'Modernity and the Mythic Imagination in Central Asia:
Legends of Origin and Discourses of Identity in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Devin DeWeese

One of the many problematical assumptions deeply embedded in the study of contemporary Central Asia is that the conceptual framework through which Central Asians understand themselves and their communal identity was overwhelmingly shaped, whether in Soviet times or in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by the forces of 'modernity.' This assumption is central to much of the scholarly discussion about 'nationalism' and its relationship to religion; this discussion has typically contrasted these two forces, linking nationalism with the modern, and religion with the pre-modern. While it should be clear that this contrast is overly simplistic, specialists on contemporary Central Asia seldom take stock of, and indeed are ill-equipped to take stock of, the ways in which 'religion' shaped communal identity in traditional Central Asia, and continued to do so through the Soviet period. The present discussion is intended to challenge this assumption by considering the mode of religious discourse perhaps most alien to 'modernity,' and exploring the continued resonance and religious meaning of mythic modes of imagining communal identity. Two examples will be considered in depth.

I. Ahmad Yasavi and the Dog-Men:

The first is a narrative complex with very deep roots and wide contemporary resonance, involving the famous saint Khwaja Aḥmad Yasavi and his conflict with a particular community; the narrative involves themes of conflict and reconciliation as well as sacrifice and conversion. Versions of the story have been studied in isolation from one another.

A) Versions of the story are preserved in Sufi literature produced from the 15th-19th centuries.

B) The story echoes several themes from tales of heroes and rulers of Inner Asian peoples from pre-Islamic and Islamic times.

C) A wide range of ethnographic recordings are preserved in Soviet-era scholarship and in material collected in post-Soviet times (some of these have been mis-used in scholarship as evidence on ethnic history).

Comparing the various versions suggests a narrative trajectory from an archaic legend of origin to a story of Islamization and on to a 'modern' legend of origin that continues to function at both a 'sub-national' level and a 'trans-national' level. The mythic framework itself is flexible and adaptable, retaining meaning even for audiences subjected to 'modernity.'

II. An Uzbek Legend of Origin:

The second, unlike the first, appears 'out of nowhere' as a story of the origin of the Uzbeks (thus revealing a consciousness of Uzbek collective identity well before the activities of the *jadīd*ists); the story is connected with the lists of the so-called '92 Uzbek tribes' that have received some scholarly attention (again, usually taken as ethnographic data).

A) Lists of tribes are noted in 19th-century accounts of Russian travelers and officials, and in independent manuscript copies; they also appear incorporated into larger literary works, of which the most prominent are the *Tuḥfat al-tavārīkh-i khānī*, written in the khanate of Khoqand just prior to the Russian conquest, and the *Majmū' al- tavārīkh*, a problematical work usually said to have been written in the 16th century, but almost certainly considerably later.

B) The legend of origin itself differs somewhat between that found in the *Tuḥfat al-tavārīkh-i khānī*, convenient to adopt as the 'standard' version, and the versions found in the independent texts; but the most extensive differences are evident in the version included in the *Majmū' al- tavārīkh*, which appears to be earlier. The latter version also suggests a quite different vision of the ethnic context in which the 'Uzbek' legend of origin was projected.

C) The legends do reflect longstanding patterns of articulating communal origins, but appear not to evoke longstanding mythic motifs or elements, in their actual content; this suggests the creative dynamism of the mythic imagination, as well as the possible roots of receptivity to an 'Uzbek' identity, outside the framework of 'modernity,' whether in its *jadīd*ist or Soviet or post-Soviet nationalist form.

Considering these stories suggests that inattention to the pre-Soviet and pre-Russian history of Central Asia, and to sources produced outside the framework of 'modernity,' leads to a severely limited understanding of the intellectual, cultural, social, and religious resources Central Asians can call upon in responding to the shifting political frameworks in which they, and their ancestors, have lived during the past two centuries.