

SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY OF FAMILY, MARRIAGE, GENDER EQUALITY AND TRADITIONAL RITUALS IN UZBEKISTAN: A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of family, marriage, gender relations, and traditional rituals in Soviet historical and ethnographic scholarship on Uzbekistan. Particular attention is paid to the methodological and ideological framework through which Soviet scholars interpreted changes in family structure, marriage practices, women's social status, and traditional customs. The study argues that Soviet historiography generated a substantial body of empirical material concerning Uzbek family life and social transformation, but its interpretation was strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist concepts of social development, modernization, secularization, and the transformation of so-called patriarchal relations. Soviet scholarship frequently presented women's emancipation, participation in education and labor, civil marriage, and the transformation of traditional rituals as indicators of socialist modernization. At the same time, religious and customary practices were often interpreted primarily as remnants of the pre-socialist social order. The article proposes a critical reading of Soviet ethnographic literature that distinguishes its empirical value from its ideological interpretive framework. Such an approach makes it possible to reconsider Soviet-era scholarship as an important historical source for studying the transformation and continuity of family and gender relations in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Soviet historiography; Uzbekistan; family history; marriage; gender relations; women; ethnography; traditional rituals; modernization; Sovietization.

Introduction

The history of family and marriage occupies an important place in the study of social and cultural transformations in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, changes in family structure, marriage practices, gender relations, and ritual culture during the Soviet period were particularly significant because they occurred within a broader process of political, legal, economic, and cultural transformation. Soviet ethnographers and historians devoted considerable attention to these processes. Among the important studies were the works of M. A. Bikzhanova on the Uzbek collective-farm family, N. A. Kislyakov on the history of family and marriage among the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, O. A. Sukhareva on the historical and ethnographic characteristics of Bukhara, and G. M. Khalidova on the family as a factor in the development of the socialist way of life [1–4]. These works provide substantial empirical information concerning family organization, marriage practices, household relations, and social change.

At the same time, Soviet scholarship cannot be examined independently of the ideological context in which it was produced. Family, marriage, religion, and gender relations were



frequently interpreted through the conceptual categories of “patriarchal survivals,” “remnants of the past,” “women's emancipation,” and the formation of a “socialist way of life.” Therefore, the purpose of this article is not simply to reproduce Soviet interpretations but to critically reassess their methodology and their significance for contemporary historical and ethnological research.

1. The Methodological Framework of Soviet Research

The Soviet study of family and marriage in Uzbekistan developed within a broader Marxist understanding of historical change. Social institutions were generally interpreted in relation to socioeconomic structures and transformations in the mode of production. Consequently, family relations were viewed not as isolated cultural phenomena but as institutions undergoing transformation under changing socioeconomic conditions.

N. A. Kislyakov's *Essays on the History of Family and Marriage among the Peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan* is particularly important in this respect. The work includes separate sections devoted to forms of family, forms of marriage, marriage rituals and ceremonies, and family-marriage prohibitions [2, pp. 12–46, 65–97, 98–162, 163–238]. The structure itself demonstrates the breadth of the Soviet ethnographic approach to family and marriage.

Kislyakov's study is valuable because it records a wide range of marriage forms, kinship relations, marriage restrictions, wedding practices, and ceremonial elements. At the same time, the interpretation of these phenomena reflects the intellectual environment of Soviet ethnography. Traditional institutions were frequently considered in terms of their historical development from earlier forms of social organization toward the Soviet family.

For contemporary researchers, this distinction is important. The empirical information contained in Soviet ethnographic works should not automatically be equated with the ideological interpretation given by their authors. Instead, the two levels—the description of social practices and their theoretical interpretation—should be examined separately.

2. Family and Marriage in Soviet Ethnographic Literature

One of the significant contributions of Soviet ethnography was the documentation of changes in the Uzbek family. M. A. Bikzhanova's *Family in the Collective Farms of Uzbekistan*, based on materials from the Namangan region, represents one of the important studies in this field [1]. The work was published in Tashkent in 1959 and contains 136 pages. The Russian State Library catalog identifies its principal subject as “family and marriage among Uzbeks,” confirming its direct relevance to the history of Uzbek family relations.

Bikzhanova's research is especially significant because it focused on the family within the changing social environment of the Uzbek collective-farm system. Her broader scholarly work also addressed changes in the position of women and the transformation of family life in Uzbek rural communities. The National Library of Russia notes that her research focused on changes in the everyday and family life of Central Asian peoples and specifically on changes in the position of Uzbek women and their movement toward a more equal social position.

The importance of this material is also confirmed by later scholarship. A study of women's involvement in education during the Soviet period cites Bikzhanova's work specifically in relation to changes in the social and educational position of Uzbek women [5, p. 47].

The Soviet literature therefore provides important evidence concerning the transformation of



family relations, but it should be read within the political language of the period. The concept of the “new Soviet family” often functioned not only as a descriptive category but also as an ideological model of social development.

3. Marriage Practices and the Transformation of Traditional Rituals

Marriage constituted one of the most extensively documented areas of Soviet ethnographic research. Kislyakov's study devotes a substantial section to forms of marriage and another to marriage rites and ceremonies [2, pp. 65–97, 98–162].

These sections demonstrate that Soviet ethnographers did not simply ignore traditional culture. On the contrary, they recorded a considerable number of marriage practices, ceremonies, kinship relationships, restrictions, and forms of interaction between the families of the bride and groom. However, the interpretation of these practices was often connected with the Soviet concept of social transformation. Traditional marriage customs were frequently classified according to their relationship with patriarchal, religious, or pre-socialist social structures. Practices such as bride-price, arranged marriage, religious marriage, and other customary forms were therefore not always treated primarily as cultural phenomena possessing symbolic meanings; they could also be interpreted as manifestations of an earlier social order.

This methodological feature is particularly important when using Soviet ethnographic literature to reconstruct the history of Uzbek wedding culture. The descriptions of rituals can be highly valuable even when the accompanying interpretation is ideologically conditioned.

4. Gender Equality and the “Emancipation of Women”

Gender relations formed another major component of Soviet scholarship on Uzbekistan. In Soviet discourse, women's emancipation was closely connected with education, participation in social production, legal equality, and public activity.

The transformation of women's social position was documented in ethnographic studies of family and rural life. Bikzhanova's research, for example, explicitly examined the position of women within Uzbek collective-farm families [1]. Her scholarly biography confirms that the changing status of women was among the central subjects of her research.

Education represented one of the most important mechanisms through which women's social position was transformed. Soviet studies and later scholarship based on archival materials demonstrate that the expansion of women's access to education was an important element of Soviet social policy. A study published in *Vzglyad v Proshloe* cites both archival documents and Soviet-era literature to demonstrate the institutional development of women's education, while also referring to Bikzhanova's research [5, pp. 41, 47].

The Soviet concept of gender equality, however, should not be understood as identical to contemporary gender studies. Soviet scholarship tended to measure women's emancipation through participation in production, education, political activity, and legal reform. Questions that are central to contemporary gender history—such as the division of unpaid domestic labor, everyday negotiations of power within the household, and the interaction between state policy and individual agency—were less systematically explored.

Therefore, Soviet historiography should be regarded as an important but historically situated stage in the study of gender relations in Uzbekistan.



5. Family and the Socialist Way of Life

By the late Soviet period, the study of family increasingly became connected with the concept of the “socialist way of life.” G. M. Khalidova's 1981 monograph *The Family as an Important Factor in the Development of the Socialist Way of Life*, based on materials from Uzbekistan, represents this tendency particularly clearly [3].

The bibliographic record identifies the work as a 160-page study published in Tashkent by Fan in 1981 and classifies it under family and marriage in the Uzbek SSR and the Soviet way of life. This approach shifted the analytical focus from the historical structure of the traditional family toward its adaptation to Soviet social norms. The family was increasingly presented as an institution that participated in the formation of socialist values, patterns of everyday behavior, and new forms of social interaction.

From a contemporary perspective, such studies are valuable not only for what they say about Soviet society but also for what they reveal about the state's desired model of family life. They can therefore be read simultaneously as ethnographic descriptions and as evidence of Soviet normative discourse.

6. The Bukhara Context

The Bukhara oasis provides a particularly important case for examining continuity and transformation in family and gender relations. O. A. Sukhareva's research on Bukhara remains an important source for understanding the city's social structure, population, everyday life, crafts, and cultural traditions.

Her *Bukhara: The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* was published by Nauka in Moscow in 1966 and contains 328 pages [4]. The broader body of Sukhareva's work included research on family, marriage, wedding rituals, neighborhood communities, material culture, and everyday life in Central Asia.

The significance of Sukhareva's scholarship lies in its detailed empirical approach. Her research was based on extensive fieldwork and historical-ethnographic observation. Later scholarship notes that her studies of Bukhara were based on field research conducted during the 1940s and 1950s [6].

For research on the Bukhara oasis, Sukhareva's works are therefore particularly valuable for reconstructing the social and cultural environment in which family and gender relations developed. At the same time, her works must be interpreted within the historiographical framework of the Soviet period.

7. Ideology and the Interpretation of Tradition

A central problem in Soviet ethnographic literature was the distinction between “progressive” and “obsolete” cultural practices. Religious rituals, certain marriage customs, and some forms of traditional social organization were frequently interpreted as survivals of the past.

Later research into Soviet ethnographic literature has demonstrated that descriptions of new holidays and rituals were often accompanied by explicit comparisons with traditional religious celebrations. Authors emphasized the economic costs of traditional ceremonies and the advantages of new Soviet rituals [7, pp. 26–27].

This reveals an important methodological feature of Soviet ethnography: the researcher was



often simultaneously describing cultural change and evaluating that change according to the normative categories of Soviet modernization.

For contemporary historiography, this requires a careful distinction between **empirical evidence** and **ideological interpretation**. A description of a wedding ceremony, family structure, or women's employment may preserve valuable historical information even when the author's explanation of that phenomenon reflects the ideological assumptions of the Soviet period.

8. Discussion

The Soviet historiography of family, marriage, gender, and ritual culture in Uzbekistan should therefore be approached at two analytical levels.

First, it represents an extensive body of empirical knowledge. Soviet ethnographers conducted field research, documented family structures, recorded marriage ceremonies, studied rural communities, and collected information about women's everyday lives. Works by Bikzhanova, Kislyakov, Sukhareva, and Khalidova remain useful because of this empirical foundation [1–4]. Second, the interpretation of these materials was shaped by the intellectual and political environment of the Soviet Union. Concepts such as “patriarchal survivals,” “women's emancipation,” and the “socialist way of life” were not neutral analytical categories. They reflected a particular theory of historical development and a particular model of social transformation.

Consequently, contemporary researchers should neither reject Soviet scholarship as entirely ideological nor accept its interpretations uncritically. A more productive approach is to distinguish the documentary value of the sources from their ideological framing.

This approach is particularly relevant to the history of Uzbekistan because many elements of family and ritual culture did not simply disappear under Soviet rule. Instead, they were modified, reinterpreted, combined with new practices, or transferred into new social contexts. The history of family and gender relations should therefore be understood not only as a transition from “tradition” to “modernity” but as a complex process involving continuity, adaptation, negotiation, and transformation.

Conclusion

Soviet historical and ethnographic literature made a substantial contribution to the documentation of family, marriage, gender relations, and traditional rituals in Uzbekistan. Studies by M. A. Bikzhanova, N. A. Kislyakov, O. A. Sukhareva, and G. M. Khalidova provide valuable evidence concerning family structures, marriage practices, women's social position, and the transformation of everyday life [1–4].

At the same time, these works were produced within a Marxist-Leninist methodological and ideological framework. Traditional marriage practices, religious ceremonies, and certain forms of family organization were frequently interpreted as remnants of an earlier social order, while women's participation in education, labor, and public life was presented as evidence of socialist emancipation.

A critical reassessment of Soviet historiography therefore requires a distinction between empirical description and ideological interpretation. Such an approach allows researchers to preserve the substantial documentary value of Soviet ethnographic works while avoiding an



uncritical reproduction of their conceptual framework.

For the history of Uzbekistan, this methodology is particularly productive because it makes possible a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between state policy and everyday life. Family, marriage, gender relations, and ritual culture were neither completely destroyed nor simply preserved during the Soviet period; they underwent complex processes of transformation in which traditional practices, state institutions, and changing social expectations interacted. The Soviet ethnographic legacy should consequently be regarded not merely as a historiographical stage that has been superseded, but as an important body of historical evidence that requires critical reinterpretation through contemporary approaches to social, gender, and cultural history.

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