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### A GLORIOUS JOURNEY: UNVEILING THE RICH HERITAGE OF SAMARKAND IRANIANS

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#### Abstract

The article examines the formation of the Iranian ethnic group in Central Asia. The study is of interest in light of the changes that occur when approaching the surrounding ethno-linguistic environment. The article draws attention to the division of the Iranian ethnic group into Tajik-speaking and Turkic-speaking representatives. A significant part of the population of Bukhara turns out to be Forces/Persians, while Iranians predominantly live in Samarkand. The article also traces the historical formation of this group, including migrations from the northern provinces of Iran and Afghanistan to Central Asia. This study offers new insights into ethnic dynamics and cultural interactions in Samarkand and the surrounding area.

**Keywords:** peoples of Central Asia, Samarkand, Iranians, Shiites, national composition.

In the process of formation of the nationalities of Central Asia, the history of the emergence of individual ethnic groups and the changes that occur as a result of rapprochement with the surrounding ethno-linguistic environment are of particular interest. Among the population of Samarkand, Bukhara and surrounding places, as well as in other cities of Transoxiana (but to a much lesser extent), an ethnic group is known, which the local population calls “Irani”.

According to linguistic criteria, the Iranians are divided into Tajik-speaking and Turkic-speaking, whose language belongs to the Oguz group. Currently, the former live mainly in the Bukhara viloyat, the latter in Samarkand. This was confirmed during field work in the city of Samarkand in 2007.

As O. A. Sukhareva writes, in Bukhara a significant group of the population was and is made up of the Forces/Persians (“Iranis”). She calls the Irani group we are studying “Fors” and explains that they adopted the name “Fors” after the so-called “Shiite massacre” of 1910, when the aggravation of relations between the Sunnis

and Shiites of Bukhara led to the fact that the previous names “Irani”, “Marvi” began to be used by others only behind the scenes, acquiring a connotation of insult and hostility. As a result, based on the publications “Bukhara in the State Economic Plan for 1923/1924” and the materials of the 1926 population census in the city of Bukhara, the author proposes to adopt their new name, which is already rooted in the life of the Bukharans - “force”.

In the population census, Persians accounted for 9.8 thousand people, i.e. 0.2% of the population of Uzbekistan. But the materials we collected on the national composition of Uzbekistan according to the 1926 census show that in addition to the Persians, the census also mentions Iranians, who make up 9.2 thousand people, i.e. 0.2% of the population of Uzbekistan. Based on our research and collected materials, we assume that the Persians mentioned in the census are residents of the Bukhara region, and the Iranians are residents of other regions of Uzbekistan (mainly the city of Samarkand).

To approach the question of those ethnic components that made up the Irani group, one should trace the history of the emergence of this group.

The first information from Central Asian historians about forced migrations to Central Asia from the northern provinces of Iran and Afghanistan dates back to the 15th and 19th centuries. This was a period of fragmentation of the feudal possessions of the Timurids, accompanied by endless internecine wars, campaigns of conquest and raids. This time marks the beginning of the subjugation of these areas to the nomadic Uzbeks, whose conquests were accompanied by the capture, among other wealth, of captives who were turned into slaves.

The religious justification for the capture of Muslim Iranians into slavery was the proclamation among the Sunni population of Central Asia of the need to fight Shiism, which under the Safivids (1502-1736) was adopted in Iran as the state religion and since then the Shaibanids' campaigns against Iran have been legitimized as “the fight against infidels,” a more precise term is “gazat.” In ordinary, palace and coin titles this was reflected in this way. Those who made a campaign against Iran (most often in Khorasan) were given the title “Abu-l-Ghazi” (warrior for the faith). In addition, traditional economic and cultural ties between Iran and Turkestan, which, according to A. Yu. Yakubovsky, had previously “continued for almost 900 years,” were replaced by mutual devastating raids. Already in 1611, the slavery of Shiites, who were equated with “kafirs” -



infidels, was officially sanctioned by a fatwa of the clergy in Herat, the capital of Sunni Khorasan.

The Shiite perception of Iran as a state of “infidels” has actually become entrenched in public opinion. In this sense, the historical fact cited in B. Babadzhanov’s dissertation can be called indicative. During the siege of Bukhara in 1540 by Barak Khan and Abdulatifkhan (Abd al-'Aziz Khan (1533-1550) sat in Bukhara), the famous Naqshbandiya leader Makhdumi A'zam (died in 1542) came out for negotiations and told the rebels: “What to fight with?” with your brother ('Abd al-'Aziz) and attack the Muslims, it is better to make ghazat and liberate the lands of the Muslims in Khorasan [from the Shiites].” He added that all Bukharans think so and are asking to withdraw, that is, to lift the siege. Particularly noteworthy is the part of the phrase in which Shiite Iranians were not even perceived as Muslims, and the war against them was considered ghazat. There is also a famous fatwa that equated the Shiites of Iran with “infidels.” This was an obvious political fatwa that legitimized the Shaybanid raids on Iran. The first ruler who received such a fatwa in 1586 was Bukhara Khan Abdullakhan (1557-1598, ascended the khan’s throne in 1583). In the course of expanding the borders of his state, he reached Mashhad and, moving deeper into Khorasan, captured Herat. At the same time, a huge number of residents were taken into captivity in Bukhara.

These historical facts received a peculiar refraction among the modern “Iranis” of Samarkand. Thus, according to the deputy imam of the Punjab mosque, Isakov Yusuf (1953), the descendants of former slaves live in the “Gullar Bogi” (“Garden of Flowers”) mahalla, which is located on Shota Rustaveli Street in Samarkand. The deputy imam himself claims to be a sayyid. However, he was unable to display his family tree.

The liberation campaigns of the Central Asian rulers and, in particular, the Uzbek rulers against Khorasan met a dangerous rival in the person of the Iranian rulers, who invaded the territory of Transoxiana and captured its cities.

It is possible that during the retaliatory campaigns of the Iranians in Central Asia (especially Nadirshah Afshar in 1740-1742), some groups of Persians settled in the Bukhara possessions. For example, to the southwest of Bukhara, outside the Sheikh Jalol gate, there is the village of Afshar Mahalla, which is classified as an “Irani” settlement. There is a related historical fact. After the capture of Bukhara, the remaining troops of Shiite Iran in the region directly helped the actual founder



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of the Mangyt dynasty, Muhammad Rahimbiya, to seize and maintain power. This caused a negative reaction from theologians of Bukhara and Samarkand, brought up in the traditions of complete non-recognition of Shiism in general.

But, in spite of everything, the most active ruler of the Mangyts, Muhammad Rahimkhan, resettled a significant number of residents of the temporarily captured areas of Merv, south-eastern Mazandaran, Abiverd, etc. For example, according to epigraphic research, the Irani mazar “Ogoyi Mir Hasan” (originally was exclusively an Irani cemetery), on which tombstones were preserved from at least the 19th century until the 30s of the 20th century, containing the names of local Iranians, apparently with hereditary nisbs “Gilani”, “Mazandarani”, “Nisawi”, etc. . P.

It is very characteristic that already from the time of the reign of the first Mangyts, Iranians, slaves by origin, played a large role in governing the state. Under Daniyalbiy (1758-1785), a certain Davlatbiy, a slave by birth, was appointed to one of the highest court positions of kushbegi. The ruler's armed guard consisted of ghulam slaves. The promotion of former slaves to senior positions in conditions of constant inter-feudal strife is known in ancient times and in this case is explained by the reliance on “elements not related by their origin to the Uzbek nobility,” which naturally caused dissatisfaction with the latter. The oppositional sentiments of the nobility, as well as the dissatisfaction of the common people with the abuses and lawlessness taking place in the Khanate, very often took the form of a religious struggle against the “heretics” Shiites who were in power. Shah Murad (1785-1800) took advantage of one of these moments, whose goal was to annex a significant part of modern Turkmenistan with the center in Merv to the Bukhara Khanate. After the inhabitants of Merv surrendered, a fairly large number of them, led by the sons of the murdered ruler Bairam Ali, were resettled to Bukhara. The descendants of these settlers made up a significant part of the group we studied, giving it one of its self-names - “marui”, often pronounced in Bukhara as “Mavri”.

About the dead, A.D. Grebenkin wrote that they were good farmers, warriors and artisans, and that therefore Shah Murad did not turn them into slaves, but, settling them in the cities, gave them good lands and empty sakli as their property.

Similar migrations, but in less compact groups, continued under Shah Murad's successors, in particular under Nasrullah Khan. He created a permanent infantry army with the help of Abdu-s-Samad, an adventurer from Iran (apparently,



partially familiar with the organization of military affairs in European armies); this army consisted of Persians, Afghans, Tajiks and partly Russian prisoners of war.

Nevertheless, a fairly significant part of this population consisted, apparently, of the descendants of slaves who, as already indicated, were brought from various regions of northern Khorasan. We find additional information about this in the descriptions of travellers in Central Asia at the end of the 18th and 19th centuries, who paint pictures of the slave trade and slavery in Central Asian cities.

Thus, Alexander Borns, who was passing through Bukhara in 1831, wrote that “all persons visiting the Bukhara ruler usually go to the palace accompanied by slaves, who for the most part consist of Persians or their descendants and are of a very special type. They even say here that at least % of the inhabitants of Bukhara are of slave origin.”

It is also known that at the beginning of the 20th century, immigrants from Iran constituted a noticeable and growing stratum of the newcomer population in Central Asia. Their numbers increased especially rapidly in the areas bordering Iran. For example, in the Trans-Caspian region there were 18,511 Iranians. Immigrants from Iran made up a significant percentage of the population in other cities and regions of the Turkestan region. In Samarkand in 1910, about 300 Iranian subjects were registered; in addition to them, over a thousand so-called “Iranis”, close in language and religion to the Persians, lived here and were subjects of the Russian Empire. According to data for 1908, 141 Iranians lived in Tashkent, and 2,110 Iranian subjects lived in the entire Syrdarya region. In the Fergana region in 1914, there were over 2,368 immigrants from Iran, etc.

The vast majority of Iranians who were in Central Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century consisted of ruined peasants, artisans and workers from Southern Azerbaijan, Khorasan and other provinces of North-Eastern Iran, who left their homeland in search of work. Iranians in Central Asia worked as loaders, janitors, domestic servants, labourers in factories, railroads, construction sites, oil fields, and agricultural labourers.

Based on the collected materials, it can be assumed that the origins of different groups of Iranians are not the same. Some of them were descendants of the inhabitants of Marv resettled here at the end of the 18th century by Emir Shah-Murad; others are descendants of slaves freed (in the 60-80s of the 19th century), according to an agreement with the Russian government, who were brought to





Bukhara from all over Khorasan, including the north of Afghanistan; the third, finally, came from immigrants from Iran, who at different times and of their own free will came to Transoxiana and settled here.

By religious affiliation, the majority of immigrants from Iran to Central Asia were Shiite Muslims (Jafarites). Among the Iranians who settled in Central Asia at the beginning of the 20th century, there were many Babis (Baha'is). At one time, they apparently left their homeland due to religious and political persecution. In Turkestan, Baha'is were able to freely practice their religious views.

No less interesting is the transformation of Iranian Shiites in Soviet times and the influence of the post-Soviet re-Islamization process on them. First of all, the peculiar "Sovietization" of the Shiites had the consequence that their knowledge of Shiism was preserved in extremely vague forms and, rather, in the form of some forms of ritual tradition (obviously, in a simplified form). Some researchers found them in this form. For example, in the course of scientific research, B. Babajanov and A. Muminov noted that even the "new" spiritual leaders of the Samarkand "Iranis" from the very beginning of the 90s did not have extensive knowledge about Shiism in general, much less about its, so to speak, internal currents or "sects". Although, according to other historical data, they could know about the spiritual leader of the Shiites "ayatullah" - "marja at-taqlid" Ruhallah Musavi Khumaini (1919-1889) and his follower Sayyid Ali Khomeini (from 1889).

Therefore, by that time (that is, by the end of the Soviet era), it was more appropriate to talk about the historical-ethnic feeling of oneself as an "Iran," and the religious component of identification was so forgotten (as a result of atheistic politics) that specifically talking about "Iran" as there was no mention of a religious group. The group self-identification of the "Iranis" in Soviet times was rather based on ethnic self-awareness, which was supported by some rituals and ritual meetings, but within the limits to which the conditions of Soviet reality allowed.

To one degree or another, having merged with the local population - Uzbeks, Tajiks and other ethnic groups, the "Iranis" engaged in creative work with them. The bulk of them lived in Samarkand. We believe that Samarkand became in fact the main refuge for the Shiites immediately after their bloody conflict with the Sunnis in Bukhara in 1910; then many "Iranis", judging by the information we collected from old-timers - "Iranis", fled from Bukhara and found shelter in



colonial Samarkand. Here they fit well into the local situation and showed, as many local old-timers recall, considerable hard work and ingenuity. The visible result of such painstaking work of the “irani” in Samarkand was the Dargom canal. This channel remained in history under the name “Eron Arigi” (“Iranian Channel”). Subsequently, Iranian mahallas were formed along this canal, such as Punjab, Khuzha-Sakhat, Lolazor, Khaimar, Mingtut, Sayit-mahalla, Bogishamol, Kullar Bogi, Naiman, Khu-zhanazar, Bekmakhalla, etc. The names of some Iranian mahallas are associated with the Iranian canal. For example, in the village of Punjab this canal is divided into several branches, hence the name Punjab (Persian-Taj. “five waters”); Yungichka - ditch, Dam - ditch, etc. New gardens appeared around these mahallas, wind and water mills were built. Such mills existed in Punjab, Sayitmahalla, Mingtut, and Dam-aryk until recently.

The most common occupations among the local Iranians were silk weaving (shoibofi), making sweets (kannoti), selling spices and medicines (attori) and jewelry making (zargari).

Speaking about the main architectural heritage of the “Irani” of Uzbekistan, it should be said about the madrasah and mosque “Punjab” (Samarkand). The architect of the madrasah was a certain Khoja Aburaim. It was built on the waqf land of Khoja Bobo Abduokhunbek. The construction was supervised by Sheikh Muhammad Kozim, and the leading foreman during the construction was Usto Komil from Bukhara. The mosque - madrasah in plan - is a structure typical of the late 19th - early 20th centuries with a rectangular hall and an veranda. The Punjab madrasah began operating in 1908. There was a school (maktab) at the mosque. Children were taught religious and secular knowledge here. Until 1924, the building was used for its intended purpose, during which time it was carefully maintained in good condition. Since 1924, the madrasah (like most religious institutions of the Soviet empire) has been adapted for various organizations and departments, and since then it has been subject to alterations. In 1939-1943, a vocational school was located in the madrasah. Later, the building was occupied by various offices - construction, trade, shops, post offices and other small organizations. And only in 1990, the Punjab madrasah passed into the hands of the true owners - believing Shiite Muslims.

Today, about 130 nationalities and nationalities live in Uzbekistan. Some of them are Iranians who profess Shiism, as they say, of the Jafarid or Isna-'Asharid persuasion. “Iranis,” despite the surrounding predominantly Sunni-Hanafi



religious environment, have preserved their religious identity and ritual characteristics from time immemorial. Now they have the best conditions (for many centuries) to preserve their confession. This is facilitated by the “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In any case, it seems that the adherents of Shiism who have survived on the territory of Uzbekistan will not lose their traditions, religious views, and ritual features in the foreseeable future.

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