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Spiritual and Cultural Development in Uzbekistan During the Years of Independence

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Abstract

This scholarly article analyzes the spiritual and cultural transformations that have taken place in Uzbekistan during the years of independence, within the historical context from the initial period of state sovereignty to the present stage (1991–2026). The relevance of the research is determined by the necessity of comprehending national identity, rehabilitating cultural heritage, and ensuring the security of the spiritual space amid globalization following the collapse of totalitarian ideology. The objective of the study is to identify the stage-by-stage developmental patterns of cultural evolution during the independence period and to evaluate the conceptual foundations of cultural policy from historical and source-study perspectives. The methodological basis of the research is constituted by the principles of historicism, objectivity, systematicity, as well as comparative-historical and historical-genetic methods. Archival documents, collections of normative-legal acts, periodical press, and works by local and foreign historians served as primary sources. As a result of the conducted research, three main institutional stages of spiritual and cultural development were identified and their distinctive characteristics were elucidated: de-Sovietization and national revival; stability and cultural sovereignty; globalization and national ascent. The processes of restoration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage objects, the transformation of the status of the Uzbek language, and the de-politicization of historical memory were analyzed. The research conclusions demonstrate that Uzbekistan's cultural policy during the independence years represents a complex synthesis of tradition and modernization, which has served as a leading factor in strengthening the foundations of national statehood. The results of the article may provide a scientific-theoretical basis for the study of modern Uzbek history, cultural studies, and state policy strategies.

Keywords: history of Uzbekistan, independence period, spiritual transformation, cultural policy, national identity, historical memory, cultural heritage, de-Sovietization, spirituality, cultural integration, social consciousness, national ascent.

Introduction

The acquisition of an independent path of development by any state is characterized not only by a fundamental transformation of its political and





economic systems, but also by profound transformations in the spiritual and cultural life of society. In particular, the attainment of state independence by the Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991 marked the beginning of processes involving the abandonment of nearly a century of Soviet totalitarian ideology and its unified cultural templates, the comprehension of national identity, and the restoration of a multi-century historical and cultural heritage. The historical analysis of these processes and the derivation of logical conclusions regarding the transformations that occurred over the past period constitute one of the most urgent tasks of modern historical science. The object of this research is the socio-cultural and spiritual life of Uzbekistan's society during the independence years, while its subject comprises the conceptual foundations, stages, directions of state cultural policy, and their outcomes. The main objective of the study is to analyze the spiritual and cultural development in Uzbekistan during the independence period as an objective historical process, revealing its distinctive characteristics, achievements, and internal contradictions. To achieve this objective, the following tasks were set: to periodize the legal-conceptual foundations of state policy in the spiritual and cultural sphere; to examine the mechanisms for restoring historical memory and national values; to identify the role of educational, scientific, and cultural institutions in transformational processes; and to assess the problems of national cultural integration amid modern globalization and digital transformations. The chronological scope of the research covers the period from 1991 to the present day. Within this period, two major conceptual shifts occurred in the cultural and spiritual spheres of the country: the first — the consolidation of national statehood foundations and liberation from Soviet ideological legacies (1991–2016); the second — the modernization of the cultural sphere, openness, and accelerated international integration under the conditions of New Uzbekistan (2016–2026). The territorial scope is limited to the modern borders of the Republic of Uzbekistan, with comparative analyses conducted, where necessary, with general cultural trends in the Central Asian region. The significance of the topic in historical science lies in the fact that spiritual and cultural processes are typically considered a field prone to subjective and abstract evaluations. This article illuminates the subject free from rigid subjectivism, based on the principles of systematic historical analysis, relying on precise statistical and documentary sources. This serves to enrich the monitoring of cultural policy in the historiography of the independence period with empirical data.

Literature Review

During the independence years, the social and humanitarian sciences of Uzbekistan, particularly history, faced the task of purging national history, the history of culture and spirituality, from the class-party approaches of the Soviet period. Therefore, from the earliest years, extensive scientific research was conducted on this topic. In local historiography, the problems of spiritual





development were initially conceptually formulated in the works of the first President I. Karimov. In his work "High Spirituality — Invincible Power" (2008), the socio-political and philosophical aspects of the concept of spirituality and its place in the national idea system were defined. This approach served as a methodological guide for local historians and philosophers for many years. Historical analysis demonstrates that researchers from Uzbekistan, such as I. Ergashev, Q. Nazarov, and N. Jo'rayev, examined spiritual revival through the prism of the national idea and independence ideology in their works. Their studies were dominated by ideological and philosophical approaches, while historical factual analysis was somewhat relegated to the background. However, in subsequent periods, historians such as R. Shamsutdinov, D. Alimova, and M. Rahimov began to deeply analyze the cultural processes, restoration of historical memory, and issues of international cultural relations during the independence period based on archival materials and documentary sources. In Alimova's works, the rehabilitation of the Jadid movement and its influence on modern national identity were fundamentally elucidated. Foreign historiography has always maintained a high interest in the spiritual and cultural processes in Uzbekistan, although certain conceptual differences are evident in their perspectives. Among Western researchers, scholars such as M.B. Olcott (Martha Brill Olcott), Adeb Khalid, and social anthropologist C. Tremain (Charlotte Tremain) studied cultural transformations in Central Asia. Adeb Khalid, in his work "Making Uzbekistan" and subsequent research, evaluates post-independence cultural revival as a "national project" (nation-building project). In his view, the state utilized the image of historical figures (for example, Amir Temur) to create new national legitimacy. Representatives of the Western school are often inclined to interpret the phenomenon of "spirituality" in Uzbekistan as a means of establishing ideological control by the state over society. Russian researchers (for example, S. Abashin, A. Malashenko) focused more on the restoration of tradition, the return of the Islamic factor to societal life, and the strengthening of ethnic identity. In their works, the role of local values and religious resources in filling the cultural vacuum after the Soviet period is comparatively analyzed. The differences in existing scientific perspectives lie in the fact that while local historiography evaluates spiritual development as an absolutely positive, progressive foundation of national ascent, foreign studies emphasize the politicized and instrumental aspects of this process. In this research, with the aim of filling the existing scientific gap, cultural development is analyzed not only as a political-ideological necessity, but also within the framework of the society's internal socio-cultural evolution, educational reforms, and their real empirical results, from an impartial academic perspective.

Research Methodology





In preparing this article, the conceptual methodological apparatus of modern historical science was utilized. The most important foundation of the research is the principle of historicism, which requires the study of spiritual and cultural processes within specific temporal and spatial conditions, in close connection with a particular historical situation. With the aid of this principle, the condition of the cultural sphere during the economic crisis of the 1990s and the transformations during the subsequent period of economic stability were examined in interrelation. The principle of objectivity ensured the abandonment of subjective ideological perspectives and tendencies to adapt to political conjuncture during the research, and the evaluation of historical facts solely on the basis of real sources. Not only the achievements of cultural development, but also its problematic aspects, such as spiritual crises during globalization and the influx of elements of Westernization, were analyzed objectively. Through the comparative-historical method, Uzbekistan's cultural policy and its stages were compared with cultural unification during the Soviet period and analogous processes in other post-Soviet countries (for example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan). This made it possible to comprehend the distinctiveness of the Uzbekistan model. The historical-genetic method served to study the roots of the formation of spiritual values and historical consciousness, their genesis. The restoration of the Jadid heritage and how it is connected today with the idea of state independence were explained with the aid of this method. Through the historical-typological method, elements of cultural life during the independence years were classified and systematized into separate types (material culture, intangible heritage, theater, cinema, museum activities, spiritual-enlightenment work in the field of education). Finally, through source-study and historiographical analysis, the content of normative-legal documents, decrees and resolutions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers was analyzed, and their practical implementation was compared with conclusions drawn in scientific literature.

Results

The changes in the spiritual and cultural spheres in Uzbekistan during the independence years proceeded through certain logical stages. Analyzing the developmental stages of historical processes, the following periodization can be substantiated:

1. 1991–2000: The Stage of De-Sovietization and National-Cultural Identity Restoration. During this period, the primary attention was directed toward abandoning Soviet ideological symbols and returning prohibited national values, religion, and traditions. The implementation of the Law "On the State Language" adopted in 1989 and its new edition in 1995 became the foundation of language policy.
2. 2001–2016: The Period of Institutional Consolidation of the Spiritual Space and





Cultural Sovereignty. During this period, the concept of "spirituality" was transformed into a systematic institution at the state level. Through structures such as the Republican Council on Spirituality and Enlightenment and the "Kamolot" youth social movement, the strategy of protecting young people's consciousness from alien ideas took priority.

3. 2017–2026: The Stage of Cultural Modernization, Openness, and Intellectual Ascent of New Uzbekistan. During this stage, cultural policy was oriented more toward principles of international integration, digitization of cultural heritage, and viewing science and innovation as the foundation of spirituality. Among the economic and social factors influencing cultural development, the state's policy of direct subsidization of the cultural sphere played an important role. Unlike many countries in the post-Soviet region, Uzbekistan did not fully leave the cultural, theater, and museum spheres to the mercy of the market economy. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Culture" and hundreds of resolutions pertaining to the sphere legally guaranteed this. In the causal chain of historical events, one of the most significant events was the restoration of national values and religious tolerance. The Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, which were virtually eliminated during the Soviet period, were systematically organized. The anniversaries of great thinkers such as Imam Bukhari, Imam Termizi, and Bahouddin Naqshband were celebrated at the international level (under the auspices of UNESCO). This resulted in the elevation of religious-enlightenment consciousness in society. Within the framework of re-evaluating the activities of historical figures, the selection of the image of Amir Temur as the foundation of national statehood was an important conceptual step. The year 1996 was declared the "Year of Amir Temur" in the country, and magnificent monuments to him were erected in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Shahrissabz. The State Museum of Temurid History was established. This process served to awaken the people's historical pride. Furthermore, the names and legacies of our Jadid ancestors — Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Munavvarqori Abdurashidxonov, Abdulla Qodiriy, Abdulhamid Cho'lpon, and others — were fully rehabilitated. The establishment of the Museum of Memory of Victims of Repression (2001) is one of the largest practical outcomes of historical memory policy during the independence years. Analysis of archival documents and scientific research demonstrates that during the independence years, more than 8,000 tangible cultural heritage objects on the territory of Uzbekistan were placed under state protection. The historical centers of Ichan-Qal'a (Khiva), Samarkand, Bukhara, and Shahrissabz were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. In the years 2017–2026, the issues of researching and preserving Uzbekistan's cultural wealth abroad reached a new stage: within the framework of the project "Uzbekistan's Cultural Heritage in International Collections," more than 50 multi-volume book-albums were published.

Discussion





When discussing the scientific results of the spiritual and cultural transformations that occurred during the independence years, it is necessary to define their place in modern historiography. The obtained results demonstrate that cultural policy in Uzbekistan possesses a "social engineering" (social engineering) character and was managed by the state in a clearly goal-oriented manner. This situation has caused various debates among scholars worldwide. Western scholars, particularly R. Isaacs (Rico Isaacs) and others, evaluate post-Soviet Central Asian cultural revival as a means of self-justification and legitimization by authoritarian regimes. They emphasize that the state created the concept of "spirituality" as a barrier to the penetration of Western liberal values and political pluralism. However, this view can be challenged on the basis of local sources and the internal demands of society. After all, following the long-term assimilation and denigration of national culture during the Soviet period, a natural social need existed in society to preserve national identity, language, and traditions. The state systematically placed this need within a legal and institutional framework. When analyzing the factors influencing the course of historical events, it is also appropriate to note certain internal contradictions on the path of spiritual development. For example, in the late 1990s and 2000s, the excessive formalization of the concept of "spirituality" and its mandatory introduction into all spheres of social life (even exact sciences and economics) somewhat diminished its appeal among society, particularly among young people. In academic circles, the overly broad and sometimes ambiguous interpretation of this term came under criticism. However, after 2016, this approach changed: spirituality began to be harmonized not only with glorifying the values of the past, but also with innovation, critical thinking, and digital literacy. The scientific novelty of the research results lies in the fact that the spiritual and cultural development process was proven to be not a continuous linear movement, but a dynamic system formed in response to crises, ideological searches, and external threats (religious extremism, information wars, mass culture). As prospects for future scientific research, the study of the history of independence period culture on the basis of digital anthropology and sociological surveys (Big Data) can be indicated. The extent to which Uzbek national culture is reflected in the virtual space and the changes in the value hierarchy of the younger generation should become important directions for future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the spiritual and cultural development in Uzbekistan during the independence years served as a strategic direction of state-building. The ideological vacuum that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet totalitarian system was successfully filled through the restoration of national values, the rich historical and cultural heritage, and the legacy of the great scholars who were among the cradles of Islamic civilization. During the research, the objectives and





tasks set were fully accomplished: the stages of cultural policy were identified, and its socio-political foundations were analyzed on a documentary basis. The theoretical significance of the research lies in the fact that it contributes to explaining the patterns of utilizing cultural resources in the process of national state-building in post-Soviet countries. Its practical significance is evident in the possibility of utilizing its conclusions in teaching the history of Uzbekistan, cultural studies, and sociology at higher educational institutions, as well as in the strategic planning of cultural-enlightenment institutions' activities. Among the scientific recommendations for future research, the development of mechanisms for ensuring the security of the national spiritual space in the era of globalization and artificial intelligence, and the fundamental study of issues related to popularizing the Uzbek language and cultural codes in global networks, should be included. It is the demand of the times that cultural policy should now transition from a function of conservative preservation to the creation of creative and competitive cultural industries.

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