

# FEATURES OF SHIITE COMMUNITIES OF CENTRAL ASIA IN THE 20TH-21ST CENTURIES

**Tokhtiev Shukhrat Rustamovich,**

PhD., Senior lecturer

“IRCICA chair for Islamic history and source studies”

International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

E-mail: [shuhtrat55567@mail.ru](mailto:shuhtrat55567@mail.ru)

**Abstract:** The article is devoted to a review of the history and culture of the Shiite communities of Central Asia, in particular Uzbekistan, which profess Shiism, from the Ismaasharid (Ismamite) and Ismaili interpretations. The historically proven centuries-old contradictions of Shiites and Sunnis sometimes took the form of not only confessional, political or diplomatic conflicts. They seriously influenced the mutual perceptions of Muslims of two confessional directions within Islam, which sometimes resulted in an almost physical hostility to Sunnis and Shiites. The hostility of these two confessional areas of Islam prompted their bearers to apply the label "wrong" in relation to each other. And sometimes it was difficult to separate simple confessional rejection from political confrontations, which, in turn, often became an occasion for mutual military expansion, bloody clashes, etc. Now, despite the prevailing predominantly Sunni-Hanafi religious environment, Shiites from time immemorial keep the features of religious ritual and their confessional self-identification. The article also discusses some historical data on the resettlement and penetration of Shiite currents in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Irani, Persian, Marvi / Mavri, Samarkand, Bukhara, Sunnits, Shiites, Imamites, Ismailites, Pandjab

## INTRODUCTION

From the 16th century to the 20s of the 20th century, in particular, due to the wars and invasions caused by the religious and ideological rivalry between the Sunni rulers of Movarounnahr and the Iranian Shiites, and the political, religious, economic and social situations in Iran and its neighboring countries, the arrival of Shiite representatives to Central Asia was observed. . Since these Shiite representatives mainly come from Iran, in Central Asia, especially in the territory of the present Republic of Uzbekistan (except for Iranian Jews), they are called by the ethnographic term Irani (Pers. Iranian).

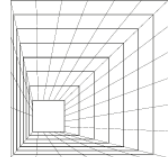
But Irani is a generic ethnic term that does not mean that all Shiites belong to a single "sub-ethnic" group<sup>1</sup>. Among the Shias we know as Iranian (depending on the city of origin) we can also find those who call themselves Marvi/Mavri (from Marv), Sabzevari (from Sabzevar), Mashhadi (from Mashhad), Giloni (from Gilon), Mozandaroni (from Mozandaron), Nisoi (from Niso)<sup>2</sup>.

## THE MAIN PART

Iranians are divided into Tajik and Turkic speakers according to language signs. For example, O.A. Sukhareva, who conducted research on the history of the cities of the Bukhara Khanate, writes that according to the Tajik-speaking Persian language and anthropological type of the

<sup>1</sup> The term "Subethnik" ("Subethnos") is used here to refer to a group separated from a particular nation or ethnos for geographical or political reasons [13, p. 197-199].

<sup>2</sup> Babadzanov B.M. On the history of the naqshbandiyya muqaddiyya in Central Maawara'n-nahr in the late 18th and early 19th centuries // Muslim culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. – Berlin, Klaus, Schwartz, Verlag. 1998. – Pp. 385-413.



city of Bukhara, it is different from the descendants of the red-headed people of Samarkand, who speak the Turkic language and are considered to have been transferred to the emir Shahmurad (1785-1800). We conducted research in Samarkand in January 2007 and witnessed this in the speech of the Iranian population living and working in and around the Panjab Mosque.

In relation to the ethnic (or "sub-ethnic") group that we know as Iranians, O.A. Sukhareva used the words "Persian" and "Persian" in her published work on the history of the cities of the Bukhara Khanate and proposed to include the term "Persian" in the literature as the official name of this group<sup>3</sup>. O.A. Sukhareva expresses her opinion that after the "massacre of Shias" in 1910, that is, when relations between Sunnis and Shias in Bukhara became tense, the Shias adopted the name Persian because the words "Iran" and "Marvi" were used in a derogatory and hostile spirit<sup>4</sup>.

Professor I.I. Zarubin commented that, regarding the division of Shias into Persians or Iranians, the district civil commissioner in the Pamirs used the word Iranian in reference to people who were deported from Marv. I.I. Zarubin writes that they, those deported from Merv (all Shias enslaved and sold in the slave markets of the Bukhara Khanate) call themselves Iranians, do not mix with the Tajiks, but despite their language and religion differences, their dress and lifestyle are similar to the Tajiks<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the Iranians, I.I. Zarubin speaks about the Persians living in the cities of the Trans-Caspian region. For example, in the 1926 census, I.I. Zarubin puts the number of Iranians in Samarkand region at 11,282 and the number of Persians at 654<sup>6</sup>. That is, here referred Shia representatives are called by two – Iranian and Persian – ethnic names.

Information about this can be found in other literature as well. For example, in the book "Multinational Uzbekistan: historical and demographic aspect" in the census, which began in 1926, we can see that the ethnic composition of Uzbekistan was 9.2 thousand Iranians and 9.8 thousand Persians. Subsequent calculations, in 1939 and 1959, show that neither the Iranians nor the Persians are a separate ethnic group, and therefore it is difficult to know their number. However, among those registered in 1970 and in 1979 and 1989, only the name of the Persians occurs, and we see that their number has doubled compared to the previous registered periods. For example, in 1970, 15.5 thousand Persians were registered<sup>7</sup>, meanwhile between 1979 and 1989, 20.0 thousand Persians were registered in Uzbekistan<sup>8</sup>.

F.D. Lyushkevich, who conducted a study on the ethnic group of Iranians (as cited in the 1926 census), does not specify to whom he referred to the Persians cited by I.I. Zarubin[9, p. 39]. However, both I.I. Zarubin and those who registered in 1926 used the word персы / Persians in the early twentieth century to refer to Iranians seeking asylum and lucrative employment in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan<sup>9</sup>. The word Iranian was widespread among the local Shias at that time. Although only the word Persian was used in the 1970, 1979, and 1989 censuses, many Shias who have lived in present-day Uzbekistan for centuries call themselves

<sup>3</sup> Suxareva O.A. Kvartal'naya obshina poznefeodal'nogo goroda Buxari. – T.: Nauka. 1976. – P. 365

<sup>4</sup> Suxareva O.A. Kvartal'naya obshina poznefeodal'nogo goroda Buxari. – T.: Nauka. 1976. – Pp. 82-83/

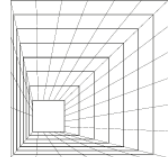
<sup>5</sup> Zarubin I.I. Spisok narodnostey Turkestanskogo kraja. – L.; 1925. – P. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Zarubin I.I. Naselenie Samarkandskoy oblasti. – L.; 1926. – P. 24.

<sup>7</sup> اقوام مسلمان اتحاد شوروی (Muslim communities of the Soviet Union). Compiled by Shirin Akiner, translated by Muhammad Hussein Oriya. In Persian. - Tehran, Scientific and Cultural Publications Company, 1367/1988. – Pp. 448-452.

<sup>8</sup> Ata-Mirzaev O., Gentshke V., Murtazayeva R. Uzbekistan mnogonatsionalniy: istoriko-demograficheskiy aspekt. – T.: Izd. medisinskoy literaturi imeni Abu Ali Ibn Sino, 1998. – Pp. 54-68, 144-151.

<sup>9</sup> Mahdi Sanoyi "Nehovandi". جایگاه ایران در آسیای مرکزی (Iranian places in Central Asia). - Tehran, International Faith Publishing House, 1376/1997. – Pp. 76; Aliyeva F. Samarkandskie iransi. centr-asia.narod.ru/iran 20.06.2006-09:46 AM.



Iranians. Even we may find the word Iranian can be found next to the word "Nationality" in their passports. However, in the documents of the younger generation, we can see that according to their wishes, the word Uzbek is indicated in the "Nationality" aspect. This process is a natural phenomenon (not organized on the "initiative" of government agencies). At the same time, Iranians do not evaluate their "ethnic conversion" negatively. Therefore, such a process of "ethnic assimilation" is natural. However, the Iranians have preserved their traditions and even restored all their customs during independence, and there is no evidence of interference or obstruction in this process by the relevant institutions of the state.

In the survey of Iranians in the "Panjob" and "Khoja Soat" neighborhoods in Samarkand that was conducted in 2007, Ishakov Yusuf (was born in 1953, nationality is Iranian), deputy imam of the Panjob mosque, and Gulyamov Ravshan (Ravshan strongman, born in 1960), chairman of the Iranian-Uzbek Friendship Society and Cultural Center, said that as well as Iranian Shias, Russian-speaking Azerbaijani Shias also lived in Samarkand. Moreover, they were called as *пирсиён* (Persian), and that some of them had Persian in their passports instead of Azerbaijani. According to 1995 data, 93% of the population of Azerbaijan believe in Shi'ism<sup>10</sup>. Currently, considering Central Asia there are about 60,000 Azerbaijanis in Uzbekistan, about 78,000 in Kazakhstan<sup>11</sup>, and about 20,000 in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan<sup>12</sup>. Due to the regime of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist policy pursued, people of this Azerbaijani nationality moved to other socialist republics located in the Central Asian region as representatives of the nation, such as: Russians, Armenians, Chechens, etc. The politics and situation of the Soviet era was not left unnoticed by the worldview, beliefs and traditions of the Azerbaijanis who came to Central Asia. For example, in 2007-2011 Gadjeva Sakina Fikretovna, a bachelor's degree student in international relations at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies said that when her uncle died, her family, along with her neighbors, who were Armenians and Russians, performed Christian rites, and buried his body under the sounds of music. "Now we, the Azerbaijanis, understand that we are Muslims"- Sakina Gadjeva added. Obviously, the cultural and enlightenment centers established in the countries where Shias live are of great importance for the Shias of Azerbaijan to understand themselves as Muslims. Consequently, such centers are located in Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) in Turkmenistan, Almaty in Kazakhstan, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, Dushanbe in Tajikistan, Navoi, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan. The first cultural center of Azerbaijanis in Uzbekistan was opened in 1989 in "Gardashlyk" ("Brotherhood") in Tashkent and then another in Samarkand region<sup>13</sup>.

The life of the Iranian-Shias of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, during the Soviet Union was distinguished by its uniqueness. First of all, there are Shias, along with representatives of other religions and nationalities, as a result of the process of Sovietization, their knowledge about Shiism has been preserved in a vague form, or rather, in the form of certain (apparently simplified) religious rituals. Many researchers have met them in this form. For example, according to B. Bobojonov and A. Mominov during the scientific research in Samarkand, even the "new" religious leaders of Samarkand in the early 1990s did not have extensive knowledge about Shi'ism, moreover, about its internal currents and factions. Although, according to other historical sources, Shiites may have heard of the religious leader in Iran – Ayatollah<sup>14</sup>, marja

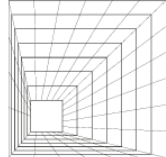
<sup>10</sup> Countries of the World: Encyclopedic Reference. - Smolensk, Rusich, 2002. – P. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Islam na territorii bivshey Rossiyskoy imperii. Ensiklopedicheskiy slovar. Pod redaksiey S.M. Prozorova. – M.: Izdatelskaya firma «Vostochnaya literatura» RAN, 2006. T. I. – P. 175.

<sup>12</sup> [inform.kz./rus/article/2207169](http://inform.kz./rus/article/2207169); [planeta-imen.narod.ru/imena/azerbaijan](http://planeta-imen.narod.ru/imena/azerbaijan); [podrobno.uz/cat/calche/Azerbajdzancu\\_v\\_Yzbekistane](http://podrobno.uz/cat/calche/Azerbajdzancu_v_Yzbekistane)

<sup>13</sup> [forum.turan.info/showthread](http://forum.turan.info/showthread); [chrono-tm.org](http://chrono-tm.org)

<sup>14</sup> *Ayatullah ("Miracle of Allah") and Marja al-Taqlid ("Object of Imitation") are titles given to prominent and high-ranking clerics in the Shia world.*



al-taqlid Ruhullo Mousavi Khomeini (1979-1889) and his follower Sayyid Ali Khomani (1989-present).

Therefore, at that time, when the Soviet era was coming to an end, it was appropriate to talk about the historical-ethnic self-awareness as an Iranian, and the religious awareness (as a result of the atheistic policy) was so forgotten that it is correct to talk about the Iranians as a separate religious and even ethnic group. would not come. In the period of the Soviet Union, the group self-consciousness of Iranians was preserved in the standards raised by the reality of the Soviet era, and in ethnic mutual feelings through certain rituals and ceremonial gatherings. But Iranians, at any level, joined the local population – Uzbeks, Tajiks and other national and ethnic groups, and worked side by side with them.

In Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan, the majority of Iranians live in Samarkand. Samarkand became a major refuge for Iranians after the bloody clashes between Shias and Sunnis in Bukhara in 1910. Many Iranians at the time, according to the information given by the original Iranians, ran away from Bukhara and took refuge in colonized Samarkand. They were accustomed to the situation here and were able to survive with their hard work and ingenuity. As a result, the “Dargam” Canal in Samarkand was built by the Iranians. The people of Samarkand remembered this channel as “Iranian stream”. Later, around this canal, the neighborhoods of Iranians such as Punjab (Five Streams, River), Khoja Soat, Lolazor, Topkhana, Mingtut, Bogishamol, Slave Garden (now Flower Garden), Bekmahallya were formed. From 1928 to 1930, in this place of Samarkand there was the district of “Eron bogishamoli” (Iranian garden)<sup>15</sup>.

The common occupations of Iranians living in Central Asia, especially in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, were weaving silk (shoibofi), making confectionery products (kannodi), selling medicinal spices (attori) and jewelry making (zargari). By now, we can find Iranians working in different areas of the country<sup>16</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

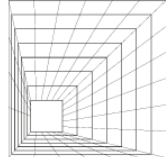
In 2007, when we went to Samarkand to conduct research on the history, lifestyle and culture of the Iranian population of the city, we stayed at the “Tomaris” hotel located in the Iranian district of Samarvand, and we were the first to witness the use of Turkish words by Iranians in their daily conversations. In an interview with Alieva Fatima Sattorovna, assistant professor of the Department of History of Uzbekistan, Ph.D., who is from Iran, she said that representatives of different nationalities live in Iran - Persians, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Iranians from Samarkand are from Iranian Azerbaijan, i.e. that they come from the region of Azerbaijan (Oston-e Azarbaydjon) of Iran and that they use Turkic words because the Azerbaijani language is close to the Uzbek language, as well as in the process of the all-Union census held in 1970, 15,457 Iranians were registered in Uzbekistan, of which 12,202 spoke Uzbek as their mother tongue said that his speech was recorded. It is also interesting that some Iranians consider themselves to be representatives of the Imamite movement based on the Jafari school of Shiism. That is, the cases of linguistic assimilation did not turn into religious conversion of Iranians. Ethnographically, this process is particularly noteworthy.

In her research, Fatima Alieva writes that many scientific and cultural figures from Iran have appeared in Uzbekistan. For example, poet and prose writer Abulqasim Lohuti, lithographer Ibrahim Sultan from Khiva, a participant in the revolutionary movement in the Bukhara Emirate, later historian Professor Aliev (may be the father of the author), orientalist-pedagogues K. Shitfar, A. Tabataboi, D. Eftekor, M. Tageev, Iranian scholars Latif Halilov and

<sup>15</sup> Aliyeva F. Samarkandskie iransi. centr-asia.narod.ru/iran 20.06.2006-09:46 AM.

<sup>16</sup> Aliyeva F. Iransi Samarkanda // Uzbekistanskiy gumanitarniy jurnal «Obshestvennoe mnenie. Prava cheloveka» №1 (13), – T.; 2001. – Pp. 123-125; Aliyeva F. Samarkandskie iransi. centr-asia.narod.ru/iran 20.06.2006-09:46 AM.





A. Patsun, director Syed Ali Okhonzoda, artist Rashid Fayzi, former consul of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Thailand Parviz Aliev. We can add the People's Artist of Uzbekistan Mrs. Nasiba Abdullaeva among them. Among the Azerbaijanis, it is worth mentioning Alisher Navoi state academician and ballet theater director, People's Artist of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan F. Safarov, writer A. Najafov, artist of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan Yu. Husaynov<sup>17</sup>.

Currently, while talking about the main architectural heritage of the Iranians of Uzbekistan, it is impossible not to mention the Punjab mosque and madrasa in Samarkand during the Soviet Union, which was called "Punjab Mosque of the Religious Society of Samarkand, UzSSR, Ogyi Mirhasan". The madrasa was built in the 19th century with a mosque and its minaret, which have not survived to us, and the architect was Khwaja Abduraim. This complex was built on the waqf land of a person named Hajibobo Abduokhunbek. The Punjab Madrasah was established in 1908, where students studied religious and secular sciences. Until 1924, the building was kept in good condition and used for its intended purpose. Since 1924, the madrasa (like many religious institutions of the Soviet Union) has been adapted for various organizations and offices, and since then the building has been reworked. In 1939-1943, the madrasa housed a vocational school. Later, the building was used for various offices - construction, trade, warehouse, post office. By 1990, the Panjab Madrasah, together with the Murad Awliya Memorial Complex, built by the ancestors of the Iranians in Samarkand, passed into the hands of its real owners, the Shia Muslims. From March 10 of this year, the "Cultural Center of Iranians" was established in the Punjab Madrasah. In 1997, instead of the mosque adjacent to the madrasa, a new mosque was built and opened in 1999. In addition, the control of the Punjab tomb, 50 meters away from the Punjab mosque and madrasa, was also handed over to the Iranians. It is said that it is a cemetery of brothers, in addition to Iranians, Arabs, Jews and Kurds are buried. According to information given to us by Iranians from Samarkand, there are 9 Iranian mosques in the city, of which only two are open because they are registered. In Bukhara, only one such mosque (the mosque located on Samarkand Street, Bukhara) is open<sup>18</sup>.

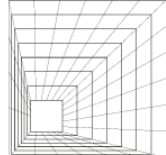
In **conclusion**, Iranians living in the territory of Uzbekistan were kept here as one of the peoples. Iranians have managed to maintain their religious and ethnic identity while becoming much closer to the local peoples. This situation is more common in Uzbekistan than in the countries of Central Asia. In addition, due to the existing conditions, the contribution of Iranians to the culture and science of Uzbekistan is indisputable. These processes are interesting from an ideological (ethnological or historical) point of view, as well as from an ideological point of view. That is, ethnic groups such as Iranians were able to adapt to local conditions and even show their respective effects on these conditions. So, while we observe a limited process of assimilation of Iranians (especially from the aspects of language and culture), this ethnic group has preserved its own characteristics (identity). In the future, ethnologists must study such factors more widely and more deeply. In particular, we think that it is an urgent issue to determine the reasons and types of adaptation of Iranians to different conditions.

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