CHAPTER 13

Soviet Legitimization of Islamic Architecture in Old Khiva as Reflected in the Diaries of ‘Abdullāh Bāltaev (1880–1966)

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Back in the early 1980s, I began to study the epigraphy of Khwarazm and I first found myself in Khiva. As a young fellow at the Institute for the Restoration of Monuments, I was struck by the magnificence of its pristine architectural landscape and the unique preservation of its monumental and funerary inscriptions. I tried to pay attention not only to the architecture and its epigraphy, but also to learn from the elders about the masters and the history of the local mosques and madrasas; about the ways they perceived and interpreted the past of their native city, which has preserved its former appearance and original landscape (see Figure 13.1).

Khiva has always been an important part of their lives, even during the difficult periods when the victims of the Soviet repression included not only people, but also architectural monuments, which in the eyes of the new Bolshevik authorities were a symbol of the ideology and culture of the “dark past.”

Later, when Khiva became the most sought-after city in the tourist industry, this circumstance intensified Soviet reflections, for example, gradually changing the local residents’ perception of their own unique heritage as “tourist sites.” However, many stories about the city and its architecture have been preserved. Despite their legendary outlines, I perceived and still perceive the monuments as important markers of the real world and the real history, as part of the celebratory memory in the eyes of the inhabitants of this ancient landscape. As a graduate of a Soviet school and a Soviet university, since childhood I, like Alice in Lewis Carroll’s wonderful fairy tale, was used to moving easily from the “looking glass” that the Soviet ideological machine had created into a non-virtual world, with many invisible threads connected to the realities of pre-Soviet life. My religious grandmother, who instilled in me a very different view of the past, of personal and social ethics, continued to live in this world.

1 All photographs used in this essay are by the author.
2 Of course, the boundaries between these “worlds” were conditional, just as people could feel...
In short, as a bearer of a complex mixture of ideological and educational codes, and having found myself in Khiva, I copied architectural epigraphy directly from the monuments and at the same time recorded their histories. I was trying to understand what parts of them have become the product of Soviet reality, and what can be considered an archaic component. Finally, I was intrigued to learn what they meant to the storytellers themselves—the old inhabitants of Khiva.

As an intellectual product of that same complex historical period, I was not surprised that most of my Khiva storytellers were quite free to operate with notions and terms that the Soviet reality had produced. For example, most of them called (and still call) all ancient buildings of Khiva by the Soviet-Uzbek neologism *fomitnik/pamiatnik* (monument). Or, named a building according to its former function (madrasa, mosque, palace), whereas it still remained a *pamiatnik* for them. Nevertheless, the former religious perception of their quite comfortable listening to a Komsomol (youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) or party agitator and then participate in, say, a burial ceremony (*Janāzah*), which took place according to traditional (religious) scenarios.

\[3\] *Obida* [ʿābida] (ancient monument) is the Uzbek equivalent of the Russian word *pamiatnik* (monument).
past did not disappear despite the efforts of the Soviet atheist propaganda. For example, stories about builders and patrons of mosques or madrasas almost always contained the traditional motivation—“seeking Allah’s pleasure,”\(^4\) that is, as an act of religious piety (\(thawāb\)).\(^5\) Specifically, in the context of an Islamic worldview, \(thawāb\) refers to spiritual merit or reward that accrues from the performance of good deeds and piety.

Now I am well aware that the ideological stamps of the atheistic state proved to be only an imposed background, in one way or another changing Soviet people’s view of the world, of their past, and generating bizarre forms of adaptations. At the same time, the somewhat forgotten commemorative practices turned out not to be a window to the past; they lived or revived precisely in the architectural landscape of old cities, where the small urban space had preserved the close societal relations and modes of communications.

Even more contradictory impressions were formed when I became acquainted with the works of local amateur historians, written in the Soviet period (1950–1960s). In addition to architectural descriptions (sometimes including epigraphy), they recorded oral accounts of famous events, personalities, the history of the city, its holy shrines (\(mazārs\)), and the craftsmen who built them. The enthusiasm of Khiva’s amateur historians of the Soviet period was not only connected with the tradition of intellectuals recording on paper stories about the past of their home town. It turned out to be almost a direct continuation of the tradition of historians of the Khwarazm Khanate. As a symbol of the link with the past, the “new stories of the old” were written in Arabic script, which, however, was not understood by at least two generations of Soviet citizens who had adopted and used the Cyrillic alphabet. However, each of these historians, judging by the remarks in their footnotes, retained the hope that their works would be transcribed into Cyrillic, published, and available to their countrymen.

Meanwhile, Soviet approaches of describing history as a permanent class struggle, with inevitable clichés about the “religious obscurantism” that reigned in the “feudal past,” have become part of the historiographic discourses produced in scientific and educational institutions across Uzbekistan. These approaches were adopted even in the works of the archaeologists and architectural historians of Khwarazm.\(^6\) Adapting to the Soviet interpretations of history

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\(^4\) إِبَآعَةُ مَرْضَاتِ اللّهِ
\(^5\)ِهَّللاِتاَضْرَمَءاَغِتْبا
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and especially of religion was a difficult task, which each amateur historian solved in their own way. Some, such as the theologian Babajan Safarov (1891–1983), when describing the holy places of Khwarazm and the rituals practiced around them, preferred to criticize most pilgrimage practices (zāʾirīn) as a form of violation of the fundamental religious law (shariʿa), or as a manifestation of “backward thinking.” In this way he tried to bring his assessments closer to the Soviet critique of living religious rituals associated with shrines (mazārs).

Other authors tried to fill the vocabulary of their works with neologisms from the colonial period and the Soviet era, while using ideological remarks in the presentation of architecture. For example, by describing buildings as the product of the labour of the “working proletariat.” This was the only and effective way in which Soviet legitimization of ancient architecture could be achieved. The most revealing example in this sense is the work of the Khiva historian ʿAbdullāh Bāltaev. He was a famous architect and restorer. His skills were highly appreciated by the Soviet government; he became a laureate of the Joseph Stalin State Award (1946), had governmental awards (orders and medals) and worked in various institutions related to the restoration and preservation of ancient monuments. Bāltaev sincerely cared about architectural conservation, invariably calling historic buildings “the memory of the past” and urging authorities to treat them with care. In numerous passages of Bāltaev’s writings, his concern for the original landscape of Khiva appears as a desire to connect the past with the present, or to restore this connection, which the Soviet ideology was trying so hard to destroy. However, his self-representation as a mediator between the “dark past” and the “bright future” (according to Soviet interpretations of the time vector denoting the progression towards Communism) was not understood in academic circles. His writings, submitted several times for publication, did not pass the censorship, again leaving their author stuck between the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras.

In this essay, I offer a brief review and analysis of some works by ʿAbdullāh Bāltaev in which he describes the Islamic architecture of his native city of

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8 Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) was the Soviet political leader who led the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death in 1953.
Here we can find occasional, but quite detailed descriptions of practices related to holidays (e.g. Nowruz, the Persian New Year), which according to a long tradition were held at the mausoleums of famous people. These works provide a good opportunity to look at the past through the eyes of the author, to find his place among the keepers and written records of the commemorative history of the inhabitants of Khiva.

1 New Power and Old Monuments. Bāltaev as a Curator, Restorer and Historian of Medieval Architecture

Bāltaev had to go through several stages of changing official attitudes towards the old architecture. At the very beginning of the Bolsheviks' power, the mindset towards old monuments was twofold. The ideology, based on a passionate desire to “destroy the old world,” first of all, affected the approach towards the “monuments of antiquity” which were perceived as models of the “culture of the exploiters.” However, the passion for destruction gradually subsided, aided in large by the old generation of orientalists, artists and art historians, as well as local enthusiasts and lovers of antiquities. They convinced the Bolsheviks that the monuments were examples of the outstanding creations of ordinary craftsmen, who by class origin were close to the “working proletariat.” All the more so, since the nation-building that began in the late 1920s demanded a search for “cultural roots.” That is why, the Soviet patrimonialization of the ancient architecture divided the cultural heritage according to the geographical locality of the new state formations situated mainly on the territory of Turkestan, Semirechye, the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates. Already then this her-

9 According to Dr. Nuregdi Toshev, 88 notebooks of ‘Abdullāh Bāltaev are known, with a total volume of about one thousand pages, written in Arabic script. They contain descriptions of some events in the history of the Khiva Khanate, poems by the author and famous Muslim poets, descriptions and historical details about the construction of architectural monuments in Khiva and Khwarazm, etc. They are kept in the Abu Rayhan Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan (inv. no. 9321, 633, 11645, 11978 and others), and in a private collection of the author’s grandson Odilbek Abdullaev, 77 notebooks (daftar). The bulk of these manuscripts are uncatalogued. For more information, please see Nuregdi Toshev, “Materialy Abdully Bāltaeva po istorii Khivinskogo khanstva: predvariatel’nye zamecheniia,” in Tsentralk’naia Azia v epokhu srednevekov’ia i novogo vremeni: obschestvo, kultura, istochniki, eds. Dilorom Alimova and Florian Schwarz (Tashkent, Vienna: Akademnashr, 2019), 76–91.

10 The various means by which cultural features—either material or immaterial—are turned into people’s heritage.
itage obtained “nationality”—Uzbek, Tajik, Kazak, etc. These processes have been already described in detail by Svetlana Gorshenina.11

Bāltaev left a number of memoirs dedicated to the history and architecture of Khwarazm and Khiva. His largest work in the series of his so-called Historical Notebooks is the Rules and procedures for the construction of architectural buildings written at the beginning of 1965 (see Figures 13.3, Chapter 13).12

In the same year he completed another work entitled History. Khiva’s Monuments which he designated as Daftar no. 47,13 Here we find even more information about the historical monuments of Khiva. The author evidently used not only oral data, but also materials known to him from the khan’s period. He was familiar with the architectural epigraphy, sometimes citing texts in their entirety, or using information he had obtained from interviews with the old masters of Khiva. He gives a lot of evidence about disappeared monuments, personalities (patrons or burials in different mausoleums), circumstances of construction, architectural plans and drawings, height calculations and other extremely interesting and useful data (see Figures 13.4, 13.5, 13.6, and 13.7).

The author’s remarks concerning the architectural epigraphy are particularly exciting. For example, describing the complex of the mystic poet Pahlavān Maḥmūd (d. 1327), Bāltaev notes:

The tile mosaic masters who worked in this building [the mausoleum] inscribed over the entrance to the Falvān-bābā’s burial chamber ... only one quatrain (rubāʿī). [...] These masters intended that the people who saw it would draw the right conclusions for themselves.14

14 The text refers to the quatrain below by Pahlavān Maḥmūd, indentation mine:

سَه صَدِّ قَوْرَ فَافَقَ أَبَاوُن سَوَدَ / نَهِ طَاقَ فَلَكَ يَقْرَنَ دِلَّ اَنَدْوَدَ / صَدِسَأَلَ أَسِيرَ بَنَدَ زَلَدَانَ بَوَدَ /

بِه زَانْكَةً دَمِي هُدِمَ نَادَانَ بَوَدَ //

It is better to overcome three hundred mountains of Kaf / To color the vault of heaven with the blood of the heart / Or to be tethered in captivity for a hundred years/ Than for one moment to be the companion of a fool. All translations from Persian and Arabic are by Bakhtiyar Babadjanov.
Figure 13.2 Cover of Bāltaev's *Historical Notebooks*, 1965 © Bakhtiyar Babadjanov
Figure 13.3  Entry on ‘Amal Usto ‘Abdullāh in Bāltaev’s *Historical Notebooks*, 1965

Figure 13.4  Architectural drawing from Bāltaev’s *History. Khiva’s Monuments*, 1965 © Bakhtiyar Babadjanov
**Figure 13.5** Drawing of a pishtaq from Báltäev's *History. Khiva's Monuments*, 1965 © Bakhtiyar Babadjanov.

**Figure 13.6** Drawing of a mausoleum's plan from Báltäev's *History. Khiva's Monuments*, 1965 © Bakhtiyar Babadjanov.
Here the author also cites the verse with a translation into Uzbek. Moreover, in this and other essays, Bāltaev refers to the architectural epigraphy and accompanies his brief remarks with statements on the “usefulness” or “necessary conclusions” that are derived when reading the inscriptions. For him, epigraphy must fulfil its direct function—to inform, to become a way of instilling ethical norms, to feed the collective memory of the community with specific names, dates, and events.

Bāltaev gives no less interesting information about the architecture of old Khiva and partly of Khwarazm in his other extensive historical essay Materials on the History of Khwarazm, Khiva. Following his style of a meticulous researcher of antiquity, Bāltaev provides information about monuments that were destroyed before his birth, and scattered information about them he collected all his life based on interviews with old masters and sources he read, including epigraphy. Such circumstances put Bāltaev’s works in the category of important, but, unfortunately, poorly demanded by the architectural historians of urban planning of Khwarazm and especially Khiva.

15 Ibid.
It is also essential to note that for Bāltaev the reference to the architectural history of Khwarazm, especially his native Khiva, is not accidental. The ancient city, which for his fellow historians such as Safarov, was more of an ordinary historical background to events they described, and a familiar architectural landscape, became for Bāltaev part of his professional interest as an architect and designer. Typically, he always remained not only a spectator or an ordinary inhabitant of this landscape, but one of its creators, as a builder and later as a restorer.

In his works, among other reviews, we find interesting descriptions of the architecture of Khiva, in which the neologisms of the Uzbek language of the Soviet time are mixed with the original (old) names of architectural constructions, technologies, methods of artistic design, names of tools, (tracing) paper for drawings, etc.

In Bāltaev’s descriptions, the medieval architecture of Khiva had already been transformed into “monuments.” It is characteristic that sometimes he uses the terms in the form of neologisms—Pāmītniklār (پامینتیکلار), meaning “Arkhatiktura” (architecture), Mauzalīy (mausoleum), Fataluk (for потолок, ceiling), Tāpāgrafīya (topography), and others. Moreover, behind some Uzbek terms like Ta’ārikhy imāratlār (historic buildings), Īsdalīklār, Yādgarlīklār (monuments), Bīnākārlīk maktablārī (architectural schools) and similar words, their well-established Russian translations are easy to guess. While describing a particular site, he occasionally refers to the traditional designation of the monument according to the local historiographic tradition such as Āthār-i ‘atīqa (هقیتعراثآ), meaning “ancient monuments,” followed immediately by the more contemporary phrase Tāʾrīkhī āhamīyatgā īga bo’lghān (یخیرات ناغلوبهگیااگتیمها), having historical value.

However, these are not just ordinary neologisms or characteristics of architectural structures, landscapes and their new functions relevant at that time. The author, judging by his descriptions, adopted new (Soviet) symbolic values, according to which “old architecture” is alienated from its former functions and becomes a “historical building,” a “museum,” transformed into a panorama and a model of scenery that delights the audience, and therefore should be preserved as “monuments of antiquity.”

As an example, I would like to provide a translation of a few lines of his text:

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17 Compare, for example, that the first few pages of Khwārazm tāʾrīkhīga matir’īllār are devoted to the architectural rules used in medieval Khiva.
18 Bāltaev, Khwārazm tāʾrīkhīga matir’īllār, 1–4.
19 Ibid., 68–72.
Khiva—the most ancient city of Khwarazm... Historic buildings (tārīkhīy bīnālār), mausoleums (mauzalīy) have been built in this city for many centuries. Since then, many historic buildings (tārīkhīy bīnālār) have remained as monuments (yādgārlīkār). Our government takes care of these monuments and allocates large funds for their preservation, repairs them well (rīmuntlār qīlīb), reviving their original appearance. Seeing the samples of architectural work on these monuments of the 18th–19th centuries, people are delighted.  

Obviously, by the time of writing of this and other similar works, Bāltaev was a witness to the reading of the Soviet cultural tradition, which became a direct heir to the imperial one. One can also say that by the 1960s there was a post-colonial (Soviet) patrimonialization of Islamic architecture according to European (Russian or Soviet) models, turning it into “monuments” worthy of showing to “spectators,” that is, offering their representation as objects of tourism.  

Nevertheless, ʿAbdullāh Bāltaev combines neologisms and a new understanding of this architecture according to the religious and cultural notions with which he was brought up. For example, referring to the mausoleums of saints (Sufis, theologians), he writes about them with a reverence, trying to prove that they too are worthy to receive the usual classification of “a monument” and could be suitable for the Soviet appreciation of ancient architecture. In addition, the people buried there are worthy of being “written down in the history notebooks for the modern Soviet people.”

At the same time, he cites various parables and stories related to the history of the construction or use of the monuments and complexes he describes. The new historical interpretations of their loci created a space for the legitimization of the old architecture within the complex system of Soviet cultural revolutions. To illustrate this, I would like to cite Bāltaev’s descriptions of the Bābā Ḥāris mosque and memorial complex. They are situated in the south-western sector of the Inner Fortress of Khiva, at the foot of the city wall. Bāltaev does not provide any information about the eponym of the al-Ḥārīsa mazār. However, he writes that this cemetery is very large, and the established memorial complex had a significant endowment.

20 Ibid., 2. The special value of this work is that, in addition to the technologies for decorating monuments, it presents the plans of some famous monuments in Khiva, the names of their master builders, the legends and stories associated with them, etc.

21 Bāltaev, Khwārazm tārīkhīga matir‘ullār, 50, 54.

22 Ibid.
Bāltaev describes in detail the rituals, games and festivities during Nowruz, which was celebrated widely and was so popular that it was called “Bābā Ḥārīs celebrations”. Accordiing to the author, it was held from time immemorial on the day of the vernal equinox, i.e. 21 March. Bāltaev asserts that during the Soviet period, the authorities tried to ban the holiday. However, residents adapted in their own way and moved the dates of the holiday to 8 March and 22 April. As a reminder, the first date is a Soviet holiday—Women’s Day. The second date is Vladimir Lenin’s birthday (22 April 1870–20 January 1922). According to Bāltaev’s description, the complex around the mazār became the focus not only of funerary and memorial rituals, but also a place for the feasts of the living, again symbolizing the extraordinary symbiosis between cults and cult practices.

Bāltaev does not simply describe these Soviet-era collisions with the Soviet legitimization of ancient festivals and architectural heritage. He makes it clear that the Soviet authorities gave a new life to these monuments, took care of them, and allocated large amounts of money for their restoration. He concludes in his writings: “What harm is there if the old festivals are mixed with the new ones? For in doing so, the old monuments will be preserved, the old festivals will take on new forms, and the new life will be more perfect.”

By the way, the dates of 8 March and 22 April were preserved as a time for pilgrimage (ziyārat) to the monuments. Although people have already forgotten about the date of Lenin’s birthday, 22 April has become a traditional day for ziyārat (see Figure 13.8).

2 Conclusion

ʿAbdullāh Bāltaev has always been not just a resident of the ancient landscape of his native city of Khiva, but one of its creators, as a builder and later as a restorer. However, the Soviet reality instilled in him a new perception of the monuments according to the notions, defined by Soviet orientalism and ideology.

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23 According to unverified data, the toponym is associated with the name of al-Ḥārith ibn Surajj, who took part in the movement against the Umayyad Caliphate in Khorasan and Transoxiana in 734–747. However, al-Ḥārith ibn Surajj was killed in the battle near Merv and was buried there. In Khwarazm, as elsewhere in Central Asia, such imaginary graves associated with the names of commanders of the period of early Islam are quite common.

24 Vladimir Il’ich Lenin was the founder of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

25 Askī bayramlār yāngīlāri bīlan chatīshsa, ne zarar? Munda askī fāmiyatnīklār saqlanar,
His works combine a new view of Islamic architecture based on the religious and cultural traditions with which he was brought up. The style of his narration retained, to a greater or lesser extent, echoes of the manuscript tradition, which can only indicate a partial cultural alienation of the author from the past in which he was born and whose paradigms have not yet been definitively forgotten. However, he tried to fill it up with new or his own interpretative meanings.

For Bāltaev, it does not matter at all how an architectural structure in his native city will be called—a monument, a museum, a palace or architectural heritage. The important thing is that this familiar landscape will be safeguarded. In other words, the preserved architectural landscape and the almost untouched topographic environment consisting of old buildings became a very convenient space where different practices, traditional and Soviet prototypes of social communication, could mix. Most importantly in their free combination, Bāltaev and the majority of his fellow countrymen saw no disagreements. Similarly, for them there was no contradiction in mixing rituals and practices.

*aski mayramlar yangi tus olar, yangi hayatni komulgha etkurur, Bāltaev, Khīvada Tāsh havli bināsīning tāpāgrafiyasī, fol. 105b.*
One gets the impression that commemorative practices among traditional believers or ordinary people are quite capable of adapting to any political regimes and imposed ideological constructs, new rituals, holidays and paradigms. This does not mean that collective memory in this environment does not change or is not subject to external influences, including official ideology. However, a certain autonomy allowed it to survive in the most unfavourable moments of its existence.

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