as Sart, Uzbek, and Tajik, as well as their perspectives on self-identification, played a crucial role in elucidating the local population's stance on ethnographic classification.

The article employs methods such as historical and ethnographic analysis, historical-comparative analysis, source criticism, and ethnographic reconstruction. By comparing the ethnographic classification approaches used by Russian Empire administrators and researchers and assessing their alignment with political-administrative objectives, ambiguities and inconsistencies in the interpretation of ethnonyms like "Sart", "Uzbek" and "Tajik" across various sources were identified. Critical analysis of statistical data and scientific publications evaluated their reliability and the extent of imperial ideological influence. By attempting to reconstruct the ethnic identity of the Turkestan population based on their lifestyle (sedentary or nomadic), language (Turkic or

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

Persian), and anthropological characteristics (Europoid or Mongoloid), the challenges and ambiguities in defining ethnic boundaries were revealed.

DISCUSSION

In the 19th century, the scholarly community held that a person's ethnic affiliation was determined by language, lifestyle (including beliefs and social psychology), and physical appearance, with an assumed interrelation among these three characteristics. According to Abashin, Russian Empire researchers believed, for a time, that the Turkic language, Mongoloid appearance, and nomadic lifestyle constituted the ethnic markers of one people in the region, while the Persian language, Europoid appearance, and sedentary lifestyle characterized another, and that these markers fully aligned with the ethnic classification of Central Asia's population (2007, p. 103).

To facilitate governance and streamline tax collection, imperial administrators classified Turkestan's indigenous population by dividing them into groups such as sedentary and nomadic. For instance, the 1867 "Regulation on the Administration of the Semirechye and Syrdarya Provinces" categorized the region's population into two major groups: Sarts, referring to all sedentary indigenous people, and Kyrgyz (actually Kazakhs – I.Kh.), referring to nomadic pastoralists (Ostroumov, 1896, p. 6). Literature from this period also reflects classifications of the indigenous population based on lifestyle, such as Sart/Kyrgyz, Tajik/Uzbek, or Sart/Uzbek, often presented as oppositional based on the aforementioned markers (Grebenkin, 1872, p. 110).

For Russian Empire administrators, Turkestan was primarily characterized as a Muslim region. When referring to the entire population, they used terms like "Muslims" or "natives". This was partly due to the administrators' focus on religious identity and partly because colonial administration activities in the region were deeply intertwined with Islam, Islamic law, and Sharia. Scholarly studies note that, from the second half of the 19th century, Russian Empire administrators began prioritizing ethnic identity over religious identity (particularly in relation to Russians), placing greater emphasis on classifying the population based on ethnic markers.

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

Ethnographic studies of the population during the Russian Empire were primarily aimed at facilitating governance and coordinating tax collection. Researchers classified Turkestan's population ethnically, with particular attention to the origins, ethnographic descriptions, and classification of Uzbeks (nomadic Uzbeks), Tajiks, and Sarts (sedentary Turkic-speaking people not divided into tribes). These groups were central to Turkestan's core provinces, and delineating ethnic boundaries among them posed certain challenges. Moreover, determining the true inheritors of the region's rich cultural heritage and its future leadership was closely tied to these groups.

By the late 19th century, language began to be regarded as the primary ethnic indicator. In the 1897 Russian Empire census, language was the main criterion (General Census, 1905, p. 25). However, attention was still paid to lifestyle and physical appearance. Since lifestyle was considered closely tied to beliefs and social psychology, Russian researchers attempted to evaluate each ethnic group through its national character. However, these evaluations were often based on the researchers' own cultural and national characteristics or relied on the opinions of neighboring peoples. N. Ostroumov noted that many positive traits among Sarts could be understood in the context of Islam and Sharia (Ostroumov, 1896, p. 58).

In addition to dividing the population into sedentary and nomadic groups, they were also categorized by race (Europoid/Mongoloid) or language (Persian/Turkic). When describing a particular ethnic group within a racial or linguistic category, classifications were based on the extent to which they preserved their "pure" race or language or had intermixed. For example, Russian researchers considered Kazakhs to be Mongoloid Turks with some Aryan (Europoid) admixture, Uzbeks as Turks positioned between Sarts and Kazakhs, and Sarts as a mixture of Tajiks and Uzbeks (Miropiev, 1901, p. 353).

Colonial researcher A. Shishov attempted to study the anthropological structure of the sedentary population in greater depth. Focusing on Aryan and Mongoloid traits, he sought to demonstrate their reflection in Sarts, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. He classified Tajiks (especially mountain Tajiks) as relatively pure Aryans, Sarts as a mix of Mongoloid and predominantly Aryan traits, and Uzbeks as predominantly Mongoloid (Shishov, 1904, p. 111). The ethnic classification of

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

the region's population, particularly the origins and ethnic affiliation of Sarts, sparked various debates.

Sarts were considered closer to Aryan peoples in terms of race and lifestyle but belonged to Turkic groups linguistically. This raised the unresolved question of which group Sarts should be assigned to. Some researchers linked them to Tajiks in terms of origin, while others viewed them as sedentary Uzbeks (Turkic). Another group considered Sarts a distinct people. Notably, local intellectuals opposed the use of the term "Sart" as an ethnonym for certain population groups, arguing that no people identified themselves as such and that the term was inherently vague (Behbudiy, 1914, p. 923).

In the works of Russian Empire researchers, tribes such as Kipchak, Kurama, and Turk, which strongly retained their tribal identity, were classified as separate groups. Thus, while attempts were made to ethnographically classify the region's population during Russian colonial rule, these efforts remained incomplete, with many ambiguities persisting. Although the ethnic self-identification of Central Asia's population was not fully formed or sufficiently expressed, a distinct ethnocultural identity emerged in the region, shaped by the interplay between sedentary and nomadic lifestyles and between Turkic and Persian linguistic and genealogical concepts.

In the early 20th century, the Turkic-speaking population of Turkestan, the Bukhara Emirate, and the Khiva Khanate consisted of several groups distinguished by lifestyle, linguistic features, and tribal structure. The most significant characteristic of the ethnocultural processes among these groups was that pastoral Turkic-Mongol tribes and Uzbek clans largely became sedentary, adapting to the ethnocultural environment of the region's sedentary population. Many even forgot their clan names, which had formed the basis of their identity. In various parts of Central Asia, constant interaction between agricultural and pastoral economies developed, with a consistently high demand for both agricultural and pastoral products. Pastoralists typically transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle only when their livestock numbers dwindled, leading to impoverishment. For example, the sedentarization of Uzbek clans increased significantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily due to economic factors. The conversion of many pastures into agricultural lands during this period

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

further impoverished pastoral populations, prompting their sedentarization. Only wealthy pastoralists could sustain their traditional economies. As a result of sedentarization, the significance of tribal, economic, and cultural traditions among pastoral populations diminished, and they began adopting sedentary culture. In turn, pastoral Uzbeks not only adopted the culture of sedentary populations but also enriched it with their own ethnic cultural elements.

The ongoing sedentarization process among pastoral Uzbek clans led Russian Empire researchers to believe that these groups would soon assimilate into the region's sedentary Turkic population. Nevertheless, traditional self-identification persisted among clans such as Kipchak, Kurama, Turk, Kongrat, Karakalpak, and Katagan into the middle 20th century (Shishov, 1904, p. 96).

The most significant distinction among Central Asia's population groups, in our view, was tied to their lifestyle and economic activities, namely sedentarism versus nomadism. This gave rise to two distinct forms of ethnocultural identity and distinctiveness in the region. However, neither these differences nor factors such as language prevented the region's population from sharing a common historical past and future destiny or from forming a unified "nation" (community). The idea of dividing the region's population into distinct ethnic groups based on linguistic and cultural markers, despite their strong sense of Muslim unity, began during the Russian Empire and found practical expression during the Soviet era. This policy was rooted in the principle of "divide and rule".

CONCLUSION

The experience of ethnographically classifying the Turkestan population during the Russian Empire served colonial objectives, facilitating governance and coordinating tax collection. Attempts were made to categorize the population based on language, lifestyle (sedentary or nomadic), physical appearance, and religious identity, but these classifications retained ambiguities and contradictory approaches. Imperial researchers sought to differentiate Uzbeks, Tajiks, Sarts, and other groups ethnically, but no consensus emerged, particularly regarding the origins and ethnic affiliation of Sarts. By the late 19th century, language was recognized as a primary ethnic indicator, though lifestyle and social psychology remained significant.

Modern American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN (E): 3067-8153
Volume 01, Issue 02, May, 2025
Website: usajournals.org

Overall, ethnographic classification efforts during the Russian Empire were not entirely successful and encompassed numerous ambiguities. Despite the population's strong sense of Muslim unity, the idea of dividing them into distinct ethnic groups based on linguistic and cultural markers was rooted in the colonial policy of "divide and rule". This process later developed further under Soviet rule, playing a significant role in shaping the ethnic identities of Central Asian peoples.

REFERENCES

1. Abashin, S. N. (2007). Natsionalizm v Sredney Azii: v poiskakh identichnosti. Saint Petersburg: Aleteya.
2. Behbudiy, M. (1914). "Sart" so'zi ma'lum bo'lmadi. Oyina, Issue 39, pp. 922–924.
3. Grebenkin, A. D. (1872). Tadzhiki. Uzbeks. Russkie v Turkestane. Vol. II.
4. Miropiev, M. A. (1901). O polozhenii russkikh inorodtsev. Saint Petersburg.
5. Ostroumov, N. P. (1896). Sarty: Etnograficheskiye materialy. 2nd ed., Tashkent.
6. General Census of the Russian Empire (1905). Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis naseleniya Rossiyskoy Imperii 1897 g. Saint Petersburg.
7. Shishov, A. (1904). Sarty. Sbornik materialov dlya statistiki Syrdarinskoy oblasti, Vol. XI, Tashkent.