

Bukhara Iranians and Their Role in Interethnic Relations

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the Bukhara Iranians, who contribute to the ethnic diversity of the Bukhara oasis. It also aims to provide a scholarly analysis of the historical formation of Husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals in central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, as well as their social and religious functions and their current state.

Keywords: Bukhara Iranians; Shia Communities; Interethnic Relations; Religious Tolerance; Husayniyakhona; Ashura Rituals; Muharram; Karbala; Marsiya; Noha; Cultural Heritage; Central Asia.

1. Introduction

Shia communities in Central Asia have an ancient history and have traditionally resided primarily in the Samarkand and Bukhara regions of Uzbekistan, as well as in certain areas of Tajikistan. In particular, in the Bukhara oasis, their long-standing coexistence with representatives of other nations and ethnic groups, from ancient times to the present day, along with their efforts to preserve their unique identity, deserves special attention. They are widely known in the region as the Bukhara Iranians. Although these communities have faced various political, social, and religious pressures throughout history, they have succeeded in preserving their traditions and values, including the memory of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) and the observance of Ashura rituals.

1.1. Study Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the historical formation, religious and cultural heritage, and the role of Shia communities, particularly the Bukhara Iranians, living in Central Asia, especially in the Bukhara oasis, in interethnic relations. This general objective is implemented through the following specific tasks:

- 1) To conduct a scientific analysis of the ethnic composition, historical formation, and the role and significance of the Bukhara Iranians in the social life of the oasis;
- 2) To identify the historical development, stages of evolution, as well as the religious and social functions of husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals;
- 3) To examine the processes through which Shia communities have preserved their religious traditions and identity across different historical periods, particularly during the Soviet era;
- 4) To substantiate the role of the religious and cultural activities of the Bukhara Iranians in strengthening interethnic relations, social cohesion, and religious tolerance.

2. Review Literature

Studies on Shia communities in Central Asia and their religious and cultural life have been conducted within historical, ethnographic, and sociological frameworks. Academic sources indicate that the presence of Shias in the Transoxiana region dates back to the period of Arab conquests, and that their influence increased significantly in the 9th–10th centuries, when Bukhara and Samarkand emerged as major centers of learning. Furthermore, research highlights husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals as key factors in preserving the religious identity of Shia communities and strengthening social and spiritual cohesion. Some studies also examine the restrictions on religious activity during the Soviet period, including the closure of husayniyakhona and the shift of rituals into more concealed forms. At the same time, contemporary research increasingly focuses on the preservation of traditional values among Shia communities and their role in fostering interethnic relations.

3. Methodology

In the historical and ethnographic analysis of cooperation among various nations and ethnic groups living in Uzbekistan and the Bukhara oasis, general scientific methods such as analysis and synthesis, retrospective analysis, comparative analysis, generalization, the dialectical method, and synergetic approaches were employed. The relevance of this article lies in the fact that, although Shia communities in Central Asia constitute a minority in terms of population, their religious and cultural heritage occupies an important place in the social life of the region. Husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals are regarded as key means of preserving Shiism and promoting spiritual cohesion within society.

4. Result and Discussion

“Husayniyakhona” (or “husayniya”) has emerged as an institution occupying a central place in the religious and social life of Shia Muslims. It primarily serves as the main venue for rituals held during the month of Muharram, especially on the Day of Ashura, commemorating Imam Husayn ibn Ali (peace be upon him) and his companions who were martyred in the desert of Karbala. Therefore, “husayniyakhona” holds significant importance not only for religious ceremonies but also for the spiritual, cultural, and social life of the community. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the article is based on the historical-analytical method. In addition, drawing on contemporary sociological and ethnographic research, it seeks to examine “husayniyakhona” and Ashura rituals from a scientific perspective within the context of the oasis.

A brief overview of the arrival of Iranians in our region is as follows. Islam entered Central Asia in the 8th century during the Arab conquests. During this period, the first traces of Shiism emerged in the territories that were part of the Caliphate. Historical sources indicate that, during the Caliphate era, many sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), migrated to the Transoxiana region, among whom were also adherents of the Shia faith [1,1113]. During the 9th–10th centuries, when Bukhara and Samarkand emerged as major centers of science and learning, the influence of Shiism increased significantly. During this period, Shiism spread primarily among the Persian-Tajik population, as they maintained close cultural ties with Iran and Khorasan [2]. Historical sources indicate that, in this same period, practices such as Qur’an recitation, the performance of marsiya, and mourning rituals associated with the events of Karbala were already in place [3,13]. In subsequent centuries, Shia

communities primarily resided in the regions of Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, and Kashkadarya in Uzbekistan. In order to preserve their religious traditions, they began to establish special institutions known as “husayniyakhona”. Initially, these functioned within private homes and small community spaces, but later, in some areas, they were constructed as separate buildings [4].

Husayniyakhona served not only as a venue for religious rituals but also as a center of social cohesion and moral education for Shia communities. Various activities were held there, including Ashura ceremonies, Qur’an recitation, the performance of marsiya and noha, as well as religious and educational discussions. Throughout the Middle Ages, although Shia communities in Central Asia constituted a minority, they succeeded in preserving their religious traditions. Even after the Russian Empire conquered Turkestan in the second half of the 19th century, these communities continued to exist. Although their activities were largely confined to the local level during this period, husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals retained an important place in collective memory. During the imperial period, the activities of husayniyakhona were, in some cases, subject to official supervision, but they were not completely prohibited. As a result, Shia communities were able to continue their religious practices [5,10].

Husayniyakhona (Arabic: ḥusaynīya, derived from the name of Imam Husayn) is a special venue for religious and social rituals among Shia Muslims. It is primarily intended for commemorating Imam Husayn ibn Ali (peace be upon him) and the martyrs of Karbala, as well as for organizing gatherings during the month of Muharram. Husayniyakhona performs multiple functions in the social and religious life of Shia communities. Its most important functions include the following:

As a venue for religious rituals. During the month of Muharram, particularly on the Day of Ashura, gatherings, Qur’an recitation, and the performance of marsiya and noha are held. In addition, during religious holidays such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, husayniyakhona serves as a place for community gatherings.

As a spiritual and educational center. Religious lessons, Qur’an instruction, and discussions on historical events are organized in husayniyakhona. This process plays an important role in conveying the lessons of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) and the meaning of the tragedy of Karbala to the younger generation [6].

As a center of social cohesion and charity. Husayniyakhona fulfills not only religious but also social functions. During the month of Muharram, the preparation of nazr food, its distribution to the poor, and support for orphans and the needy are common practices among Shia communities.

As a center of cultural memory. Husayniyakhona plays a key role in preserving the religious memory of society, commemorating Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) collectively, and transmitting this memory to future generations. In this respect, it serves as an important institution for strengthening collective identity.

From an architectural perspective, husayniyakhona buildings generally have a simple design. Although they are constructed in a manner similar to mosques, they often lack features such as a minaret and a mihrab. The main hall of the husayniyakhona is typically spacious, serving as a venue for community gatherings and the performance of marsiya. In some cases, husayniyakhona also includes additional rooms, such as a kitchen (for preparing nazr food) and a library [7].

Husayniyakhona, unlike in Sunni communities, has facilitated the active participation of women alongside men in the religious life of Shia communities. During Muharram ceremonies, women gather separately to recite the Qur'an and perform marsiya and noha. This practice has enabled the transmission of Shia traditions through women as well, thereby contributing to their continuity within society [8, 336]. In some cases, women demonstrate a particularly high level of engagement in these rituals.

Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, is regarded by Shia Muslims as a sacred commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn ibn Ali (peace be upon him) and his companions in the desert of Karbala. This day is honored by Shias as a symbol of resistance to oppression and a commitment to justice. In Central Asian Shia communities, Ashura is valued not only as a religious ritual but also as a means of fostering spiritual unity within society. Through Ashura gatherings, the community preserves its religious memory and transmits it from generation to generation. On the Day of Ashura and during the preceding nine days, special gatherings are held in husayniyakhona. The primary purpose of these gatherings is to provide religious education and to instill the values of patience, justice, and devotion to the righteous path. Mourning rituals occupy a central place in their organization. Mourning (motam) is expressed through chest-beating and weeping as signs of grief for Imam Husayn [9]. In Central Asia, Shia communities have traditionally expressed mourning mainly through hand-beating on the chest. In some regions, the practice of self-flagellation with chains has also been observed; however, as in many Muslim countries, this form is prohibited in Uzbekistan.

Charitable offerings (nazr) and acts of charity hold particular significance during Ashura rituals. During the month of Muharram, special meals are prepared by Shia communities and distributed to those in need. The most common form of nazr is osh (pilaf). This tradition serves to strengthen compassion within society, support the disadvantaged, and promote religious solidarity. At the same time, it can be regarded as a practical expression of the social protection policies currently emphasized in the country. Moreover, such rituals function as a bridge in strengthening interethnic relations among different nations and ethnic groups.

After 1917, the Soviet authorities pursued a policy of strict restrictions on religious activity. In the 1920s–1930s, a large number of religious institutions were closed; like mosques and madrasas, husayniyakhona were also forced to cease their activities. Religious practice was classified as a “private matter”, and its public expression was prohibited. Ashura rituals among Shia communities were labeled “reactionary”, as they were perceived to strengthen social cohesion and potentially foster opposition to the government [10, 70–72]. During the Soviet period, most husayniyakhona in Central Asia were closed or repurposed. In some cases, they were converted into warehouses, clubs, or school buildings. Shia communities were compelled to conduct Ashura rituals in secrecy, typically in private homes or courtyards [11, 195]. These clandestine gatherings included Qur'an recitation, the reading of marsiya, and limited mourning practices. In public, such events were often presented as “ordinary memorial gatherings”. In this way, Shia communities managed to preserve their religious memory [12, 35]. Due to the constraints imposed on religious life during the Soviet era, certain changes occurred in Ashura rituals. Mourning increasingly took on an internal, spiritual form. Chest-beating rituals were performed discreetly and within restricted circles. Additionally, marsiya and noha were more often recited in poetic form without musical accompaniment. In some cases, Ashura gatherings were conducted not as explicitly religious events but as “cultural

and spiritual” assemblies. Although these changes reduced the outward expression of the rituals, their core meaning, the commemoration of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) and the preservation of the spirit of resistance to oppression, remained intact [13,5].

Toward the end of the Soviet period (the 1980s), religious policy became somewhat more lenient, and Shia communities began efforts to revive their religious practices. However, by that time, most husayniyakhona had already disappeared. As a result, significant challenges arose in restoring the tradition of husayniyakhona after independence. Nevertheless, these circumstances did not prevent the Bukhara Iranians from preserving their identity.

5. Conclusion and Future Recommendations

In conclusion, although Shia communities in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan and the Bukhara region, constitute a demographic minority, they have played a significant role in preserving their religious and cultural heritage. Husayniyakhona has occupied a central place in this process, serving as a venue for religious rituals, educational activities, and social cohesion. From the earliest periods of Shiism, husayniyakhona has functioned not only as a site for commemorating Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) and the martyrs of Karbala, but also as an institution that fosters social unity and strengthens religious identity. Ashura rituals, in turn, serve as a primary means of preserving and transmitting this identity to future generations. Through Qur’an recitation, the performance of marsiya and noha, as well as mourning and nazr practices, Shia communities reinforce not only religious values but also the ideals of justice, devotion, social support, and resistance to oppression.

Overall, while actively preserving their national identity, the Bukhara Iranians also involve representatives of other nations, ethnic groups, religions, and denominations in their rituals. This practice plays a significant role in strengthening interethnic relations and promoting religious tolerance, mutual respect, and patience within society.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- To expand research aimed at the scientific study and preservation of the religious and cultural heritage of Shia communities in the Bukhara oasis, particularly the Bukhara Iranians;
- To develop systematic measures to enhance the spiritual and educational significance of husayniyakhona and Ashura rituals, and to foster historical memory, religious values, and social cohesion among the younger generation;
- To effectively utilize the role of Shia community rituals in strengthening interethnic relations and promoting religious tolerance, and to support them as a social factor that encourages tolerance within society;
- To develop mechanisms for creating a favorable environment for the lawful and free practice of religious traditions, taking into account historical experience and contemporary conditions, and to enhance their positive impact on social life.

These recommendations aim to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of Shia communities, strengthen interethnic harmony, and promote spiritual development in society.

Declarations

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Consent for publication

The author contributed to the manuscript and consented to the publication of this research work.

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