Islam and Cultural Heritage on Tajik Television

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Abstract

For many members of the Tajik governing elite, Muslim piety remains problematic—a stubborn, socially regressive holdover of anti-modern Tajiks—and Muslim leaders are often thought of merely as anachronistic cultural survivals. This paper interrogates the depiction of Muslim exemplars as they appear on Tajik state television by comparing a 2009 documentary about the life of Imomi Abūḥanifa, the eponymous founder of the Ḥanafī school of jurisprudence, with an exposé about Ėshoni Temur, a local Naqshbandī Sufi *pir* tried and convicted in 2015 for polygyny and various indeterminate offenses against official notions of Muslim religiosity. This article considers different regimes of Muslim alterity as depicted on state media and argues that the Tajik governing elite alternately renders problematic Islam as innocuous heritage or in need of swift extermination.

Keywords

Islam – Tajikistan – television – heritage – Sufism

In the early years after independence, it was common to see evocative images of Lenin statues—a once ubiquitous feature of Soviet life—removed, sus- pended from cranes, stored in warehouses, or in piles of rubble on the ground. In journalistic accounts, such images seemed to provide an easy metaphor for the present, as post-Soviet governments constructed their new futures by leaving their Soviet pasts in ruins. The unquestioned metonymy of Lenin's destruction stood in for all of the vicissitudes that accompanied political, economic, and social transition. Dushanbe's own suggestive image came early. Protestors tore down the city's central Lenin statue in September 1991 amid the Supreme

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Soviet's declaration of independence from the USSR. The city's last prominent Lenin statue stood for sixteen more years before it was removed to make room for a new national one dedicated to the Persian poet Rudakī.

For Dushanbe, a more politically resonant image has been the recent architectural remaking of the center of the city. The state's efforts to modernize architecturally are well-documented, variously understood as political elites' attempts to position the Tajik nation in a global context, a form of new nationalist pedagogy, or a mere opportunistic vehicle for grift.1 Visitors to the capital can now enjoy a new national museum; read donated books at a cavernous, almost empty national library; gaze up at the erstwhile tallest flagpole in the world; stroll through manicured gardens with fountains; listen to outdoor concerts in parks; take pride in the new presidential palace—the palace of nations (*qasri millat*)—or have their photograph taken in front of a towering doppelganger of President Ėmomalī Raḥmon, the statue of Ismoil Somonī.2 Yet remaking the city center would not have been possible without displacing what had existed before and tearing down what remained.3 Amid much consternation, one of the earliest Soviet-era buildings, the main post office, was torn down in 2014. The demolition of the Maiakovskii Theater, the building in which the Tajik SRR had been proclaimed in 1929, followed in 2016, with an un- characteristic public outcry.4 Plans exist to tear down the buildings that house the Dushanbe city administration, the Ministry of Agriculture, and other early Soviet-era structures along the city's central Prospekt Rudakī.

In 2010, I recall talking to a resident of one of the apartment buildings facing onto Rudakī, adjacent to the new parks and public buildings that make up the new center of the city. The man had recently been given notice that his building was to be razed in order to create clear sightlines for drivers and pedestrians to see through to the Palace of Nations, which sat on a hill above the river half a kilometer away. The man was skeptical that promises of a new apartment in some distant *mikroraion* of the city would materialize. Even if they did, he could not fathom how pushing him away to the city's periphery would do anything more than provide an opportunity to line the pockets of

1 See, for example, K. Hughes, "From the Achaemenids to Somoni: National Identity and Iconicity in the Landscape of Dushanbe's Capitol Complex," *Central Asian Survey*, 36, no. 4 (2017): 511–33.

2 K. Nourzhanov, "The Politics of History in Tajikistan: Reinventing the Samanids," *Harvard Asia Quarterly,* 5, no. 1 (2001): 21–30.

3 Hughes, "From the Achaemenids to Somoni," 514.

4 "Actors Mourn as Tajikistan's Oldest Theater Is Torn Down," *EurasiaNet*, August 3, 2016, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79991.

bureaucrats in the city's planning department. Sentiments like his prefigured, on a smaller scale, those expressed during mass protests in Moscow in 2017, when thousands demonstrated in opposition to the Moscow city government's plan to demolish apartment buildings that dated back to the same era as the apartments in Dushanbe to make way for modern high-rises.5 While the specifics in Moscow might have been different than in Dushanbe, the two projects' rhetorical goals aligned neatly: sweep away the derelict to make room for a new, symbolic global modern, not unlike the recent re-makings of other Central Asian cities, Astana in Kazakhstan and Ashgabat in Turkmenistan chief among them.6 Beyond personal interest, the responses of the man I knew or the protestors in Moscow were not due purely to nostalgia for Soviet-era architecture. The Tajik writer Abduqodir Rustam neatly summed up his worries in a March 2017 interview with Tajikistan's *Asia-Plus* newspaper: "I think the authorities just want to demolish people's memory. For the future generations, history will start from this time, as if there had been nothing before."7

As Rustam suggested, the governing elite in Tajikistan seeks to remake Dushanbe not only architecturally, but also ideologically, aiming in both cases to instantiate the country's future. Just as they removed the city's Lenin statue and the buildings left behind in Lenin's wake, they seek to sweep away history's ideological ruins. For many within the governing elite, Muslim piety remains just as problematic as aging architectural eyesores, a stubborn, socially regressive, non-forward-looking holdover, and Muslim leaders enter the rhetorical frame as anachronistic cultural survivals in the metaphorical sightlines of Tajik modernity. Tactics like bulldozing work well for architectural problems, but it is a greater challenge to accomplish something similar in the realm of ideas, especially problematic Muslim piety. Bulldozers cannot, without con- sequence, destroy living relics, practices, and beliefs now framed as backward, non-modern, or prone to superstition. Yet television has offered Tajikistan's governing elite a potent vehicle for projecting ideal images of a new, globalized Tajik future that is not limited to images of architectural remaking. On television, the political elite have also depicted their chosen ideal projections

5 Seemingly emboldened by the Moscow protests, a group of Dushanbe residents even sent a letter to Dushanbe's mayor, Rustam Ėmomalī, President Raḥmon's son, to protest forced eviction. See "Meru Dushanbe Rustami Emomali. Srochno!" *Akhbor*, July 10, 2017, http://akhbor .com/-p2686-169.htm.

6 N. Koch, "The Violence of Spectacle: Statist Schemes to Green the Desert and Constructing Astana and Ashgabat as Urban Oases," *Social & Cultural Geography,* 16, no. 6 (2015): 675–97.

7 "Is There Any Chance to Stop Demolition of Historical Buildings in Dushanbe?" *Asia-Plus*, March 16, 2017, http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/society/20170316/237658.

of globally-oriented Muslim piety alongside contrasting visions of backward-looking Muslim exemplars.

In 2009, Tajikistan's Safina television network aired a film about the life of Abūḥanifa (d. 767 CE), the eponymous founder of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic jurisprudence, as part of a state-sponsored jubilee year in celebration of the jurisconsult. As the founder of one of the four established Sunni legal schools (*mazḥab*) and the predominant one in Central Asia, Abūḥanifa's importance extends well beyond Tajikistan, with his school's adherents numbering as many as half a billion people across Turkey, Central Eurasia, and South Asia. However, the film renders Abūḥanifa a saint and paragon of a specifically *Tajik* Islamic heritage. For the Tajik governing elite, Abūḥanifa's legacy is particularly valuable in that Ḥanafī jurisprudence has traditionally been distinguished by its quietist orientations toward centers of political power. Indeed, many key Ḥanafī *ulamo* in Central Asia during both the colonial and Soviet periods accommodated to outside rule as long as the *shariat* was upheld and the *ulamo*'s ability to adjudicate religious matters remained unchecked.8

In 2015, state television aired a telling contrast to the aforementioned depiction of Abūḥanifa, a thirty-minute exposé about the alleged crimes of Ėshoni Temur (b. 1950), a local Naqshbandī Sufi *pir* tried and convicted for polygyny and various other offenses against official notions of proper Ḥanafī religiosity. At the time of his arrest, Temur was on the margins of the Tajik religious establishment, if for no other reason than that he most often lived on an isolated mountaintop north of Tursunzoda, approximately 50km west of Dushanbe. For many who lived around him, the strict piety associated with his Sufism isolated him even more. A wide range of religious practices continue to exist under the general rubric of Sufism (*tasavvuf*) in Tajikistan, often with distinct historical genealogies. Many Sufis go through special initiations and become the disciples (*murid*) of men like Temur, called *pir* or *shaĭkh,* who by virtue of knowledge, God's special favor, and/or lineage possess special blessing. Naqshbandī Sufism and Ḥanafī jurisprudence have been two complementary pillars of institutional Islam in Central Asia for centuries, and in recent de- cades Central Asia's governing elite have instrumentalized Sufi history just as they have Ḥanafī jurisprudence. On television, however, Temur's Sufi teachings received little attention. Instead, Temur was framed as Abūḥanifa's opposite: a fraud, an anti-saint, and a representative of all that is wrong with contemporary Islam in Tajikistan.

8 A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 28, 38–39, 113–115.

It is the space between these seemingly opposite mediatized projections of Muslim piety that suggests some of the ways in which organs of the Tajik state communicate religious difference and deal with public Islamic religiosity. Both images depend on constructing narratives of time and as such provide a window into the governing elite's interpretations of national modernity and Islam's place within it. Whereas Abūḥanifa becomes cultural heritage, Temur is set against both televised and architectural representations of state ideology. Temur and figures like him are the detritus that remains following the modernizing, globalizing projects of the governing regime.

Cultural Heritage on Television

A faceless narrator begins *The Luminary of Guidance: The Life of the Great Imom* (Charoghi Ḥidoi͡at: Ḥaëti Imomi A"zam)9 by reading a declaration made by President Raḥmon, the text of which scrolls over a black screen:

> Considering the contributions of the historical descendants of the Tajik people, Abūḥanifa Nu"mon Ibn Sobit holds great significance to the development of the culture of Islamic civilization, to religious-legal heritage, and to the formation and progress of national consciousness. Accordingly, I command paragraph 69 of the Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan [to read]: 2009 shall be proclaimed the Year of the Great Imom.

State-sponsored festivities that year were far-reaching, encompassing local jubilees held around the country, displays in public buildings, and a televised international symposium attended by hundreds of scholars from around the world. In sum, the year marked "a symbolic high point in the Islamicization of nationalist discourse,"10 in which the governing elite marshaled the full weight of state organs to put forward a coherent notion of what Islam in Tajikistan ought to entail. Raḥmon repeatedly entered the fray, even purportedly authoring a number of books about the jurisconsult and his historical legacy, the most

9 Numerous versions are available on YouTube, e.g., "Imomi A"zam, Abu Hanifa - 1/4 (Tojikfilm)," YouTube video, 10:29, posted by "VatanamTJ," November 16, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMg99fIB03k&t=538s (accessed February 14, 2019).

10 K. Nourzhanov, "Nation-Building and Political Islam in Post-Soviet Tajikistan," in M. Y. Omelicheva (ed.), *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 80.

widely circulated of which was entitled *The Heritage of the Great* Imom *and the Dialogue of Civilizations* (Merosi Imomi A"zam va Guftaguii Tamadunḥo).11 The book's title and the film's opening monologue share an operative word: heritage (*meros*). This is not heritage as a legal designation—the kind of heritage that has been codified in UNESCO agreements with lists of items of intangible cultural heritage12—although Tajikistan participates in that as well: like many other states around the world, Tajikistan has used UNESCO heritage designations to jockey for national difference, particularly vis-à-vis Uzbekistan.13 In the book and film, however, heritage exists predominantly as a potent rhetorical tool to shape how Tajiks imagine Islam's relevance to the present. The state's heritage work—what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has described as a "mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past"14— is to draw on episodes from Muslim history in support of official notions of Tajik modernity. The film itself visually seems to confirm its orientation be- tween these two points in imagined time. The filmmakers weave a pastiche of black-and-white scenes drawn from older films into their portrayals of the Great Imom's life.15 Murky, unfocused black and white gives way to color action as a male narrator's voice elides years of Muslim history that occurred between the events he highlights.

The film's hazy black-and-white images suggest the unenlightened pastness of the era in which Abūḥanifa lived as opposed to the present, yet such images' real work is obscuring the fundamental modernity of the film's heritage discourses. As a voluminous scholarly literature on heritage suggests, heritage

11 Ė. Raḥmon, *Merosi Imomi A"zam va Guftugūi Tamaddunḥo* (Dushanbe: Sharqi ozod, 2009).

12 M.D. Foster and L. Gilman, *UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cul-tural Heritage* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

13 G. Mentges, "The Role of UNESCO and the Uzbek Nation Building Process," in R.F. Bendix, A. Eggert, and A. Peselmann (eds.), *Heritage Regimes and the State* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2012), 215. Significantly, too, the state's discourse surrounding the Great Imom is still predicated on similar ideas of national difference. The Great Imom may be a kind of shared heritage, since many Muslims hailing from Anatolia to South Asia follow the Ḥanafī school of jurisprudence, yet the Tajik governing elite foregrounds his Persianate inflection, seemingly directly denying other Central Asian republics, in particular Uzbekistan, of his cultural patrimony.

14 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 7.

15 The credits list three films: *Al Bukhorī* (1995), a Russian-made biographical treatment of the hadith compiler; *Ḥalid bin Valid* (2008), a serial produced in Syria that was later dubbed and distributed in Russia; and *Ḥazrati Alī*, a film that I was unable to locate. How- ever, the black-and-white scenes do not seem to come from *Al Bukhorī* or *Ḥalid bin Valid.*

is not the past innocently brought into the present; heritage is modern, some- thing new brought about through "ambivalent temporal entanglements."16 In the case of Tajikistan, this new heritage includes national historiography;17 the restoration of shrines, such as that of Ḥamadonī in Kūlob; and the newly re- built tourist site around the fort at Ḥisor, among other things. In each case, patrons from the governing elite have sought to produce a "hereness" for their favored pasts that they might be experienced anew by readers or visitors.18 At the same time, heritage only works when the pasts it seeks to represent are domesticated and living representatives of it rendered as provincial, but not altogether modern others.19

This temporal ambivalence is always inherent to heritage discourse. Heritage might foreground the past, or more precisely multiple pasts, but its social work is always future-oriented. That is, my discussion of heritage should not be taken as overemphasizing the past, but rather as an argument about how members of the Tajik governing elite imagine their future. Abūḥanifa is part of the future not simply because he figures into nationalist discourse but because he helps position the Tajik nation within a global context. As John Heathershaw has pointed out, there is a global dimension to Tajikistan's nation-building projects.20 Abūḥanifa's role in a Tajik future derives directly from Tajikistan's increasingly global orientation, including the broader cosmopolitan predilections of the Tajik political elite, of which Dushanbe's architectural transformations are just the materialized result. Just as shifts in Dushanbe's city planning according to models provided by Gulf urbanism highlight efforts to incorporate Dushanbe's material environment into a future-looking global modernity,21 Abūḥanifa's lionization as cultural heritage situates Tajikistan's citizens as part of the global *ummat*. Significantly, Ėmomalī Raḥmon's regime

16 K. Kuutma, "Between Arbitration and Engineering: Concepts and Contingencies in the Shaping of Heritage Regimes," in R.F. Bendix, A. Eggert, and A. Peselmann (eds.), *Heritage Regimes and the State* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2012), 32.

17 M. Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search of a Secularized National Ideology," *Nationalities Papers,* 35, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 51–70.

18 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage," *Ethnomusicology,* 39, no. 3 (1995): 367–80.

19 D. Noyes, *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 371–409.

20 J. Heathershaw, "Tajikistan amidst Globalization: State Failure or State Transformation?" *Central Asian Survey,* 30, no. 1 (2011): 147–68.

21 M. Stephan-Emmrich and A. Mirzoev, "The Manufacturing of Islamic Lifestyles in Tajikistan through the Prism of Dushanbe's Bazaars," *Central Asian Survey,* 35, no. 2 (2016): 157–77.

shares both architectural and ideological worlding strategies with other Central Asian governments.22

In the case of Tajikistan, in particular, television is a prime metacultural means of imagining the Tajik future and asserting global orientations as well as delineating which aspects of the past remain modern and which should rightly be confined to the realm of domesticated heritage. Most of what is available to watch on television in Tajikistan comes refracted through state sources, if it is not produced by them, satellite channels from Russia being one key exception. Programs broadcast on the four main national channels—of which Safina is one—and two regional affiliates carry with them the imprimatur of the state and, like the architecture of the national capital complex before them, work as vehicles for national pedagogy.23 The State Committee for Radio and Televi- sion launched Safina in 1991 as Network 2 (*shabakai* 2) to distinguish it from the main state television channel, Network 1 (*shabakai* 1). In 2005, Network 2, following its administrative separation from the main television network, be- came Safina. Not insignificantly, 94% of Tajik respondents indicated in a 2010 survey that television served as their chief source of information.24 Just as with school curricula and mass spectacle—the parades, performances on national holidays, and other modes of mass mobilization common across the post- Soviet Central Asian republics25—television's primary addressee is the citizen, not the consumer.26 Television therefore helps constitute national culture, per- haps doubly so when that culture is framed as heritage.

Heritage, even on television, does not just exist as an abstract construct; it demands participation.27 If one of Tajik television's purposes is to distribute hegemonic narratives about the Tajik nation, then the efficacy of its heritage discourse, i.e., the degree to which it can produce the hereness on which it is

22 See, for example, A. Bissenova, "The Master Plan of Astana: Between the 'Art of Government' and the 'Art of Being Global,'" in M. Reeves, J. Rasanayagam, and J. Beyer (eds.), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 127–48.

23 L. Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

24 F. Menga, "Building a Nation through a Dam: The Case of Rogun in Tajikistan," *Nationalities Papers,* 43, no. 3 (2015): 490.

25 L.L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

26 Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*, 11.

27 C. Noy, *Thank You for Dying for Our Country: Commemorative Texts and Performances in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 91, 208.

predicated, rests on how viewers uncritically reproduce its mental imaginaries. Just as heritage spaces like the fort at Ḥisor require visitors' embodied actions to replicate the temporal narratives put forward by the conservators of the site, a heritage-inflected biopic, as a kind of virtual heritage space, similarly demands that viewers produce hereness. However, its hereness comes from replicating the intent of its pedagogy by internalizing the collective identities it inculcates and its moral narratives about the origins of the Tajik people.

Film director Abdulhaĭ Zokirov chose to foreground several specific moral narratives from Abūḥanifa's life: Tajik distinctiveness, the importance of education, allegiance to family, and the imperative for the pious to reject asceticism and any interference in politics. Early on, the narrator lauds Abūḥanifa as "among the most learned of the Tajik people," along with other Persian-speaking luminaries from Muslim history such as Salmoni Fors, the first Persian convert to Islam; Al-Bukharī, the hadith compiler; and Mavlono Balkhī, the Sufi poet and author of the most revered mystical treatise in Muslim history. The narrator tells us that Nu"mon ibn Sobit (the given name of the Great Imom) stands among them in Muslim history. Abūḥanifa's alleged "Tajik" distinctiveness demands explanation, in that he hailed from Kufa in contemporary Iraq. Accordingly, the film, most of the materials produced for the "Year of the Great Imom," and Raḥmon's speeches take great pains to highlight how Abūḥanifa's ancestors were Persian-speaking merchants from territories surrounding Kabul, a feature that lends greater credence to Abūḥanifa's status as a national forefather.

In the film, we repeatedly hear about Abūḥanifa's devotion to learning—or, more specifically, to the core textual sources of Islam, Qurʿan and hadith—and how he apprenticed himself to the most learned individuals of his day. A key scene in the first half of the film depicts the Great Imom studying Muslim juris- prudence while he devotedly tends his father's stall at the bazaar. Besides emphasizing the *imom's* scholarly attributes, therefore, the film also foregrounds Abūḥanifa's devotion to his family. Later, he takes care of his father when he falls ill, even when the Great Imom might have put off familial obligations to devote the requisite time to his studies. The *imom* minds the stall at the bazaar throughout the film, emphasizing how Abūḥanifa shunned the ascetic or, as suggested in the film, parasitic life of a Muslim scholar. The filmmakers tell us that Abūḥanifa worked as a merchant until the end of his life, even when he could presumably have earned a good living from cultivating disciples.

The most emotionally charged scenes of the film come toward the end of Abūḥanifa's life, when amid the political turbulence of the early Abbasid caliphate, the caliph repeatedly entreats the Great Imom to side with the state and lend his hefty theological weight to their political squabbles. Yet Abūḥanifa's

piety prevents him from entering the political fray: Islam, it would seem, compelled him to shun all politics. The film's poignant end—Abūḥanifa's stead- fast refusal to deny his principles even as the world around him descends into chaos—almost serves as a battle cry to common action, especially when framed against the collective national heritage arguments put forward at the film's outset. By extension, Abūḥanifa's righteousness encompasses Tajiks more broadly, as if the Tajik nation is righteous because of its righteous forebears.

Wrapped up in this illusionary collectivity is heritage's inherent zero-sum contest. Even when merely rhetorically invoked and not adjudicated in UN bodies, heritage is always about the politics of inclusion and exclusion,28 and not just the exclusionary nationalities politics of the post-Soviet Tajik state, which even in the film seemingly denies the Great Imom's legacy to its non- Persian-speaking citizens: Uzbeks, Pamiris, Kyrgyz, etc.

Cultural Heritage Contested

Ėshoni Temur Khoja was a popular Naqshbandī Sufi *pir* who lived in a mountaintop redoubt west of Dushanbe, near Tursunzoda.29 Between 2010 and 2011 and later in 2014, in the context of long-term ethnographic fieldwork with Sufi groups in the country,30 I regularly saw Temur's disciples come on pilgrimage with the goal of putting off worldly entrapments in favor of cultivating love for the divine. As part of an earlier project, I talked weekly with several of Temur's followers in their homes in and around Dushanbe. Temur's disciples were different than many of the Sufis I knew well in Tajikistan. While other Sufis in Tajikistan lived in the world, embodying the well-known Naqshbandī dictum "Hand at work, heart with God" (dast ba kor, dil ba ɪ͡ar) to the extent that many Sufis remain unidentifiable to those around them, Temur's followers seemed to take their piety to a different level, regarding most of the world as ritually unclean. They embraced asceticism to a greater degree than many of the other Sufis I knew: many of Temur's followers eschewed all employment and familial

28 R. Bendix, "Heredity, Hybridity and Heritage from One Fin-de-Siècle to the Next," in P. J. Anttonen et al. (eds.), *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity* (Botkyrka, Sweden: Multicultural Centre, 2000), 37–54; Kuutma, "Between Arbitration and Engineering," 25–28.

29 See also S.A. Dudoignon, "From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from De-Stalinization to Independence (1955–91)," *Central Asian Survey,* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 56, 69.

30 B. Gatling, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

attachments, frequently fasted, refrained from sleeping, and worked diligently for the *pir*.

In early 2015, Temur was arrested, which came as a shock to many of the Sufis with whom I regularly interacted. Temur had been a charismatic, though peripheral, figure within the constellation of Tajikistan's Sufis. Authorities accused him of a dizzying array of crimes, including polygyny, kidnapping, stealing land from his neighbors, and heresy, though the veracity of his alleged offenses remained suspect and the state's proximate motivations for prosecuting his crimes were even less clear, beyond the suspect rhetoric included in the film. The charges of heresy stemmed from Temur's adoption of a new name, Saĭid Mahdikhan, which the film attributes to Temur's insistence that he was the incarnation of the Mahdi—the twelfth Shi'a imam, absent since the tenth century and now returned from occultation to usher in the end of time. Temur did have multiple wives, one of whom was, no doubt, a teenage girl. Ethical arguments aside, underage marriage is widespread, such that it strains credulity to see that as the primary motive for prosecutorial action against him. Similarly, many wealthy and powerful men have multiple wives, often maintained in separate households, despite the illegality of such arrangements. Temur's sup- posed prophetic aspirations, meanwhile, would be laughable if they were not so serious. Members of the Turajonzoda family, some of the most respected members of the Tajik religious field, had earlier been accused of more normative Shi'a sympathies that ultimately resulted in their removal from official religious office and the demotion of their mosque.31

On February 6, 2015, state television broadcast a thirty-minute exposé entitled, "The Story of Shaĭkh Temur" (Rivoi͡ati Shaĭkh Temur).32 The images it presented of the *pir* and his disciples were unrecognizable as the men I knew. For most of the program, a nameless interrogator presses Temur to answer questions about his family life. Local *imom*s accuse him of defying Ḥanafī jurisprudence. Officials working in the state religious bureaucracy offer their own commentary regarding what they see as Temur and his adepts' general lack of intellectual rigor. In between repetitive video montages of Temur receiving his disciples' respect, Temur sits alone despondently, never looking at the camera, and answers his interrogators only with single-word replies delivered

31 T. Epkenhans, "Islam, Religious Elites, and the State in Tajikistan," in P. Jones (ed.), *Islam, Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 181, 195.

32 M. Salimpur, "Filmi Da"voi 'Paĭghombarī'-i 'Shaĭkh Temur,'" *Radioi Ozodī*, February 8, 2015, https://www.ozodi.org/a/story-of-tajik-cleric-who-called-himself-new-prophet/26834881.html.

in a monotone. The broadcast repeatedly mocks Temur's disciples for their devotion. The most provocative of the clips shows Temur's disciples placing a red carpet before Temur's car as it drives by. The exposé elicited fiery responses on Tajik social media sites, most of which passionately criticized Temur as a trickster and a fraud.33

While the implicit goals of the exposé about Temur were diametrically opposed to those of the biographical film depicting the Great Imom, Temur's resemblances to Abūḥanifa are more than striking. It is almost as if the stories about Temur that are cobbled together in the exposé are also episodes from Abūḥanifa's life, but seen as though through a funhouse mirror. Distortion begins early. Even the title, "The Story of,"34 blurs the facticity of what it depicts, in contrast to the simple truthful mimesis encapsulated by the subtitle of Abūḥanifa's film: "The Life of." Temur's story begins not with the Great Imom's authoritative narrator, but with notes of ominous, distorted electronica, prefiguring the alleged weird dissonances the exposé records between Temur's life and the rest of Tajik modernity. Within that distorted frame, the uncanny resonances of Temur's life to Abūḥanifa's are difficult to dismiss, from the seemingly innocuous—Temur's interrogators press him on the scriptural bases of him and his disciples wearing blue turbans, even as the character portraying the Great Imom wears an eerily similar one throughout the film—to the moreconsequential.

The exposé spends almost half its thirty-minute length fixating on Temur's wives. The producers seem to seek the greatest disgust when we learn that one of Temur's followers gave the *pir* a daughter with intellectual disabilities as a wife, even as the opening scene of Abūḥanifa's film depicts the so-called "apple story," in which Abūḥanifa's father marries a girl who purportedly had significant disabilities and who is given away, without her consent, by her father. Even more poignantly, viewers must reconcile the fact that Temur sits facing a hostile inquisition from the local *ulamo* in the Tajik town of Tursunzoda and in prison because of his crimes against the religious status quo of Ėmomalī Raḥmon with an almost eerily similar moment in Abūḥanifa's film.

33 A. Shafiev, "A 'Last Prophet' Faces Jail for Land-Grabbing and Polygamy in Tajikistan," *Global Voices*, February 9, 2015, https://globalvoices.org/2015/02/09/a-last-prophet-faces- jail-for-land-grabbing-and-polygamy-in-tajikistan/.

34 Scholars of Tajik oral narrative most often translate *rivoi͡at* as "legend," not simply as "story" as I have here. However, "legend" in colloquial usage implies that a story's truth- fulness is up for debate and that the story may have fantastical elements, features that *rivoi͡at* in Tajik never includes. See D. Raḥimov, *Folklori Tojik* (Dushanbe: Ėjod, 2009), 118–51.

The dramatic highpoint of the biographical sketch of the Great Imom's life comes when he is hounded and questioned by the *ulamo* in Kufa; Abūḥanifa ultimately loses his life after being mercilessly beaten in the dungeons of the caliph's palace for refusing to approve of the caliph's wars and serve as chief judge in his court.

While the Great Imom's heritage works in concert with the Tajik governing elites' aspirations for contemporary Tajik modernity, Temur's actions do not, and his television portrayal must vehemently deny him coeval presence in the present. Tellingly, the opening few minutes of Temur's exposé say little about either the *pir* or his disciples. What viewers see instead are images of the same architectural icons so central to new Tajik national identity. The camera pans as happy Tajik citizens, dressed in national garb, walk by and take photographs of the new national museum, towering flagpole, manicured parks and gardens, and majestic statues. The narrator lauds the opportunities that independence has provided to Tajikistan's citizens, who now have the opportunity to celebrate their national identity and its ancient civilizational roots, as if the architectural icons depicted in the film are the physical evidence of the regime's enforced peace, prosperity, and urbanity—the governing ideology materialized.

Tellingly, heritage works better for some pasts than for others.35 While dis- tant pasts—like that of the Great Imom—more easily adapt to heritage designations, more immediate, living ones—like Temur and his disciples—are less amenable to state efforts at domestication. Temur stands against televised, material representations of state ideology. Indeed, as the film's narrator threateningly notes at the beginning of the exposé, some Tajiks still seem to deny the opportunities provided by Raḥmon and his cohorts, instead seeking to survive "by deceiving their countrymen." Temur, then, is what is left after the modernizing beneficence of the governing regime.

The stark difference between Abūḥanifa's representation as an exemplar of cultural heritage and Temur's as a threat to Tajik society suggests some of the divergent strategies the Tajik governing elite uses to deal with problematic forms of public religiosity. Dorothy Noyes has offered a useful cultural typology of ideal types (heritage, zombie, world culture, and alternative) that elite actors use to interpret the present and posit a future through recourse to a past, drawing on contexts as diverse as Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, and the Appalachian region in the US.36 She charts four quadrants in which the X-axis spans, left to right, from pasts seen as non- productive to productive; and the Y-axis, top to bottom, maps the degree to which a past is seen as worthy of incorporation

35 Noyes, *Humble Theory,* 375.

36 Ibid., 399.

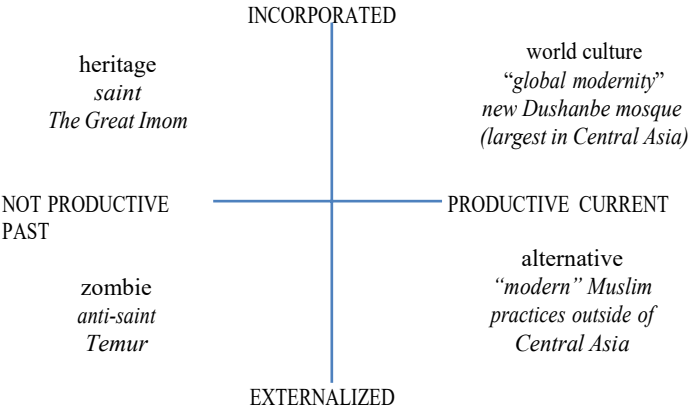

Figure 1 Noyes' diagram labeled with figures and practices of Islam in Tajikistan
Source: Dorothy Noyes, *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 399.

into national discourse or external to it (see Figure 1). Abūḥanifa falls in Noyes' upper-left quadrant as heritage. The Great Imom is not necessarily a productive past, yet he remains worthy of attention. Temur seems relegated to Noyes' lower-left quadrant, zombie: an unproductive past that must be externalized. The governing elite's other moves toward asserting Tajiks as part of the global Muslim community, such as the construction of what promises to be Central Asia's largest mosque with the support of the government of Qatar, might fall in the upper-right quadrant as world culture, while seemingly innocuous foreign forms of Muslim practice might be placed in the lower-right quadrant as simply "alternative," that is, practices not worthy of incorporation into national discourse but which do not merit official condemnation either.

Significantly, as Noyes' diagram illuminates, cultural survivals like Temur become the living dead, the zombies of the contemporary Tajik religious sphere. However, in the case of Islam in the Tajik context, a context far distant from both the term's historical resonances in Haitian Vodou and its more recent iterations in horror movies, "zombie" may not quite capture the range of its semantic equivalencies in contemporary Tajikistan. As represented in the exposé, Temur might better be characterized as an anti-saint, the Great Imom's discursive foil. Regardless of the term used, anti-saints and zombie pasts are not modern. As such, the only recourse left to modernizing states that seek to deal with such living relics is the ideological equivalent of tearing down old statues and apartment buildings: swift extermination. Temur and

his family are the cultural debris left in modernization's wake,37 debris that the exposé exhibits almost as if Temur and his family are in a zoo.38 The same montages repeatedly fill the frame: Temur's wives and children stare blankly at the camera, as if viewers should gawk at Temur's household's misfortune and the biological results of their gross ignorance. Televised responses to the exposé seem to confirm the chamber-of-horrors-esque, living-museum quality of the film.39 One man interviewed remarks, "How could people be so ignorant… it's amazing that people like this are in the provinces… how could you raise your kids like this… what stupidity!" A woman says, "It's important that people don't go to this sort of *mulla*, don't believe in them." Another woman adds, "It's ignorance… these people don't have any education." A man argues, "People have gone astray when they call these people saint, *mulla*, *ėshon*."

All in all, Temur comes off as a non-modern, ignorant, provincial, and uneducated relic when framed against the enlightened perspectives of television viewers. Still, what remains suspect is the security services' selective enforcement of Temur's crimes. Why did the authorities move against Temur when they did? Why did they not continue to ignore Temur and his disciples as they had for many years before?

Modernity, Alterity, and Islam in Tajikistan

On the surface, the stark differences between the televised depictions of Abūḥanifa and Temur are jarring. When coupled with the secularist emphases of earlier national celebrations devoted to ancient Tajik Aryan heritage,40 the rehabilitation of the Samanids as the apogee of Tajik civilization,41 and a year dedicated to the Great Imom, the governing regime would—at best—seem to demonstrate a kind of throw-spaghetti-against-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks model of nationalist mythmaking.42 One obvious factor influencing shifts in

37 A.L. Stoler, *Duress: Colonial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 337.

38 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture,* 35–47.

39 "Shubḥa, Bovarī va Khulosaḥoi Sokinon Az Qaziiai 'Shaïkh Temur,'" *Ozodagon*, February 10, 2015, http://ozodagon.com/20061-2-video-aziyai-shayh-temur-az-nigoi-roguzaron-in-dur-ast.html.

40 Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth."

41 Nourzhanov, "The Politics of History in Tajikistan."

42 Reuel Hanks identifies a similar disconnect in Uzbekistan, which he calls Uzbekistan's "Janus-state syndrome." Hanks juxtaposes the incorporation of Islam into national

how Muslim exemplars are represented on Tajik television has been the sharp evolution of official policy toward the religious sphere, what Shahnoza Nozimova and Tim Epkenhans have termed a move from soft authoritarianism to hard authoritarianism, in which control over the religious sphere has been subsumed under the aegis of the quasi-governmental Islamic Center (*Markazi Islomī*).43 Indeed, during the six-year period between the two films' broadcasts, the State Committee on Religious Affairs and the High Council of Ulamo shuttered madrasas and began distributing topics for Friday sermons, among other moves. Tajikistan's parliament passed sweeping legislation tightly controlling religious groups and individual piety. Most egregiously, authorities moved against the governing regime's main political opposition, the Islamic Renaissance Party, then Central Asia's only registered Islamic political party.

Despite these new interventionist orientations of state policy toward the religious sphere, state heritage rhetoric remained remarkably consistent be- tween 2009 and 2015, and heritage discourses render the seemingly incommensurate narratives of Abūḥanifa and Temur interpretable because of the way that the governing elite's myth-making pastiche operates using consistent discursive logic. That is, Tajikistan's seemingly discordant nationalist narratives cohere as long as we do not assume that the pasts they celebrate should be lived anew in the present. The past of heritage is dead. To the degree that Abūḥanifa lives on, he does so only as an exhibition of himself.44 That was Temur's problem. Abūḥanifa died in the mid-eighth century. Temur, though now hobbling along with a walking stick, is only in his seventh decade. Temur is too close. If heritage depends on constructing certain privileged timelines about the past, then the living Temur and his present piety must necessarily be marked as temporally invalid. If heritage, by definition, is something collective that the Tajik nation possesses, then Temur cannot have a place in contemporary Tajik society.

If there is anything discordant between the two films, it is not their messages, but their consumption. The various meanings each film possesses are given their shape centrally, yet their reception always happens locally. Both the

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narratives about Uzbek spirituality with the so-called Islamic threat to state stability. See R.R. Hanks, "Narratives of Islam in Uzbekistan: Authoritarian Myths and the Janus-State Syndrome," *Central Asian Survey,* 35, no. 4 (2016): 501–13.

43 S. Nozimova and T. Epkenhans, "The Transformation of Tajikistan's Religious Field: From Religious Moderation to Authoritarian Salafism" (presentation at "The Islamic Mediascape in Central Asia" workshop, Central Asia Program, The George Washington University, October 2, 2017).

44 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 131–76.

Great Imom and Temur mean different things to different viewers, as individuals critically interpret the messages they receive on television and refract them through their everyday realities.45 This article is not an ethnography of watching television; besides the viewer responses that I have already noted, I cannot presume to know or generalize how most Tajiks received each film. However, to a certain extent the individual motivations of producers or viewers are im- material to understanding the rhetorical effects of state policy.

Television viewers in Tajikistan well know that television exists as more than simple entertainment, and even those responses that I have already noted were undoubtedly shaped by such expectations. This is even more true when religious programming originates from within Tajikistan, as opposed to programming like dramatizations of prophetic figures' lives that are rebroadcast from Iran or Egypt. Viewers understand that the state seeks to mold notions of proper Islamic religiosity through television, just as its counterparts in neigh- boring Central Asian countries do.46 What makes television such a powerful tool for instantiating this sort of heritage rhetoric is the way in which television forecloses actual experiences in favor of mediated ones,47 just as heritage privileges virtuality over actuality. Thus, the biopic about Abūḥanifa invites television viewers to revel in the perfection of restored history rather than live among the imperfections of the present as do ignorant people like Temur.

One might simply read Temur's media conviction as the inevitable result of the political elite's ongoing hostile relationships with local religious leaders, of which the marginalization of the Turajonzoda brothers is perhaps the best illustration.48 The governing elite forcibly compelled brothers Ḥojī Akbar and Ėshoni Nuriddin to leave public life completely, a fact all the more remarkable given that they were once among the religious figures with the widest reach, including via a mosque with as many as 10,000 weekly congregants and a vigorous online presence.49 Other popular figures, such as the former *imom*

45 Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*, 11–12.

46 In Uzbekistan, the state produces religious programming for television featuring Tashkent's chief *imom*. See D. Abramson and N. Tucker, "Engineering Islam: Uzbek State Policies of Control," in P. Jones (ed.), *Islam, Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pitts- burgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 90–91. Other examples include dramatic serials with an explicit anti-extremism message, e.g., "Uzbekistan Churns Out a New Anti-Terrorism Melodrama," *EurasiaNet*, January 16, 2017, http://www.eurasianet .org/node/81991?utm.

47 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 8–9.

48 Epkenhans, "Islam, Religious Elites, and the State in Tajikistan," 195–96.

49 S. Nozimova and T. Epkenhans, "Negotiating Islam in Emerging Public Spheres in Contemporary Tajikistan," *Asiatische Studien Etudes Asiatiques,* lxvii, no. 3 (2013): 965–90.

of a congregational mosque in Kūlob, Ḥojī Mirzo Ibronov, have faced similar fates. Beyond how Temur's media spectacle caters to the emerging nationalist narrative, Temur's persecution and arrest also cohere to the political elite's recent strategies for limiting the influence of potential religiously-oriented opponents. Still, Temur commanded far less influence than the Turajonzodas or Ibronov. Temur was virtually unknown outside of Tajikistan's Sufi circles and the villages surrounding Tursunzoda, while the Turajonzodas and Ibronov remain among the most recognizable voices in the republic.

Through the lens of heritage, it seems clearer that Temur was not primarily arrested and made a public example for any specific action on his part, whether polygyny, theft, or heresy. The governing authorities did not have to know or even care what Temur and his disciples really did.50 For example, in the exposé it is unclear whether Temur actually claims to be the last prophet, despite the foreboding titles of most of the news coverage. The only thing that would suggest his prophetic aspirations is the name change in the passport. I cannot answer definitively, but in the spring of 2014—the last time I met with any of Temur's disciples—no one indicated to me any of these seemingly monumental shifts in Temur's self-understanding from Naqshbandī *pir* to the incarnation of the twelfth *imom,* now having returned from occultation a millennium before. Indeed, eschatology in any of its manifestations was far from the concerns I often heard expressed by Temur's disciples, even well after the *pir's* passport change. Instead, Temur's arrest and zoo-like display seem to be more because Temur maintained a loyal cadre of disciples with orientations dramatically distinct from the modernizing narratives of the Tajik state. And leading up the parliamentary elections that were to be held during the spring of 2015, Temur's difference necessitated action so as to demonstrate to the Tajik public that the sorts of modernizing global narratives embodied by new nationalist architecture existed as more than rhetoric.

Others, too, have noted how the Tajik state's governing elite has often moved to assert the alterity of forms of Islam beyond its control.51 Such assertions have a long history in Central Asia. For example, organs of the Soviet state staked

50 See, for example, a recent interview with Ibrohim Usmanov in the Tajik periodical *Dialog*. Usmanov draws a clear distinction between state concern with ritual (*sobliudeniia religioznykh obriadov)* and religious sentiments mobilized for political gain ("V Tadzhikistane net kakikh-libo ogranichenii v sovershenii religioznykh obriadov," *Dialog: Tadzhikistan i mir*, January 8, 2018, http://www.dialog.tj/news/professor-i-usmonov-v-tadzhikistane-net-kakikh-libo-ogranichenij-v-sovershenii-religioznykh-obryadov).

51 E. Lemon, "Governing Islam and Security in Tajikistan and Beyond: The Emergence of Transnational Authoritarian Security Governance" (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2016).

out similar discursive ground in pejoratively labeling the vernacular practices in which many everyday Central Asian Muslims engaged as "traditional" and seeking to limit the forms of their public expression. In particular, similar to the Tajik governing elite's condemnation of Temur, Soviet-era officials represented Sufi figures and practices—*ėshons*, shrine visitation, and in particular the *pir- murid* (master-disciple) relationships at the center of institutional Sufism in Central Asia—as charlatanism, antisocial, and backward.52 Linear narratives of socialist advance marked so-called superstitions as temporally anomalous and evidence of primitive, feudal consciousness still problematically in operation in the present.53 The black-and-white scenes in Abūḥanifa's biopic, which could have been drawn from a Soviet-era propaganda film and in some ways are analogues to Temur's exposé, precisely depict such alleged historical superstitions. Additionally, *ulamo* in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras redeployed the pejorative "traditional" of Soviet-era Islam and accused those they felt were temporally anomalous of innovation or being under foreign in- fluence. So-called Wahhabis became anachronisms.54 National heritage, too, has a Soviet-era legacy. During Soviet rule, each titular nationality had its own national, historical exemplars. Figures like Rudakī became anachronistically Tajik, prefiguring the post-Soviet Tajik state's rehabilitation of Abūḥanifa as ason of the Tajik people.

In the present, the Great Imom and Temur are new icons in a long line of representations of traditional Central Asian Islam and their problematic others. However, the official critique of Temur foregrounds a very specific form of difference: one of temporal distance.55 This has enormous significance when weighed against state security services' motives in repressing forms of public Islam anathema to their present. In other words, their view is not so much that repression necessarily follows where public religiosity remains outside of state

52 E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 153–61.

53 cf. S.P. Poliakov and M.B. Olcott, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992).

54 B. Babadjanov and M. Kamilov, "Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892–1989) and the Beginning of the 'Great Schism' among the Muslims of Uzbekistan," in S.A. Dudoignon and H. Komatsu (eds.), *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)* (New York: Kegan Paul, 2001), 195–219; M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

55 Lemon posits a different sort of temporal alterity. He argues that temporal alterity includes when governing elites accuse ISIS sympathizers and other out-of-favor Muslim groups of seeking to return to the time of the Civil War. See Lemon, "Governing Islam and Security in Tajikistan and Beyond," 162–64.

control, but rather that any form of public Muslim religiosity that—directly or indirectly—confronts the governing regime's construction of global modernity risks similar sanction. Time is more problematic than behavior. In the case of Temur, therefore, it was not that his actions and those of his disciples necessarily threatened the Tajik state's aspirational monopoly on religious thought, even if that is what the filmmakers chiefly chose to depict. Temur's oddity— his degree of divergence from the normative—seems oriented to raise the ire of urban, educated classes in Dushanbe, the likely supporters of Raḥmon's enforced peace and prosperity. Yet his oddity alone cannot account for his arrest. We should not forget that in the film about Abūḥanifa, some of those same behaviors are lauded and presented as evidence of piety. The problem comes when such behaviors suggest a future and exist in the now when they should only rightly exist as heritage.

Both Temur's arrest and his chamber-of-horrors-esque depiction on state television demonstrate how the Tajik governing elite asserts what Elizabeth Freeman has called "chrononormativity,"[56] the use of time to control human bodies. State elites' manipulation of heritage routinizes the ideologies they seek to project.[57] Living examples of Muslim heritage are just as incompatible with official modernity as are the architectural relics of the Soviet *ancien régime*, and the new buildings of central Dushanbe have the same metonymic relationship to the future as Temur shares with backwardness. Yet when marked as heritage, the Great Imom is as modern as fiberglass flagpoles. Temur is the opposite of the Tajik governing regime's globalizing new modernity, an icon standing in the way of new orientations provided by Raḥmon and his cohorts. Heritage, saint, zombie, and anti-saint all stand as potential discursive strategies, variously invoked by the governing elite to domesticate or eliminate what they see as problematic iterations of future Islam. Both the architecture of central Dushanbe and images of Abūḥanifa similarly exemplify Tajikistan's future. However, if zombie is an appropriate metaphor, Raḥmon and other governing elites might still justifiably worry: zombies come back to life.

56 E. Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). See also Gatling, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan*.

57 Ibid., 3.