

National Identity between Tradition and Reflexive Modernisation: The Contradictions of Central Asia

ANDREW PHILLIPS and PAUL JAMES¹, *Monash University, Australia*

Abstract *Central Asia, one of the most understudied areas in the world, is currently going through the upheavals of modernisation and nation formation. Arguing against the one-dimensional modernist conclusion that this process was arrested during the Soviet period, the article sets out to explore the complex weave of historical continuity and discontinuity in the formation of national identity in the new states. It argues against the notion that national identity involves the necessary dissolution of traditional ties. Moreover, the article substantially qualifies the contemporary theoretical trend to treat continuing elements of tradition as merely dead images of the past, given life by instrumental élites. Instead of nationality being posited as a one-dimensional form of identity, the article sets up an approach that emphasises the contradictory layering of identity.*

The sudden collapse of the old Soviet Union in late 1991 marked the near-end of 'East European colonialism' and the advent of independence for the 15 constituent republics of the USSR. In the wake of the upheaval, the focus of attention was dragged across the Balkans to Chechnya and back to Kosovo. Commentators attempted to understand the blood passions affecting both close neighbours and distant apparatchiks. This article discusses the largely forgotten, newly independent states of Central Asia and aims to assess the nature of nation formation in these states given the multiplicity of sub-national and transnational identities. Whilst it is useful to recognise that an emergent layer of modernism has been developing since the forced modernisation of Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, the article sets out to argue against the notion held by writers such as Ernest Gellner that nation formation involves the necessary dissolution of traditional ties. Rather, we suggest that a layering of subjectivities is likely to persist, leaving the identities of Central Asia's caught in a series of tensions between traditionalism, modernism and an emergent late-modern reflexivity.

In assessing a given polity's prospects for nation building, one's conclusions are to a large degree determined by the meaning ascribed to the term 'nation'. If nations are regarded as essential communities, then the notion of the nation-state as a recently constituted polity-community is anathema—the self-consciousness of national community in the nineteenth century and its political expression in the formation of nation-states are seen as part of a natural progression. This conception of primordial national formation has become increasingly marginalised in academic circles. However, a different version of primordialism has recently emerged in popular writing, this time in relation to the rise of neo-nationalism at a time of global change. It is smuggled back

inside an argument about those fragmenting states such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia that contain more than one nation. The argument assumes that as these nation-states fragmented, the 'nations within' inevitably again become self-aware, and sleeping nationalist movements were re-awakened. It is a new version of the oft-quoted misapprehension that the modernist Ernest Gellner called the myth of the sleeping-beauty nations.² Against this primordialist myth, it is our assumption that national identity is borne upon changing and contradictory subjectivities and related to changes in the dominant structures and subjectivities of the society. However, against a modernist such as Gellner we are concerned there is the risk of setting up a new myth—the myth that modernity sweeps all before it, turning traditional ways of life into mere fragments to be instrumentally used by the 'awakeners' as carriers and agitators for cultural nation-building. This is the myth that Gellner's approach, along with the theories of most other modernists, carries as general presupposition.

Even the best of the general approaches that conceptualise the nation as a collective identity responding to the pressures of modernisation, risk reducing the nation-state to being merely a formation within an all-embracing and globalising modernity. Whether one grants causal primacy to changes attendant upon industrialisation,³ to the emergence of 'imagined communities' through the mechanism of print capitalism,⁴ or even to the uneven diffusion of modernisation across different *ethnies*,⁵ such approaches tend to implicitly rest on the sharp discontinuities between traditionalism and modernism. They present versions of the Great Divide asserted between *Gemeinschaft* societies grounded in traditional structure and modern *Gesellschaft* societies unified by 'culture'.⁶ The problem here is not that tradition and modernism should be treated as continuous. It is that this dichotomous outlook ignores the multi-layered nature of societal integration.

Moreover, regardless of whether or not one thinks that the national subjectivity has pre-modern roots, as for example from very different perspectives do Tom Nairn or Anthony Smith, or alternatively that nationalism is constructed self-consciously by elites as does Eric Hobsbawm,⁷ the task of explaining the process of nation formation all too quickly becomes reduced to tracking a people's exposure to the facets of modernity. These facets are afforded causal status in a way that blankets out active and continuing traditional identity-formation. Thus, growing exposure to an industrial division of labour and exo-social education (Gellner), the experience of an imagined community via the mechanism of print capitalism (Anderson), a heightened awareness of the uneven diffusion of the fruits of modernisation between different *ethnies* (Smith) or an increasing incorporation into the world capitalist system (Wallerstein⁸) are wrongly said to engender a corresponding growth in the kind of national subjectivity which carries the 'past' with it as merely the *content* of a modernising social *form*.

In this article we attempt to walk a methodological tightrope, drawing appreciatively but critically upon the insights of the modernist writers while emphasising, in a way that they do not, the contradictory effects of modernisation. On the one hand, in Central Asia as elsewhere the processes of modernisation have been essential requisites of nation formation. Whilst the 'nation' can be experienced prior to the onset of modernisation by certain individuals, usually by intellectuals who work in the media of disembodied extension such as writing, it is the structural processes of modernisation that generalises this subjectivity across the minds and bodies of the populace. The incorporation of the mass of the population into Gellner's culturally 'homogenous' space of modernity nevertheless represents at best one flawed measure of nation formation. In addition to this horizontal yardstick, one must also consider the 'depth'

of the nation, that is, the extent to which the national subjectivity shapes an individual's identity.

Given our argument that social integration occurs simultaneously at different levels, the presence of multiple layers of identity within the same individual is to be expected. In order to determine the depth of the nation, and by implication its durability in the face of attempts to redefine the high culture of a society, it is thus necessary to speculate on the nature of the constitutive space that the nation occupies for an individual. For this to occur, it is critical that one studies the *specific* quality of the intersections of levels of integration within the society under scrutiny. For the purposes of the following analysis we distinguish three levels or modes of social integration: (i) relations of face-to-face integration, usually the dominant mode of integration in tribal societies, where embodied presence defines the form of the social ties; (ii) relations of agency integration where agents of institutions such as the state mediate and abstract the relations between persons, an important level of association during the formation of empires and nation-states; and (iii) relations of disembodied integration where disembodied media, technologies and techniques of communication and exchange such as mass communications come to link strangers across increasing expanses of space and time. These are related to different ways of being-in-the-world: tribalism, traditionalism, modernism and, of least relevance in this case, postmodernism.⁹ Instead of taking time now to explain the approach, for the purposes of our critique it is sufficient to say that if we can show the deep historical and continuing relevance of face-to-face integration and formations of traditionalism at the heart of contemporary Central Asian nationalism then we have fundamentally called into question the one-dimensional modernist approaches of theorists such as Ernest Gellner.

Nation Formation in Central Asia

To the extent that Central Asia is referred to at all in the popular press and electronic media, depictions of the area infer that it has remained largely cosseted from the forces of globalism and modernisation. 'Logically' on this basis, nation formation would be impossible in Central Asia given the continued salience of traditional loyalties and the inability of the peoples to undergo the ontological shifts necessary to 'think the nation'. The *Sixty Minutes* current-affairs version of this is that the accordion-effect of squeezing hundreds of years of European development into 20 or 30 years in Central Asia (development referring not just to modernisation but to the shifts that had been occurring from the Reformation onwards) would foreclose the possibility of national subjectivities emerging without the tensions that would tear people apart. Ernest Gellner's version of this is no more subtle. It subsumes Central Asia within a homogenised post-Soviet experience:

The situation was quite different in the lands of the Tsar of All the Russias. Within a few years of shattering military defeat, the empire was re-established under new management ... The strength of the ideology and of the institutions that it engendered did, however, prevent the lands of the Tsar from following, for 70 years, the same path as that followed by the erstwhile lands of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans ... (With the collapse of the Soviet Union) the societies caught within this system resumed the development which had been frozen 70 (or, in some areas, 40) years earlier.¹⁰

Thus we have, on the one hand, the popular press version of the once-frozen unique-

ness of Central Asia and, on the other, the disappearance of the particularities of Central Asia in a modernist attempt to universalise the process in a new myth of cryogenics. As the following historical overview reveals, the experience of colonialism and the consequent development of nascent pan-national movements amongst the indigenous intelligentsia, together with the imposition of largely fictitious 'national' ethnonyms by a 'European' power and the exposure to rapid but partial modernisation, renders the Central Asian experience far from unique. It rather invites comparison with both Africa and the Middle East. Paradoxically, if we are to adequately understand the particularities of nation formation in Central Asia, it is essential that they be placed in a wider historical context.

Central Asia Prior to Russian Colonialism

The territory of Central Asia has one of the longest recorded histories of human settlement, and has been both the subject of innumerable invasions and the seat of glorious civilisations at different times.¹¹ The experience of repeated invasions together with exposure to manifold cultural influences via the Silk Route, which for a time represented the safest passage for commercial traffic between Europe and China, led inevitably to the formation of a highly heterogeneous local population, albeit one in which Turkic peoples predominated.¹² The population was further fragmented in the sixteenth century when the Uzbeks and Tajiks adopted sedentary lifestyles whilst the tribes in southwest Central Asia (Turkmen) and the inhabitants of the Asian steppe (Kazakhs/Kyrgyz) remained nomadic.¹³ In saying this it is crucial not retroject the contemporary meanings that have been ascribed to terms such as Uzbek and Turkmen—that is, as ethnonyms denoting separate nations. Such terms originated merely to distinguish between different tribes who, with the exception of the Persian Tajiks, were all of Turkic origin. Indeed, the very fact that the term 'Uzbek' originated to denote a group of tribes who traced their genealogy back to Uzbek Khan, grandson of Ghenghis Khan, is indicative of the social formation that existed at this time. It was one in which only face-to-face and agency-extended levels of integration existed and in which loyalties to family, tribe and clan predominated. The social formations necessary to enable the nation to be imagined were still centuries away.

The social space between sedentary and nomadic peoples grew until by the eighteenth century it became possible to distinguish between two separate 'societies'. On the one hand there existed a sedentary core of three Uzbek feudal khanates, *viz.*, Khiva, Kokand and Bukhara.¹⁴ A leader who claimed, and was largely granted, authority as a supra-tribal leader (Uzbek tribal autonomy had been subordinated to the rule of a supra-tribal leader under Tamerlane as early as the fifteenth century¹⁵) ruled each khanate. The khanates incorporated all of the major ancient cities of Central Asia, and also contained within their borders the peoples of Central Asia who had experienced the most enduring contact with Islam. Whilst Uzbeks dominated the khanates, the presence of large numbers of Persian Tajiks meant that bilingualism was widespread even amongst commoners.¹⁶

Conversely, the nomadic periphery by definition contained no great cities and was inhabited by tribes that had either been introduced to Islam late in history (the inhabitants of the steppe) or who had been converted by Sufis who practised an eclectic form of Islam incorporating many purely shamanistic rituals (e.g. the Turkmen).¹⁷ Islam was thus less institutionalised amongst the nomads and more strongly syncretised with pre-Islamic beliefs than in the core.¹⁸ Tribal loyalties were correspondingly

stronger in the periphery than in the core. Whilst the core and peripheral societies interacted, with the nomads of the periphery alternately invading the khanates and serving as mercenaries for the khans, two *qualitatively* different social formations nonetheless existed in Central Asia on the eve of the Russian conquest.

Imperialism and the First Stirrings of Imagined Nations

The Russian conquest of Central Asia can be divided into two periods. The first spans the period 1731–1854, during which time the Kazakh/Kyrgyz steppes were absorbed into the Russian empire.¹⁹ The fact that the Russians negotiated separately with each of the three tribes on the steppe, thereby reinforcing the power of existing subjectivities, together with the incremental pace of Russian expansion during this period, presaged what was to follow, but had no direct bearing on the formation of national identities in Central Asia.²⁰ Thus, it need not detain us further.

The second period of Russian expansion in Central Asia roughly coincides with what Roland Robertson has dubbed the ‘take-off phase’ of globalisation.²¹ Between 1865 and 1881, Russia absorbed the three khanates (although they survived as self-governing protectorates) and what would later become Turkmenistan into the newly named region of Turkestan. A hunger for raw materials (principally cotton), competition with other imperial powers (principally Britain) for control of the area and the age-old justification of needing to impart the fruits of civilisation on more ‘backward’ peoples all played a part in driving Russia south.²²

The necessity of responding to Russian hegemony together with the introduction of European ideas via Russian immigrants provided the requisites for proto-nationalist sentiments to emerge amongst elites. Moreover, and in keeping with the rise of nationalist movements in both Europe and the periphery, such sentiments were first evinced by individuals used to working in the abstract/disembodied medium of writing, namely, intellectuals. From the late 1890s onwards, the vision of a pan-Turkic nation encompassing all Turkic speakers ‘from the Balkans to China’ (the Tajiks, being bilingual, were included in this category) gained increasing currency amongst Central Asian intellectuals.²³ Significantly, just as the first advocates of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism were deracinated intellectuals (many of whom were Western educated *and* Christian),²⁴ so too the Pan-Turkists contained within their ranks disproportionate numbers of Tartars,²⁵ an ethnic minority that had no tribal attachments and whose intellectuals were thus doubly removed from the grasp of traditional subjectivities.

Attempts were made to propagate Pan-Turkism through the dissemination of pamphlets and through the production of a short-lived newspaper written in a purified Turkic script purged of Arabic and Persian elements.²⁶ Nevertheless, the first attempt at nation building in Central Asia failed. We suggest that this failure can be attributed to two distinct factors. Firstly, whilst the professional and ethnic/social background of the Pan-Turkists allowed them to ‘think’ the nation, the majority of the population were relatively unaffected by the changing modes of practice that would otherwise have enabled them to accommodate a national subjectivity. The amirs of the three khanates discouraged the kind of exo-social education (Gellner’s term) required to establish a single epistemological space throughout the populace. This conservatism was supported by the tsarist authorities, who in any case relied on skilled Russian immigrants to support the fairly limited industrialisation taking place in Central Asia at the time.²⁷ The result was that by the turn of the century the vast majority of Central Asians

Asians remained illiterate and, with the exception of those dispossessed by the Russian immigrants, largely isolated from the processes of modernisation.

If one employs the horizontal measure of nation formation established earlier, it can be effectively argued that national subjectivities did not exist outside a fraction of the intelligentsia in the early 1900s, thus 'nation formation' had yet to occur. However, the absence of a broadly based national subjectivity did not preclude the establishment in Europe of nascent official state-nations by nationally minded elites.²⁸ The failure of elites to mobilise anti-colonial sentiment and thereby forge an enduring state-nation when the opportunity arose with the implosion of the metropole in 1917 (as an extension of Tom Nairn's theory would presume) must therefore be attributed to the second inhibitor of nation formation during this period, namely, the prevalence of competing visions amongst elites. The division between Pan-Turkists, Pan-Islamists (including both the fundamentalist *Qadims* and the Westernising *Jadid* [reform] movement) and the tribal separatists of the steppes (the *Alash Orda*) can in turn be attributed to the persistence of traditional identities among large sections of the elite.

Prima facie, the persistence of traditional identities amongst the educated elite seems incongruous. Whilst it could be argued that many pan-Islamists and tribal separatists were merely fighting to preserve their prestigious positions in society, such a stance underestimates the degree to which traditional mores were internalised even by elites. The capacity to operate within abstract media does not automatically grant one the capacity to step out of one's skin, as it were, and to assess all situations from a purely dispassionate and self-interested perspective. The persistence of tradition amongst members of the elite can be attributed to a notion that forms a recurrent motif in our analysis—whereas in metropolitan Europe modernity gradually emerged from the ashes of tradition, the conflicting ontologies of modernity and tradition collided even more violently and unevenly in the periphery as they were diffused by the imperialist activities of the core.

The implications of this are profound. In Europe, changes from the Reformation onwards such as the decline in the power of the papacy and a growing sense of human beings as autonomous individuals, the rise of centralised Absolutist states, the efflorescence of Enlightenment rationalism and the identification of the people as the source of state sovereignty in the works of writers such as Locke, laid the groundwork for the emergence of national subjectivities amongst elites. Thus, elites were able to imagine the nation from the mid-eighteenth century onwards even if the ontological shifts necessary to turn 'peasants into Frenchmen'²⁹ required the advent of industrial capitalism and the introduction of state-run education systems, the last of which can be dated to the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Central Asia the collision of modernity and tradition led all but the most deracinated of the intellectuals—clerics to seek salvation in reconstituted variants of traditional identities rather than succumb to the modern European idea of nationalism. The inability of the elites to form a unified front, as demonstrated in the numerous declarations of autonomy by different authorities during the Russian civil war, paved the way for the Soviet re-conquest of Central Asia in the early 1920s.

The Invention of Nations and Accelerated Modernisation

The persistence of tradition amongst sections of the elite together with the isolation of the masses from the processes of modernisation have been shown to be mutually reinforcing factors militating against nation formation. Such barriers were substantively

confronted with the national delimitation of Central Asia, which was initiated in 1924 by the triumphant Soviets and which had led by 1936 to the consolidation of the national borders extant in contemporary Central Asia.³⁰ Whilst the delimitation was motivated in part by the principle of *divide et impera* (the Islamic *basmachi* rebellion throughout Central Asia was not completely quashed until the late 1920s), it was also a concession to the different socio-economic conditions both between and within the sedentary core and the nomadic periphery, ideology also exerted considerable influence.³¹ Stalin's nationalities policy had at its core a notion commonly found in discourses on the nation, *viz.*, that whilst heightened national awareness was an inevitable by-product of modernisation, it was nonetheless transient and would eventually give way to cosmopolitanism. The belief that the formation of nations would mollify indigenes' demands for autonomy and the conviction that the transition to a socialist mode of production would eventually dissolve national loyalties as a 'new Soviet man' came into being, thus led (pace Gellner) to the self-conscious construction of nations from above from the 1920s onwards.³² This is what might be called reflexive modernism.

The gap between Stalin's Eurocentric conception of national identities and the reality of multivariate traditional identities in Central Asia necessitated a self-conscious process of cultural invention of the kind described by Eric Hobsbawm in his writings on nationalism. However, it is our argument that these inventions only lived at one level of social being: the public abstracted level. This is not to suggest that these inventions were superficial—to the contrary as we will see, invented languages became the means of articulating national sentiment—rather it is to argue that the layers of identity did not collapse into an undifferentiated plane of modern meaning.³³ Whilst the peoples of Central Asia spoke different dialects in different regions, these dialects were derived from a common Turkic heritage. The use of Arabic script, heretofore the sole means of common communication across Central Asia was forcibly discontinued, whilst Soviet linguists accentuated the differences between regional dialects and elevated them to the status of 'national' languages. Soviet historians painstakingly fabricated 'national' histories and the new nations were delimited on the basis of allegedly objective measures that had no subjective significance for the peoples involved. When citizens in the sedentary core were asked to nominate their nationality on their identity cards they frequently had difficulty deciding whether or not they were Tajik or Uzbek given that many people were a mixture of both identities.³⁴

The invention of nations must be considered in the context of a much broader process of accelerated modernisation forced upon Central Asians from above. In their determination to drag the peoples of Central Asia into modernity, the Soviets attempted to stamp out expressions of traditional identity. Mosques were closed, the Sufi orders were suppressed and holy sites in the nomadic periphery such as the tombs of tribal leaders and Muslim mystics were desecrated.³⁵ The assault continued into the 1930s as collectivisation of agriculture led to forced denomadisation in the periphery, whilst the diffusion of a 'historical materialist' outlook through the introduction of compulsory exo-social education sought to further undermine tradition in the minds of the populace.³⁶

The significance of this period in relation to the development of national subjectivities cannot be underestimated. The common view, predicated as it is on the incorrect belief that Central Asia had yet to experience the effects of modernisation, posited that when such processes were eventually experienced, the 'accordion effect' of compressing such change into a short temporal frame would preclude the development of national

subjectivities. The period of accelerated modernisation presents us with an opportunity to test whether or not the ontological shifts necessary to think the nation can be affected within a relatively short space of time. There can be no doubt that the period of accelerated modernisation inflicted immense trauma on the peoples of Central Asia. The mass migrations of the 1930s, not only from the nomadic periphery but also from the sedentary core, into neighbouring countries parallels the mass migrations from Europe to the New World during the modernisation of the late nineteenth century.³⁷ Both cases involved large numbers of people translocating themselves physically over large distances in order that they might remain psychologically in the same place. Conversely, in Central Asia, as in Europe, those that remained were immersed in an exo-social education that provided the skills such as literacy deemed necessary to conceive of abstract communities such as the nation. Whilst such exposure did not guarantee that national subjectivities would take root, it nonetheless made the prospect of broad-based nation formation possible for the first time.

At the same time, the period of accelerated modernisation in Central Asia was characterised by the durability of tradition. Despite the best efforts of Stalin, pre-modern loyalties retained considerable power. The *mahallah*, the locality in which one was raised and which was typically based on familial networks and linked by genealogical principles,³⁸ remained the focus of social interaction for most Central Asians. It provided a ready-made identity-map of steadily expanding concentric circles of loyalty (from locality to clan to region) within which one could locate oneself. Significantly, this identity-map retained considerable hold over not only those individuals primarily used to dealing at the face-to-face and agency-extended levels of integration, but also over the supposedly Russified *nomenklatura* who were accustomed to operating within the disembodied medium. In theory they should have been immune to such a parochial outlook.

Whilst one could argue that the tendency of the *nomenklatura* to set up networks of patronage amongst those from their native *mahallah* was merely a manifestation of *realpolitik*, this is an oversimplification. Specifically, it imputes a rationalist, individualist and pre-eminently modern outlook to persons who in spite of their exposure to a modern ontology were nevertheless embedded in a social milieu in which pre-modern values and loyalties remained deeply entrenched. The Soviets' continuation of tsarist preferences for importing Russian proletarians to facilitate Central Asian industrialisation together with the adoption of a more conciliatory attitude towards Islam from 1941 onwards (an acknowledgement of the continuing hold of Islam over the populace by a regime anxious to retain Central Asian loyalty in World War II) no doubt reinforced the bifurcated consciousness evolving amongst the people of Central Asia.³⁹

The sudden reframing of the life-world of the general population and its attendant traumas is probably not unique to Central Asia or even to the developing world but rather a malady inextricably associated with modernisation. However, what distinguishes the rest of the world from metropolitan Europe is the fact that the gradual modernising in Europe over several hundred years both infused elites with a modern *Weltanschauung* from the mid-eighteenth century onwards whilst eroding the material bases for a continuation of traditional lifestyles by the masses.⁴⁰ In the developing world, by contrast, modernity collided with tradition more dramatically and across all classes. The persistence of traditional social formations created a hybrid traditionalised modernity in which the emergence of a common epistemological space inscribed in the language of nations co-existed with rather than displaced traditional identities. This explanation adequately accounts for the changing conceptions of identity from the

1920s onwards. However, given the subjective nature of identity and the totalitarian character of the Soviet state, macroscopic evidence in support of this interpretation only manifests itself from the period of *glasnost* onwards.

Glasnost, Independence and an Uncertain Future

With the advent of *glasnost* the first overt evidence that national subjectivities had established a foothold in Central Asia emerged. Intellectuals began to agitate for the adoption of the language of the titular ethnic group as the language of state in each republic, this in spite of the fact that such languages had been largely constructed by Russians merely two generations earlier.⁴¹ In 1986, the replacement of the Kazakh First Secretary of the KCP by a Russian provoked serious riots in the Kazakh capital of Alma-Ata, whilst in 1988 the first avowedly nationalist political grouping came into being with the establishment of the *Birlık* Popular Front in Uzbekistan. These events, and the extent of popular involvement in both the riots in Alma-Ata and protests pushing for changes in the language policy,⁴² indicate that national subjectivities now exist in Central Asia not only within elites but amongst the masses as well.

It is worth spending a moment on the Alma-Ata riots, *Zheltoksan*, particularly to challenge any counter-claim that the demonstrators were narrowly pro-Kunaev supporters motivated more by tribal loyalties or fear of losing access to patronage networks than by collective nationalist affront to Kunaev's dismissal. Firstly, it has to be remembered that the dismissal itself was motivated in part by Moscow's concern at Kunaev's apparent indifference towards rising Kazakh nationalism—alternatively expressed as 'opposition to internationalism'. Secondly most of the demonstrators were educated youth, less instrumental about patronage than established political figures. However, whatever the motivation, most crucially in the aftermath of the riots the moment itself became symbolic of a growing rift between the Russians and Kazakhs. The fact that military tanks overwhelmed a peaceful demonstration, with a number of demonstrators killed and many subject to long-term imprisonment, confirmed for many Kazakhs a history of enmity rather than 'great friendship' between themselves and the Russians. *Zheltoksan* joined two key moments evoked in the popular sense of past injustices: the period of compulsory collectivisation—in which 40 per cent of the population perished—and the Russian Virgin Lands policy of 1953–65, during which time Kazakhs became a minority in their own country. *Zheltoksan* joined this pantheon of national events as the living memory of people in the street.

The flow-on from this period has seen a new emphasis on cultural identity. As one writer suggests, 'there is a growing dominance of Kazak cultural manifestation and symbols raging from the total renaming of streets in major cities and towns (in autumn 1997, the new capital of Akmola 'suffered' from the *overnight* renaming of almost 30 streets) to getting rid of Russian 'ov/ev' suffixes from Kazak surnames.'⁴³ Such cultural policies might have begun as official top-down nationalism to placate unrest, but by opening up such intimate questions of identity as how persons once named themselves, sensitivity to ethnic or national identity is becoming embedded in everyday life.

Through all of this change, 'history' has become increasingly important as a narrative of identity, and one of the central emphases has become the re-evaluation of Kazakh-Russian relations. Interestingly in terms of our central argument, the second major emphasis of the new culturalism is, as Azmat Sarsembayev notes, the increasing cultural interest in the genealogical history of traditional clan-tribe formations.⁴⁴ It almost goes without saying that this duality of modern revisionist historiography and genealogical

interest in things ‘traditional’ is common across the world from Scotland to Nova Scotia. However, in relation to Central Asia, the evidence of nascent national subjectivities may even more dramatically be counterposed against the stronger revival of traditional identities in recent times. ‘Counterposed’, yes, but this does not mean that nationalism and traditionalism are set off against each other in an inexplicable paradox. As we have been concerned to emphasise, it is unhelpful to see the reclamation of tradition as necessarily qualifying the new nationalisms. Rather, both trends at the very least indicate increased reflexivity over questions of identity. In some cases, neo-traditional identity and national identity are even mutually confirming. For example, a resurgence in Islam assisted by both the modernising moves of *glasnost* and the modern international Islamic revival⁴⁵ has seen a proliferation in the number of mosques being built in Central Asia and a dramatic increase in the number of young people attending *madrasahs*, most notably in Uzbekistan.⁴⁶ In the states comprising the once nomadic periphery, many of the holy places desecrated by the Soviets are being restored at the initiative of local citizens’ committees and pilgrimages to these areas are on the rise.⁴⁷ This has contributed to the national specificity of the faith both from the bottom and the top. In Turkmenistan the daily prayer of the official clergy reads: ‘Oh, powerful Allah, protect independent Turkmenistan and bring luck to our beloved Motherland and honorable President Saparmurad Turkmenbashi in all his intentions.’⁴⁸ The title ‘Turkmenbashi’ in the prayer signifies the embodied connection of the president to traditional chiefdom. Similarly, the ruling organ, the Halq Maslakhaty is intended, in political form and (romanticised) content, ‘to hark back to the “national tradition” of holding tribal assemblies to solve the most pressing problems.’⁴⁹ In Uzbekistan, the *mahallah* committees—the traditional neighbourhood bodies of elders—have been given the official national status of ‘organs of local government.’⁵⁰ Tradition, nation and universalising religion have thus come to intersect. It is indicative that both the Uzbekistani and Turkmenistani flags now incorporate the Islamic crescent moon, while the Kyrgystani flag depicts a motif of the 40 Kyrgyz tribes.

Attempts to reconcile these seemingly discrepant trends must begin with an acknowledgement that life is experienced at distinct and yet overlapping levels of integration and that as such one’s identity, far from being unitary and fixed over time, is rather multiple, contextual and relational.⁵¹ Thus, it is entirely possible for an individual to be a member of the Middle Horde, a Kazakh and a Muslim depending on the social context. It should not be inferred that this process is always or necessarily self-conscious or manipulated—far from it. Rather, it is by (practically) separating out the realms of identity that a young Turkmen is able to reconcile her pilgrimage to an ancestral tomb for the purposes of enhancing her fertility with the atheistic exo-social education in biology that she would have received under the Soviets.⁵² All of this needs much more empirical research. Nevertheless, what these examples, and evidence of a more general renaissance of tradition amongst the educated young, demonstrates is that it is possible for not only different subjectivities to exist within one individual, but for different ontologies (mystical, sacred on the one hand, and historical, materialist on the other) to operate in and across different social contexts. In the words of Yaacov Ro’i:

The collective consciousness of the Central Asian peoples seems to be simultaneously subnational, national, and supranational. In other words, they identify themselves at one and the same time as, although apparently in different contexts and on different levels, as Tekke, Laqay, or Manghyt (just to mention some of the region’s ethnic groups and tribes); as Uzbeks, Kirgiz

and Turkemen; as Central Asians or (with the exception of Tajiks) as 'Turks'... (Moreover) the Islamic component has become a fundamental facet of all Central Asian nationalisms or national consciousnesses—as part of the national heritage—without it necessarily signifying religious practice.⁵³

If one employs the measures of nation formation described earlier, it is apparent that the nations of Central Asia, whilst broad, are not comprehensively embedded in citizens' conception of themselves. The nature of these nations invites the possibility that the terms by which the high culture is defined may be subject to challenge. This has indeed been the case in Central Asia, but the challenges have not gone very far. The Pan-Islamic IRP (Islamic Revival Party) has established cells in all five republics, and has been particularly active in the traditionally devout Ferghana valley, which lies within the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but these groups have faltered or tended to operate as national bodies. In short, pan-Islamism adds another tension to the layering of national subjectivities in the sedentary core rather than an alternative form of exclusive identity. Meanwhile, in the periphery, traditional cleavages remain salient though they have rarely led to inter-clan conflict.⁵⁴ In addition to these 'potential' challenges to 'classical' nation building, the ethnic heterogeneity of the populations, especially in Kazakhstan where Russians outnumber Kazakhs, has hampered the development of a homogenising national outlook, as demonstrated by sporadic outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence.⁵⁵ The elites of Central Asia remain haunted in particular by the civil war in Tajikistan between an unreformed Communist *nomenklatura* and an Islamic-led opposition.⁵⁶ However, we would argue that Tajikistan is anomalous,⁵⁷ and that the chaos can be attributed to the presence of compounded social cleavages of tribe, religiosity, ethnic community and level of economic development which are not representative of Central Asia as a whole. Just as their nomadic ancestors were able to syncretise Islam with shamanistic practices, so too it is possible that contemporary Central Asians will be able to retain a layered sense of national identity in conjunction with traditional identities. Conversely, it is doubtful that further industrialisation will simply dilute traditional identities—the qualitative shift that enabled national subjectivities to emerge has already been made. If parallels in Africa and South-East Asia are anything to go by, elites will continue to manage and manipulate the political expression of traditional identities either through reflexive syncretic association or by manipulative cultural management rather than by vainly hoping that further modernisation will dissolve these identities. And they will feel forced to do so because the layering of identity is a lived reality right down to the level of the face-to-face rather than simply a fiction based on their own invented traditions.

Correspondence: Paul James, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, Clayton Campus, Victoria 3800, Australia.

Notes

1. With thanks to Shahram Akbarzadeh for his insightful comments.
2. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 48.
3. Ernest Gellner, 'The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: The Myths of Nation and Class', in Gopal Balakrishnan (ed), *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996).
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2nd edition 1991).
5. Anthony D. Smith, 'Nations and Their Pasts', *Nations and Nationalism*, 2/3, 1996, pp. 358–365;

- and Tom Nairn, 'Breakwaters of 2000: From Ethnic to Civic Nationalism', *New Left Review*, 214, 1995, pp. 91–103. While it might seem strange writing about Anthony Smith in the same vein as the other modernist writers, even his latest work misses the contradictory layering of the ontological formations of traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism.
6. Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
 7. E. Hobsbawm, 'The Nation as Invented Tradition' in John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). See the critique of this position in John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism* (London: Fontana Press, 1994).
 8. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991).
 9. For an explanation of this approach, see P. James, *Nation Formation: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community* (London: Sage, 1996), as well as writings by theorists such as Geoff Sharp and John Hinkson in *Arena Journal*.
 10. Gellner, 'The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation', pp. 130–131.
 11. M. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St Martin's Press) 1995.
 12. A. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 15–16.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
 14. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics*, p. 2.
 15. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*, p. 85.
 16. M. Haghayeghi, 'Islamic Revival in the Central Asian Republics', *Central Asian Survey*, 13/4, 1994, pp. 251–252.
 17. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics*, p. 77. This infusion of Sufism in to Islam still continues today.
 18. Haghayeghi, 'Islamic Revival', p. 251.
 19. D. Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammed: The Changing Face of Central Asia* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995).
 20. Admittedly, the Russian advance did spur the amir of Bukhara to attempt to modernise his state apparatus between 1826 and 1860. However, whilst feudal chiefs were purged from the administration in favour of professional bureaucrats and taxes were increased as part of a more general fiscal reorganisation, the possibility that such processes could eventually have led to nation formation, a contestable proposition at best, is a moot point in light of the subsequent Russian take-over of the khanates. See Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*, p. 86.
 21. Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).
 22. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*.
 23. Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammed*, p. 5.
 24. R.R. Anderson *et al.*, *Politics and Change in the Middle East: Sources of Conflict and Accommodation* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 4th ed. 1993), p. 54.
 25. Y. Onaran, 'Economics and Nationalism: The Case of Muslim Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, 13/4, 1994, p. 493.
 26. Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammed*, p. 5.
 27. Onaran, 'Economics and Nationalism', p. 494.
 28. The phrase 'official state-nations' is used to describe the states forged by national-minded elites in nineteenth-century Europe (e.g. Italy, Germany) and in which the development of national consciousness amongst the masses had yet to occur.
 29. E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).
 30. S. Sabol, 'The Creation of Soviet Central Asia: The 1924 Delimitation', *Central Asian Survey*, 14/2, 1995, p. 236.
 31. *Ibid.*, pp. 237–238.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
 33. For a sympathetic discussion of the differentiated layers of nationalism in the context of South Asia see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). On Central Asia see Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'A Note on Shifting Identities in the Ferghana Valley', *Central Asian Survey*, 16/1, 1997, pp. 65–68.
 34. Onaran, 'Economics and Nationalism', p. 495.
 35. *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

36. A. M. Khazanov, 'The Ethnic Problems of Contemporary Kazakhstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 14/2, 1995, p. 245.
37. F. Braudel, *A History of Civilizations* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1963, 1994), p. 462.
38. D.S. Carlisle, 'Uzbekistan and the Uzbeks', *Problems of Communism*, 40, September–October 1991, p. 26.
39. Onaran, 'Economics and Nationalism', p. 496.
40. This refers not only to the slow demise of the feudal mode of production but also to the gradual diminution in the concrete manifestations of traditional identities from the Reformation onwards. Whilst one is inclined to retroject an individualistic and private conception of religion onto pre-modern Europeans, practices such as the trade in relics, the cult of saints and the pilgrimages to holy places throughout Europe indicate the highly public, social and 'lived' nature of religion. It invites comparisons with the cult of the holy sites in contemporary Central Asia. It is only the very gradual demystification of the world in Europe that makes the traditionalised modernity of Central Asia and the existence within Central Asians of opposing ontologies seem so incomprehensible. See M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 59, 111 and 131.
41. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*, p. 98.
42. The fact that *Birlık* was able to mobilise 50,000 people to protest for the adoption of Uzbek as the national language in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent in 1989 is demonstrative of the presence of broad-based national subjectivities in Central Asia. See Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*.
43. A. Sarsembayev, 'Imagined communities: Kazak Nationalism and Kzakification in the 1990s', *Central Asian Survey*, 18/3, 1999, p. 334. The whole of this paragraph is indebted to this penetrating article.
44. Sarsembayev, p. 330.
45. The Islamic revolution in nearby Iran in 1979 and the Soviet war against Afghanistan, a country containing large numbers of Uzbeks and Tajiks who fled the Soviets in the 1920s and 1930s no doubt assisted the Islamic renaissance in Central Asia.
46. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Asia*, p. 100.
47. M.E. Subtelny, 'The Cult of Holy Places: Religious Practices Among Soviet Muslims', *Middle East Journal*, 43/4, 1989, p. 597.
48. A.M. Khazanov, *After the USSR* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 145.
49. G. Smith, V. Law, A. Wilson, A. Bohr and E. Allworth, *Nation-building on the Post-Soviet Borderlands* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 145.
50. Smith *et al.*, *Nation-building on the Post-Soviet Borderlands*, pp. 141–142
51. M.H. Yavuz, 'The Patterns of Political Islamic Identity: Dynamics of National and Transnational Loyalties and Identities', *Central Asian Survey*, 14/3, 1995, p. 343.
52. Subtelny, 'The Cult of Holy Places', p. 601.
53. Y. Ro'i, 'The Islamic Influence on Nationalism in Soviet Central Asia', *Problems of Communism*, July–August 1990, pp. 54, 59.
54. J. Janabel, 'When National Ambition Conflicts with Reality: Studies on Kazakhstan's Ethnic Relations', *Central Asian Survey*, 15/1, 1996, p. 15.
55. V. Tishkov, '“Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!”: An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict', *Journal of Peace Research*, 32/2, 1995, p. 147.
56. O. Brenninkmeijer, 'Tajikistan's Elusive Peace', *The World Today*, 53, February 1996, p. 42.
57. This position is supported by Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Why Did Nationalism Fail in Tajikistan?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48/7, 1996, pp. 1105–1129.