

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE BUKHARA EMIRATE: THE SURKHAN–SHEROBOD REGION FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
This article examines the cultural and spiritual life of the Surkhan–Sherobod region within the Bukhara Emirate from the eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century. The study explores the region’s position within the political and administrative system of the Bukhara Emirate, its religious and educational environment, the activities of traditional schools and madrasas, the role of local Islamic scholars and religious teachers in society, architectural monuments, oral folk traditions, traditional culture, and the socio-cultural transformations that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.	Bukhara Emirate, Surkhan Oasis, Sherobod, Boysun, Denov, Termez, cultural life, spirituality, madrasa, traditional school.

Introduction

The period from the eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century was one of the complex stages in the history of Central Asia, during which political, socio-economic, and cultural processes developed in close interaction. During this period, the Bukhara Emirate functioned as one of the major political centres of Transoxiana (Mawarannahr). In particular, the consolidation of the Manghit dynasty from the second half of the eighteenth century strengthened efforts to reunify the territories under its rule. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Surkhan Oasis had also become one of the important regions within the Bukhara Emirate.

Geographically, the Surkhan–Sherobod region was situated in the southern territories of the Bukhara Emirate. Within this region, the beklik districts of Sherobod, Boysun, and Denov occupied important positions. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, changes also occurred in the region’s administrative structure and system of governance. Historical studies provide information about the beklik districts of Sherobod, Boysun, and Denov and their constituent amlokliks (administrative subdivisions).

Discussion

Because of its location in the southern part of the Bukhara Emirate, the Surkhan–Sherobod region occupied a distinctive position in political, economic, and cultural terms. Although political fragmentation intensified in the Bukhara state during the second half of the eighteenth century, the consolidation of Manghit rule initiated a process of territorial reunification. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Surkhan Oasis had become an important region within the territory of the Bukhara Emirate.

During the reign of Amir Nasrullah, the territory of the Bukhara Emirate expanded considerably, and such districts as Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod occupied significant positions within its administrative system.

The region's status as a southern territory also influenced its cultural life. The Surkhan Oasis had long been a meeting point for various cultural and commercial connections, a circumstance reflected in the population's lifestyle, customs, and spiritual outlook.

One of the principal dimensions of cultural and spiritual life during the Bukhara Emirate was religious education and enlightenment. Traditional schools and madrasas functioned not only as institutions for religious instruction but also as centres that shaped the intellectual and spiritual life of society.

Schools and madrasas also operated throughout the Surkhan–Sherobod region. In particular, madrasas in towns such as Denov and Boysun played an important role in educating local intellectuals and religious scholars.

The Said Ataliq Madrasa in Denov is considered one of the region's important cultural monuments. A UNESCO publication devoted to the history of Central Asian civilisations lists the Said Ataliq Madrasa among the madrasas preserved in Denov.

Madrasa education also developed in Boysun during the nineteenth century. Research indicates that the Hududiya Madrasa was constructed in 1870 during the reign of Amir Muzaffar. Subsequently, a second madrasa was built nearby, and the complex became known as the “Twin Madrasas” (Qo‘sh Madrasa). Local religious teachers conducted scholarly and educational activities in this environment. These findings demonstrate that the educational system of the Surkhan–Sherobod region was connected with the broader madrasa traditions of Bukhara. The fact that local young people travelled to Bukhara to pursue their education also indicates the strength of these intellectual and educational connections.

Alongside madrasas, Islamic scholars and religious teachers held an important position in the spiritual life of local society. In addition to teaching, they advised the population on religious ceremonies, marriage, inheritance, legal matters, and other issues associated with everyday life.

Mulla Khudoyberdi Boysuni, a scholar from Boysun, provides a notable example. Research indicates that he studied in Bukhara, subsequently taught at madrasas there, and gained recognition within the scholarly community. His activities demonstrate the intellectual connections between the Surkhan region and Bukhara's scholarly environment.

These intellectual connections contributed to the development of religious and educational traditions in the Surkhan Oasis and influenced the worldview and spiritual values of local society.

Mosques and madrasas served not only as religious centres but also as places of social interaction and learning. Madrasas provided students with opportunities to study traditional subjects, including religious sciences, languages, logic, and other fields of knowledge. Religious buildings also shaped the architectural character of the Surkhan–Sherobod region.

Historical monuments such as the Said Ataliq Madrasa in Denov have survived to the present day and are important for studying the region's centuries-old intellectual and educational heritage.

Pilgrimage sites also occupied an important place in the spiritual life of the population. Islamic traditions, the remembrance of saints and religious scholars, pilgrimage rituals, and popular religious beliefs interacted with one another, creating distinctive expressions of local spiritual culture.

The cultural life of the Surkhan–Sherobod region cannot be fully understood without examining its oral folk traditions. In particular, bakhshi epic storytelling and the performance of traditional epics played a significant role in shaping the spiritual world of the population.

Through epic narratives, historical memory and ideas concerning heroism, patriotism, loyalty, courage, and justice were transmitted from one generation to another. Bakhshis therefore emerged not merely as performers but also as custodians of the people's historical memory and spiritual heritage.

The longstanding traditions of folklore performance, epic storytelling, and oral literature in Surkhan and neighbouring regions have also been documented in later studies. Contemporary research particularly emphasises the role of bakhshi art, songs, dances, and traditional musical instruments in transmitting values, knowledge, and experience across generations in the folklore of Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya.

For this reason, oral folk traditions should be considered an important body of material that complements written sources in the study of cultural and spiritual life from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.

The cultural life of the Surkhan–Sherobod region was not limited to religious education and architectural monuments. Everyday life, family ceremonies, clothing, handicrafts, folk medicine, and food culture also formed integral components of spiritual and cultural life.

Nineteenth-century Russian researchers recorded considerable information about the ethnic composition, settlement patterns, economic activities, and lifestyles of the region's population. These records provide opportunities for the historical analysis of local traditional culture.

Traditional handicrafts were another important expression of cultural heritage. Pottery, blacksmithing, jewellery-making, weaving, and other crafts not only met economic needs but also reflected local aesthetic perceptions and artistic tastes.

Another aspect of the cultural and spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis was folk medicine. Medical knowledge was often based on experience passed down through generations, the use of medicinal plants, and the practical activities of local healers.

Recent studies have examined traditions of folk medicine, the activities of local healers, and the use of medicinal plants in the Surkhan Oasis during the Bukhara Emirate. This demonstrates that the population's knowledge of nature and accumulated practical experience also constituted important elements of the region's cultural heritage.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, external political and economic influences in the Surkhan–Sherobod region began to intensify. The growing political and economic influence of the Russian Empire in the region brought about certain changes in local society.

These developments also affected cultural life. Changes in trade routes, the emergence of new population groups, the arrival of foreign goods, and increased competition for traditional handicrafts contributed to transformations in established lifestyles.

Studies indicate that Uzbeks and Tajiks constituted the principal population groups in the Surkhan Oasis during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the presence of Russians, Tatars, and other groups also increased. Thus, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the cultural environment of the region was being shaped by both established traditions and new social and cultural influences.

The findings of this study make it possible to identify several distinctive characteristics of cultural and spiritual life in the Surkhan–Sherobod region during the Bukhara Emirate.

First, the region possessed a well-developed religious and educational environment. Mosques and madrasas occupied an important position in the spiritual life of society.

Second, the Surkhan Oasis maintained close connections with Bukhara’s intellectual and educational environment. The fact that local religious teachers and students studied at Bukhara’s madrasas demonstrates the existence of these connections.

Third, written religious and educational culture interacted with oral folk traditions. Bakhshi performances, epic storytelling, and folklore helped preserve the historical memory of the population.

Fourth, the region’s distinctive geographical and ethnocultural environment contributed to the development of specific local characteristics within its cultural traditions.

Conclusion

From the eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century, the cultural and spiritual life of the Surkhan–Sherobod region developed in close connection with the broader historical and cultural processes of the Bukhara Emirate. By the nineteenth century, the region’s position within the emirate had become firmly established, and such districts as Sherobod, Boysun, and Denov occupied important places in its political and social life.

Traditional schools and madrasas formed the principal foundations of the region’s religious and educational environment. The Said Ataliq Madrasa in Denov and the nineteenth-century madrasas in Boysun are important cultural monuments demonstrating the existence of educational institutions and an intellectual environment in the region.

The cultural and spiritual life of the Surkhan–Sherobod region was therefore an integral part of the history of the Bukhara Emirate. Islamic educational traditions, local ethnocultural characteristics, and folk creativity interacted to create a distinctive cultural environment. A more comprehensive study of this heritage will contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural development of southern Uzbekistan.

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