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Articulating national identity in Turkmenistan: inventing tradition through myth, cult and language

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ABSTRACT. A study of myth, cult, and language as tools of state power, this paper analyzes ways national identity was constructed and articulated in one state. When Türkmenistan became independent in 1991 its first president, Saparmyrat Nyýazow, promoted himself as the ‘savior’ of the nation by reconceptualising what it meant to be Türkmen. Myth, public texts and language policy were used to construct this identity. While they were the targets of the state’s cultural products, Türkmen citizens contributed to the processes of cultural production. Nyýazow legitimised his authoritarian leadership, first by co-opting Türkmen citizens to support his regime, and then by coercing them as participants in his personality cult. The paper concludes that Nyýazow used the production of culture, ‘invented tradition’ in Hobsbawm’s sense, to bolster his agenda and further his own power. It also argues that the exaggerated cult of personality Nyýazow cultivated limited his achievements, rather than solidifying them.

KEYWORDS: agency, cult of personality, invented tradition, myth, national identity

The construction of post-Soviet national identity in Turkmenistan had much to do with totalitarianism, control, and power. It involved the calculated elevation, in everyday life, of discourse and symbols amenable to those in authority. When Turkmenistan became independent in 1991 it was, as Metternich once said of Italy, a ‘geographical expression’ (Sandeman 2007: 116). The people had no common story of a fight for independence from Moscow; no common enemy; no shared story of clandestine nation-building as a counterpoise to Soviet rule. The Communist Party leader at this time, Saparmyrat Nyýazow, recognised that securing his own position would require some kind of ideological glue to replace that afforded by Soviet power. He accomplished this by promoting an ethno-linguistic nationalism combined with official texts and a personality cult in which he became the embodiment of the nation’s distinctive character and achievements. This paper explores the ways in which Nyýazow articulated a new national identity to achieve his
goals. In the process it will shed light on what Eric Hobsbawm memorably called ‘the invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1996).

**Personality cult**

Power did not change hands with the onset of Turkmenistan’s independence in 1991. Nyýazow and a small circle continued in the leadership, concentrating power until he was the sole authority in the country. In 1993, he adopted the appellation ‘Türkmenbaşy’ (Leader of all Türkmen) and from 1999 until his death in 2006 he took the title ‘President for Life’, combining national myth with one of himself as the nation’s ‘savior’ (Tulard 1984: 350). He declared, ‘The Türkmen need a centre of attraction that will hold them united in material and spiritual terms in the new age. It is only the state and its national principles that will meet this need’ (Nyýazow 2002: 401). With such statements Nyýazow asserted that only the state with himself at the helm could guide the Turkmen on their new path, uniting Turkmen national identity with what became a personality cult.

E.A. Rees’s definition of a personality cult is aptly descriptive of Turkmenistan’s situation under Nyýazow:

an established system of veneration of a political leader, to which all members of the society are expected to subscribe, a system that is omnipresent and ubiquitous and one that is expected to persist indefinitely. It is thus a deliberately constructed and managed mechanism, which aims at the integration of the political system around the leader’s personality (Rees 2004: 4).

Jan Plamper also writes about the history of personality cults in a manner that applies to Nyýazow’s case, describing modern personality cults as ‘derived from mass politics, [employing] a mass media highly dependent on culture, [taking] place in virtually closed societies and where the male leader served as a metaphor for a homogenised society’ (Plamper 2012: 4).

Turkmenistan was a semi-closed society in which all members were expected to venerate Nyýazow as Türkmenbaşy. Nyýazow was head of the Democratic Party – the only political party allowed in the country. Photos of him hung in every office and on billboards throughout the country. Accolades to him appeared in the introduction of the select few books published and in the songs and poems children intoned on television. The new national pledge of allegiance was as much an oath to Nyýazow as it was to the country. He was at the centre of public life. Being at the centre, however, did not ensure the kind of pervasive control he desired, and to which he had become accustomed under the Soviets. For that, additional tools would be required. Ultimately his efforts would give him a level of control that surpassed what he enjoyed during Soviet times.
Invented tradition

Nyázow’s power may have been inherited, but the country he sought to lead was new, a circumstance that actually afforded considerable freedom in the deployment of nationalising rhetoric and mythology as a means of legitimising his position. Ernest Gellner has proposed that nationalism is the ‘consequence of a new form of social organisation . . . [using] some of the pre-existent cultures generally transforming them in the process . . .’ (Gellner 2006: 46). Nyázow agreed. For him ‘[T]he nation is the unity of language, religion, customs, and tradition, ideals and state . . . The fundamental feature of our state is its being a nation-state’ (Nyázow 2002: 254). Furthermore, ‘The state is the essence of the national spirit . . . By means of a nation-state the values belonging to a nation are integrated’ (Nyázow 2002: 264). Nyázow sought to effect the transformation that Gellner has described first of all by portraying himself as Türkmenistan’s redeemer. There was, however, nothing in the country’s actual historical experience on which to base this portrayal.

Post-Soviet discourse in Türkmenistan was an official discourse, and post-Soviet identity was an official identity, to which ‘nationality’ was assigned by the authorities. The phrase ‘Halk! Watan! Türkmenbaşy!’ (People! Nation! Türkmenbaşy!) recited daily and found on abundant signage, characterised Nyázow’s vision of himself not simply as the leader of nation, but as co-equal with it. These words became a trope for the new miras (heritage) – the ‘Golden Age,’ as Nyázow labelled it – the new era on which the nation was supposed to be embarking. They also became the punch-line of jokes traded among the citizenry, a perhaps inevitable fate for words hanging from official banners strung across the main street of every town. The problem for Nyázow was to connect these slogans to some aspect of real public experience, above all that of the millions of rural families who thought little about the abstractions of national independence, but a great deal about the practicalities of keeping their children fed after years of shortages, heightened at the end by the additional uncertainly that accompanied Perestoika. The new official discourse, new social practices, new symbols, and new public rituals all supported the myth of an ethnically homogenous nation-state.

Türkmenistan is, in fact, more ethnically homogenous than most countries. According to the most recent available census data (1995), ethnic Turkmen constituted 77 percent of the population. Minority ethnic populations included Uzbeks (9.2 percent), Russians (6.7 percent), and Kazakhs (2 percent). Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Tatars, Baluch and Jews made up the remaining 5.1 percent (Patheos online). Their assimilation was not an overt goal of state policy. However, it was implicit through a reassertion of the national identity along linguistic lines, to which ethnic identity became logically subordinate. Ethnic Türkmen were also affected. New policies were designed such that a ‘true’ Türkmen was not a person claiming membership through bloodline – as was customary – but through knowledge of the Türkmen language. Ethnic Türkmen who did not know Türkmen would soon
see themselves as disenfranchised as the non-Türkmen of the country, most of whom would find that the new linguistic nationalism was exclusionary in its effects, however inclusionary its rhetoric.

Old bottles were rapidly filled with the new wine. On national holidays, for instance, school children and teachers were required to recite poetry and perform ‘traditional’ songs and dances and other rituals in stadiums around the country. All were performed in Türkmen, and while the forms may (ostensibly) have been traditional, the words were new, written to praise the post-Soviet leadership of İlkinji we Ömürlik Prezidenti Türkmenbaşy (First President for Life Türkmenbaşy). These rituals represented the type of ‘invented tradition’ to which Eric Hobsbawm refers: ‘existing customary traditional practices – folksong . . . modified, ritualised and institutionalized for the new national purposes’ (Hobsbawm 1996: 6). The top-down artificiality of those purposes was, of course, apparent to those involved. If a student chose not to participate a teacher would call their parents, or a parent’s boss, to scold them. This was a carryover from the Soviet system, in which celebration of holidays was mandatory. In post-Soviet Türkmenistan, holidays became so frequent that they elicited complaints from students, teachers, and parents in private conversations. Teachers and students would stand lined up along a road or in a stadium for three to four hours in advance of television coverage to prepare for an event. Among themselves, teachers complained that practices for such activities were so frequent that they interfered with learning. Still, Nyýazow encouraged people,

Our souls become one in various festivals and commemoration days attended by all the public in every corner of our nation to remember past sorrows and anniversaries. These events contribute to the spiritual strength of our people. They make people closer to one another. The festivals help us erase these difficulties from our minds . . . Each Türkmen should enthusiastically celebrate our festivals in the way our ancestors did (Türkmenbaşy 2002: 381–2).

But even such exhortations were specifically aimed at Türkmen and not the rest of the ethnic groups. They were excluded from the rhetoric and from the idea of being Türkmen.

The national revival movement

Türkmenistanynyı Umumy tanksı Galkynys herketi (Turkmenistan’s National Revival Movement) was Aşgabat’s official program for building a secular state based on a Türkmen identity and Muslim culture. National Revival began 17 January 1994 at the convocation of the fifth assembly of the Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council), which was (until 2008) the highest representative body in Türkmenistan. Revival of the national culture ranged from broad programs reintegrating Islam into daily life, after decades of official atheism; to paying closer attention to national customs (däp dessurleri); to the establishment of the Democratic Party in place of the Communist one. Politically, the aim was
to promote the concept of Independent, Neutral Türkmenistan’ an interna-
tional position that was portrayed as consistent with, and derivative of, the
nation’s unique cultural identity (Kiepenheuer-Drechsler, 2006).

The discourses of National Revival were embodied in the phrase ‘Altyn
Asyr’ or Golden Century. The Golden Century was the metonym for all that
was good about post-Soviet Türkmenistan. It appeared in the names of
shopping centres and hotels, in descriptors of products like bottled water
and yogurt, and was promoted as the nickname for the generation that never
knew Soviet life – Altyn Asyr Nesli (The Golden Generation). That genera-
tion would participate in Türkmen nationalism by marching in parades,
celebrating new holidays learning new school curricular, reading new books,
reciting ancient as well as new poetry, learning traditional as well as new
songs, memorising new catechisms and homilies, visiting new shrines, and in
identifying Nyýazow as Beýik Serdar Türkmenbaşy (Great Leader of all the
Turkmen).

None of the symbols and semantics of National Revival were more intense
than those surrounding the president. Photos of Nyýazow hung over every
official doorway, in classrooms, and on airplanes. Statues of Nyýazow sprung
up around the country, including the famous golden figure of him atop the
Arch of Neutrality in downtown Aşgabat, which rotated to ensure that it
always faced the sun. Nyýazow’s image appeared on the new currency, on the
gold plated lapel pins worn by public officials, and on the front page of every
newspaper, every day. Nyýazow changed the name of the city Krasnovodsk to
Türkmenbaşy while Çärjew became Türkmenabat (city of Türkmen). The
town Gyzylarbat took the president’s second new appellation, Serdar (leader),
and the district of Ýlanly became Gurbansoltan Eje, after Nyýazow’s mother.
Even the national anthem began with his name.

Identities

Among the many identities from which Nyýazow could have chosen he built
upon a specifically anti-Russian, pro-Western, Turco-Islamic heritage, which
looked to its ancient cultural antecedents and ignored the Soviet experience,
except to denigrate it. He wrote,

We sometimes come across people today who say that we were better off during the
Soviet era. My dear Türkmen! Don’t be mistaken! . . . You almost lost your native
tongue during the Soviet era. You were not admitted to schools and you could not find
employment if you did not know Russian. You forgot about your religion, tradition
and values. You lagged economically. Our nation lived under terrible conditions
in villages and towns. It is essential that our old tell the young about this (Nyýazow

Denigration of the Soviet past allowed the new government to paint the
post-Soviet period as fresh and promising. More than that, Nyýazow pro-
moted a history that emphasised ancient heritage to the point of obscuring

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modern events, in an attempt to shape a national memory from which interaction with Russians had been erased. There was no Great Game in the nineteenth century, no context for the 1881 Battle at Gök Tepe, which had solidified Russian colonisation of Türkmen lands, and a mostly studied silence about life under Soviet rule. Still, there were moments that slipped into the narrative when they were convenient. World War II was commemorated and the 1948 earthquake that had destroyed much of the capital Asgabat was not forgotten. Each appeared in history books and was marked by a national holiday in part because of Nyýazow’s personal connection: his father died in the war and the rest of his family was lost in the earthquake. This reconstructed historical narrative interwove Türkmenbaşy’s personal history with the reconfigured history of the People and Nation, again underscoring the symmetry between Halk, Watan and Türkmenbaşy.

This approach also had the political advantage of allowing Nyýazow to present himself to his own people as anti-Russian without actually having to do or say anything against Russia. He could easily have chosen a more expressly anti-Russian cultural line, emphasising Russian colonial history and encroachment on Türkmen lands. Instead, fine lines were drawn. Nyýazow contemplated building a museum to honor the fallen at Gök Tepe, for instance, but by the time he began coordinating with an architect and looking at serious proposals he was too concerned with Russian sensitivities to go through with the plan (Conversations with Turkish architects, 2001–2004). Although domestic politics were still very much geared toward Türkmenification and the cult of Nyýazow, national trade agreements with Russia were important enough that Nyýazow did not want to risk insulting his northern business partner by bringing up bitter memories. Thus Gök Tepe would be commemorated in humanitarian and religious, but not political terms: there is a large mosque at Gök Tepe, but no new museum.5

Public texts & script

Language and script were crucial to the discourse of National Revival. Altering a people’s script is a common method for disassociating or reassociating them with some aspect of their identity. In 1928, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk replaced Turkey’s Arabic script with a modern Latin-based alphabet to symbolically westernise Turkish society. The history of language politics in Türkmenistan is not unique in the sociolinguistic path it took, but it is an important aspect of how the official Türkmen national identity came to be formed (Clement 2007: 266–80).

In 1993, Nyýazow took control of public texts, announcing that the country would adopt a Latin-based ‘Türkmen National Alphabet’ in place of the Cyrillic one the Turkmen had used since 1940. He explained in speeches and in the press that
creating a new Turkmen alphabet based on the Latin script would hasten the young country’s progress toward intellectual, cultural and social strength. And, it would expedite means for Turkmenistan’s joining the world civilization and taking its own worthy place among developed countries (Türkmenbaşy 1994: 33–4).

There was a state-driven program employing newspapers and journals, radio and television to announce details about the new alphabet, which first appeared in newspaper mastheads and in television spots, broadening slowly out from there. Schools began with first grades and each subsequent year expanded their focus to include upcoming classes, keeping pace between classroom instruction, teacher training, and development of new textbooks (Interview with Myratgeldi Söýegow, member of the Alphabet Commission, 2001). Government offices and official media were the final targets for reform. The first newspaper printed entirely in the new Latin alphabet appeared in Gün on 27 October 1994, the third anniversary of Turkmenistan’s declaration of independence (Clement 2008: 181).

The new alphabet symbolised Türkmenification. In abandoning the Cyrillic script of the Soviet era, Aşgabat signalled an anti-Russian cultural stance that was also moving swiftly throughout other parts of the former Soviet Union. Turks in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and even the Tatars in Russia, were discussing adoption of a Latin-based alphabet. The new alphabets law reflected the state’s view of the Latin-based script as possessing international currency. Moreover, in 1993, Aşgabat passed a Three Language Policy, making English the second official language of the country and Russian the third. With respect to this policy Nyýazow wrote, ‘just as the Cyrillic alphabet had aided in Turkmens’ learning Russian, the new [Latin] alphabet will assist the populace in its learning English’ (Türkmenbaşy 1994: 33–4). Latinisation aimed to facilitate the emergence of a new and implicitly anti-Soviet intellectual order.

Language status and identity

Language was crucial to the way Nyýazow reconceptualised life in Türkmenistan. Thus he announced,

The national language is an essential quality of our state and society. We have been using our Türkmen language as our official language. Otherwise, our essential quality, nationality, would not be able to penetrate into the meaning of our state and its properties (Türkmenbaşy, 2002, p. 400).

During the Soviet era, Russian language held a higher status than Türkmen language and Russian speakers held positions of authority. Türkmen only became the official language of the Türkmen Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990 on the eve of the Soviet collapse, and the subsequent displacement of Russian for official and public purposes took time. Language status became a major focus in the mid-1990s when the state began replacing Russian vocabulary with Türkmen terms, and sponsoring programs to reinvigorate the
ancient vocabulary. In 1998, the Türkmen state blocked Russian television broadcasting provided by ORT television. Only one Russian language newspaper survived (one produced by the government itself), along with twenty-two published in Türkmen. The state was limiting access to non-Turkmen forms of information and language to promote Turkmen.

By 2000, language planners were systematically inventing neologisms to create a comprehensive Türkmen vocabulary. A section in the Türkmen Language and Literature Institute was devoted to language development and the state founded the newspaper Türkmen Dili as a forum for intellectuals to explain new terms and their historical roots to readers. All of this work led to the need for a dictionary to explain the post-Soviet terms to the populace (Beýik Saparmurat Türkmenbashy Zamanasynyň Sözlügi 2002). President Nyýazow himself made the language question into a national priority, by declaring in 2000 that he wanted to see ‘the complete and universal introduction’ of the national language in public life (Paul Goble 2000). He underscored his seriousness in televised broadcasts in which he would criticise officials who spoke Russian better than they did the national tongue. He even fired his foreign minister specifically for the latter’s weak knowledge of Turkmen. In 2002, the government banned the importation of foreign texts, restricted cable television and blocked the popular Russian language radio station Radio Mayak (RFE/RL 2004). As Turkmen gained in status the Russian language’s status fell. The official ideology did not define ‘Turkmen’ simply by ethnicity, lineage or ancestry – although these were not ignored – but first and foremost by language, which was presented as the reification of other elements of national identity. It was not enough to be Turkmen by blood and ancestry, one also needed to speak the language. Nyýazow began speaking Turkmen in public and surrounded himself – in public – with Turkmen language speakers.

Anyone who had advanced socially or economically during the Soviet years by virtue of membership in the Russian-speaking elite was denied status and state positions under Nyýazow. (Members of Nyýazow’s own inner circle, all of whom, like Türkmenbaşy himself, were old Soviets who continued to speak Russian behind closed doors, were exceptions). Linguistic discrimination, which implied that post-Soviet Türkmenistan had only enough space for ‘real’ Türkmen (Türkmenbaşy 2002: 365), led to the emigration of ethnic minorities. Russian speakers left Türkmenistan if they could (Uzzell 2000).7

Most people who did not speak Turkmen lost their jobs with the state – the number one employer.8 Turkmen language speakers took their places, regardless of merit or skill. The state organised Turkmen language classes under the direction of the various Ministries (Education, Communications, Foreign Affairs, etc.) for the employees within each sector. Still, most non-Turkmen did not learn the Turkmen language. Russian speakers reported that these classes were either not announced, were never actually carried out or, they admitted, they simply had not wanted to attend (Fieldwork observations, 2001–2006).
Some ethnic Türkmen, though not all, saw the linguistic dispossession of non-Türkmen minorities as justice for decades of ‘oppression.’ For them political independence and cultural exclusivity went hand and hand. Turkmen who could speak the Turkmen language felt justified in becoming the new ‘elite’ (Fieldwork observations, 2001–2006). Turkmen speakers began to take over the most prestigious jobs and positions of responsibility, while Russian-speaking professors, scientists, doctors, and lawyers found themselves relegated to working as taxi drivers.

Western reports focused on the brain drain and the official abuse of minorities across the country. What these reports missed was that there had been a base of popular support for the president’s initial cultural policies in the early 1990s. What was unacceptable to Western analysts was acceptable to a substantial number of ethnic Türkmen. Only twenty-eight percent of Türkmen had claimed Russian as their second language in the 1989 Soviet census (Clark et al. 1997: 317). A good deal of the population felt that they were not losing with the Türkmenification of social structures so much as they were gaining a country (Fieldwork observations, 2001–2006).

Aşgabat’s rhetoric aimed to create cohesion among Türkmen, as defined by the state, and to keep non-Türkmen out of that collective. The post-Soviet Türkmen nationalism not only excluded non-Türkmen from the nation, but it also kept ‘Russians’ from being a part of the elite and prospering in the newly designed state. This arrangement upended lives leaving thousands unemployed and just as many newly employed with no experience at their work.

It was in these heady days that Nyýazow called out to Türkmen around the world to return to their ‘native’ land. He invited the diaspora to ‘come home’ (Durdýew and Kadyrow 1991). Türkmenbaşy saw himself as the leader of Türkmen everywhere. He called them to immigrate and increase the country’s numbers; over 13,000 came from Tajikistan alone. One Ahal Teke informant told the story of how he and his brothers had been born and lived in Dushanbe, Tajikistan until the 1990s, when Türkmenbaşy called them ‘home.’ They had arrived in Türkmenistan and with the exception of one were living very good lives. ‘Türkmenistan for Türkmen!’ his deep voice boomed.

Ruhnama

National Revival continued to capitalise on Türkmen heritage, but as time passed there was less focus on Türkmenification and ancient tradition, and an increasing focus on Nyýazow personally. Adherence to a strict line of cultural policy and celebration of Nyýazow’s Türkmenistan diluted the Turkmen people’s role in National Revival from vital supporters to miserably coerced participants. 2001–2002 began to see a decline in popular support as people began to feel that Nyýazowisation was overshadowing Türkmenification. The President’s book, Ruhnama, played a significant role in this shift.
**Ruhnama** was President Nyýazow’s pseudo-historical-spiritual tome, which he wrote in order to guide the Turkmen people in their newly found independence. He explained, ‘The **Ruhnama** brings the national perception into a system and organisation. I have written the **Ruhnama** to enable my nation to perceive our past and to envision our own dignity.’ (Nyýazow 2002: 61). **Ruhnama** offered Nyýazow’s interpretation of Türkmen history, wrapped up together with his autobiography, stories of Türkmen ancestors and their important deeds, and a moral code combining Türkmen and Islamic values. In the tradition of Central Asian epics, it sacralised the leader’s family, idolising Nyýazow’s own mother and father. In it he mused:

> What is the meaning of the Head of State writing on philosophical matters? . . . five- or ten-year programmes are not sufficient for the needs of our state. At this time, it is necessary not only to establish a state but also to create a nation, for a nation needs far-reaching moral values and criteria. We have to seek and find ways in which these kinds of criteria can be provided through moral work and traditional moral philosophies (Nyýazow 2002: 69).

He would not only run the state, but also, as Head of all the Turkmen, guide the people toward their future. Published in December 2001, a decade after independence, **Ruhnama** became a formal part of the educational curriculum the following year. **Ruhnama** became the key source in humanities curricula. State employees (including medical doctors) were required to take weekly lessons. Television, radio, and newspapers relayed excerpts and homilies to the people. All public speeches referenced it. It stood beside the Koran in state funded mosques. Yet it never resonated with the broader public in the way Nyýazow must have expected it would. Most citizens quietly went along with the public recitations, ignoring the ubiquitous signage referencing it, and grudgingly accepted it as part of curricula. In an obvious parallel with the required political indoctrination in the Soviet period, protesting would have caused more trouble for most people than it was worth.

Though Nyýazow humbly claimed that **Ruhnama** was ‘not a history book’ its pages asserted that it imparted the great ‘lessons of history’ (Nyýazow 2002: 44, 74), and its author persistently expressed expertise in Turkmen history. **Ruhnama** became Turkmenistan’s de facto official history during Nyýazow’s presidency, much to the consternation of historians, teachers and parents. In addition to forcing **Ruhnama** into school curricula, Nyýazow eliminated other available histories. Other scholarly works not approved by him personally were either not allowed to be published or, in at least one case, burned by state authorities and the author removed from his position at the Magtumguly University because his history contradicted that in **Ruhnama** (Conversations with historians, librarians, and scholars, 2001–2002). **Ruhnama**’s aim was to solidify and teach the myth of Nyýazow’s Turkmenistan, which gained legitimacy from its link to an ancient past, however imaginary.

Nyýazow sought to instruct the people in what it meant to be a ‘true’ Turkmen: moderately Muslim, Turkmen speaking, faithful to the state, and
loyal to Nyýazow. *Ruhnama*, was the keystone in the construction of his personality cult. In this Turkmenistan was not unique. As Amieke Bouma has observed, ‘[a]ll five Central Asian republics developed strong presidential systems and everywhere the heads of state [were] actively involved in the creation and propagation of the new state ideology also through the writing of books on politics and the histories of their respective republics’ (Bouma 2011: 559). However, the scope of Turkmenistan’s use of presidential texts in schools, for driver’s license tests, even in medical schools, was spectacularly atypical. Nyýazow’s discourse was pervasive and invasive.

**Cult of distraction**

It was with *Ruhnama* that Nyýazow pushed Türkmenification beyond what even ethnic Turkmen-speakers found tolerable. *Ruhnama* was presented as an ‘inspired text,’ a ‘sacred book,’ the ‘lighthouse for the people.’ As such it moved policy beyond Türkmenification toward Nyýazowisation. Popular tolerance of Nyýazow’s discourse began to wane, as it invaded people’s lives, becoming an insufferable daily hassle rather than simply a distraction.

In August 2002, Nyýazow announced that the country would be using a new calendar. He changed the names of the months and the days of the week. The names of the months included ‘Independence’ for October and ‘Neutrality’ for December. Others were taken from ancient Türkmen leaders, poets, and Nyýazow’s own family. January was Türkmenbas¸y and April bore his mother’s name. While less dramatic than the French revolutionary calendar which not only renamed the months, but also completely reorganised the calendar year and days of the week, most people in Türkmenistan thought this was a wholly unnecessary step in their already complicated lives.

After 2002, the semantics of Türkmenification intensified, while shifting away from connections to the ancient past and toward commemoration of Nyýazow’s decisive role in the nation’s rebirth. In 2004, he built the largest mosque in Central Asia in his father’s village, Gypçak. The state razed single-story homes with barnyards to build luxury high-rise ‘Golden Era’ apartment buildings; and in a public park he erected a twenty-foot tall neon *Ruhnama* in Aşgabat which slowly opened and closed every thirty minutes like a Times Square spectacle. On the outskirts of Aşgabat, in another park named *Saglyk Yolu* (Health Walk) a giant statue of Nyýazow depicted in work-out garb, including Puma sneakers, encouraged people to undertake the trek up the 37 kilometer-long, winding set of steps. Its ritualisation was enhanced by a basin next to the statue’s foot, in which water collected. Through urban myth people were encouraged to touch or drink from the water almost like holy water before climbing the steps. The state built fountains and parks throughout this area. People gathered at these as they used to at the Soviet monuments, both to have photos taken on their wedding days and to escape the heat rising from the streets of the city in summer. These new sites of commemoration drew the
nation’s capital into the narrative of Nyýazow’s Türkmenistan (Denison 2009: 1167–68; Šir 2008).

**Audience reception: co-production**

Nyýazow’s personality cult was inescapably a top-down phenomenon imposed by the political equivalent of brute force. Yet it could not have succeeded to the extent that it did if it had not awakened some kind of reciprocal response among the Türkmen people. Yves Cohen writes of personality cults generally,

To understand the cult fully in its many forms, both material and mediated, we should approach it as an enormous co-construction in which a wide variety of people and groups took part . . . The producers of the cult were the politicians and professionals in various media. And of course, there were those who received and consumed the cult (Cohen 2007: 615).

Interpreting cult as a production, Cohen refers to its ‘producers’ and its ‘reception.’ The people of Turkmenistan were an ‘audience,’ but also ‘active participants’ in the state system; the slogan ‘Halk! Watan! Türkmenbaşy!’ illustrated the state’s reliance on the nation to sustain the National Revival Movement. Michael Denison uses the term ‘performers’ to describe those who took part in Türkmenistan’s rituals and choreographed mass spectacles (Denison 2009: 1170). Without ignoring the element of coercion, it is apparent that many of those who participated in the new national discourse did so sometimes to preserve something of themselves within an oppressive structure that they could not resist overtly. Some Turkmen found ways to use the new cultural dispensation to their advantage – primarily to get new state jobs, or to save old ones. Conformity was itself an act of agency. James Scott writes about this sort of use of an official discourse to achieve one’s personal aims. He recognises it as a form of agency where one might participate in the official discourse just to survive within a restrictive system or to manipulate the system to one’s own aims (Scott 1990). Cohen agrees, writing, ‘if the cult can . . . be understood as a way of giving form to people’s relationship[s] with power, the practices of the cult, too, were aimed at gaining power’s favor . . . ’ (Cohen 2007: 616). At times it seemed as if there was a mere monologue emanating from the office of the President, but that cannot have been the case. The participation of the ordinary Türkmen meant there was an exchange taking place, even in ideological spaces dominated by the state and its interests.

In the 1990s, in light of civil war and ethnic strife in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, many Türkmen saw a strong centralised leadership as the best guarantor of peace. This contributed to their acceptance of Nyýazow as the country’s saviour. After 11 September 2001, the government played up the (unlikely) threat of terrorism and Islamic extremism, while the people also worried about the (even more unlikely) threat of Türkmen tribal conflict. The idea of a strong, solitary leader did not conflict with the Türkmen value system, which
resembles the Russian tradition of reverence for the ‘benevolent tsar’ (batuushka-tsar – the little father). In Russian and Türkmen history alike, the pervasiveness of such values is part of the explanation for state excesses (Plamper 2012: 9). Many Türkmen did not blame Nyýazow for his own personality cult, citing zealous supporters or sycophants as the guilty parties. Nor was Nyýazow alone faulted for administrative excesses like the bugging of phones, or social deficiencies such as rampant bribery. Citizens told me, ‘if he knew about it, it wouldn’t be happening’ (Fieldwork observations, 2001–2002). Turkmen knew that Nyýazow was ultimately in charge. But, they also rationalised that he could not control every detail in daily life, and thus cited self-interested elements within the administration as the source of Türkmenistan’s social problems (Fieldwork observations, 2001–2002). The element of psychological defensiveness that is apparent in such an outlook is part of how personality cults work. They succeed as cults because they are able to claim loyalty and credit, while evading responsibility.

In fact, Nyýazow deliberately kept his administrators and state institutions weak by allowing individuals to hold their posts for only short periods of time. It was not unusual to turn on the evening news and see the president calling ministers to task in a televised meeting. He would berate them for corruption, disloyalty, thievery, or incompetence and then force them to beg for forgiveness, before firing them and sending them off to jail or demoting them to a menial job. Many were indeed guilty of corruption since they knew they would only be in office for a short period of time, and hoped to make the most of it. If Nyýazow had allowed individuals to stay in office long enough to gain some professional knowledge and build some political capital, his people may have become effective administrators; but then his own cult-like role would have been diminished. Nyýazow’s pose as the people’s protector against corruption and incompetence required a continuous supply of both; his regime was calculated to produce them.

Nyýazow ‘led’ the public by making them feel as if they were constantly under siege. He constantly reminded people of the threat of civil war or instability, encouraging Turkmen to accept his protection as the only safe path forward. Nyýazow encouraged fear of threats from beyond the national borders if the people did not accept his protection, and from within if anyone stood against him. He even made the northern-most province, Daşoguz, a restricted region, accessible only with internal visas, based on a fear of the large Uzbek population that lived there, near the border with Uzbekistan. In Article 54 of the Constitution, the president – Nyýazow – himself was considered the ‘chief guarantor of national independence, territorial integrity.’ He used symbolism and rhetoric to construct the new Türkmen national identity, but he also induced fear to convince the populace of the need for his strong, authoritarian leadership.

Nyýazow simultaneously curried favor with the people by addressing certain material concerns. His ‘Ten Years of Prosperity’19 program contrived a pact between the people of Türkmenistan and himself through which the state,
with its access to rich hydrocarbon reserves, provided subsidies to all citizens while they kept silent about their lack of liberties.\textsuperscript{20} In banners all around the country and as part of the Prosperity plan, Nyýazow proclaimed that within ten years Türkmenistan would be the ‘Second Kuwait.’ He even went so far as to promise – not just Herbert Hoover’s ‘chicken in every pot and a car in every garage’ – but a \textit{Mercedes} in every garage. According to this arrangement, of which the government constantly reminded the people via slogans, banners, and daily newspaper articles, the state secured the right to rule without checks or balances such as a free press, an independent legal system or civilian oversight of military institutions. Moreover, Nyýazow held complete control of the country’s finances. In fact, he not only represented the country as head of government, chairman of the party and leader of the military, but he also personified the state. In exchange, citizens received for free or at a minimal cost: water, natural gas, gasoline, electricity, flour, salt, cooking oil, the protection of the Türkmen state, ‘peace and tranquility’ (Nyýazow 2002: 287), and the paternalistic guidance of Türkmenbaşy. For the many citizens who had suffered a complete lack of liberties this was an arrangement they endured due to fear of civil war, violence from abroad or repression at home. Nyýazow combined this mechanism with coercion, myth and discourse to articulate the post-Soviet Türkmen nation identity and attempt to buttress his own power.

**Conclusion**

Türkmenistan’s first president created an ethno-linguistic nationalism to solidify and legitimise his rule. This nationalism marginalised citizens who did not speak Türkmen from access to social power and even employment. Questions of identity and the discourse of nation building are accordingly of more than theoretical interest. They go to the heart of how society, the economy, and ordinary people’s lives were organised in the first twenty years after the end of the USSR. In this respect Turkmenistan is exemplary, but not unique.

In Nyýazow’s creations, including his book, \textit{Ruhnama}, his invention of a distinctive calendar, the erection of monuments (including several to himself), and reforms to the script and language, we can trace the mechanisms he used to support his discourse of ‘National Revival.’ We can also see the ways that discourse went beyond rhetoric to shape the lives of the Türkmen people. Of all the symbols and markers of the new national identity none was as meaningful as language, the cultural realm in which the power of the new state could be exercised most freely. It was language above all that made culture a weapon in the hands of the state.

In Nyýazow’s Türkmenistan the citizenry contributed to the processes of cultural production even while they were the targets of the state’s cultural products (Plamper 2012: 205). A study of the importance of myth, cult, and language as tools of state power, this paper analyzes the ways national identity...
was constructed and articulated in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. It explores the methods through which Nyýazow legitimised his authoritarian leadership, first to co-op Türkmen citizens to support his regime, and then to coerce them as participants in his personality cult. It concludes that Nyýazow used the production of culture, of ‘invented tradition’ in Hobsbawm’s sense, to bolster his agenda and further his own power.

It also argues that the exaggerated cult of personality that Nyýazow cultivated limited his achievements, rather than solidifying them. The symbiotic relationship signalled in the phrase ‘Halk! Watan! Türkmenbasy!’ was gradually eroded by cultural policies that became so intrusive, so implausible, and so entangled in the practicalities of daily life, that the average Türkmen could not help but recognise the gradual transformation of his own cultural role, from that of ‘co-producer’ and willing audience member to that of reluctant, coerced consumer. After Ruňnama entered schools in the early 2000s Altyn Asyr began to see a decline in popular support, as even the ‘true’ Türkmen grew alienated from the regime, sensing that Nyýazowisation was overshadowing Türkmenification.

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Notes

1 The territory that became Turkmenistan in 1991 was demarcated by the Soviets in 1924 as the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. It corresponded closely to the tsarist province of Transcaspia.

2 This name was no doubt fashioned after Atatürk which means ‘father of the Turks,’ taken by Mustafa Kemal as he was forging the Turkish Republic out of the Ottoman state, but Nyýazow was probably also influenced by the other leaders such as Karimov in Uzbekistan and Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. There are also similarities between the Nyýazow and Reza Shah of Iran, including the use of the title ‘Serdar.’ Ansari, 2003 describes the centrality of the ruler as ‘dynastic nationalism’ p. 59–71.

3 In 2003 the CIA reported the demographic breakdown as Turkmen eighty-five per cent, Uzbek five per cent, Russian four per cent, other six per cent https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html. Accessed on 17 March 2013].


5 The small museum that is there was built by the Soviets.
In order to gain entrance to a university, students had to fill out applications requiring them to identify their ancestors going back three generations. This was an ancient way of proving one’s identity via lineage as well as to demonstrate pride in heritage.

According to official figures found in Uzzell, 2000, the share of ethnic Russians in the population (primarily urban) dropped from fifteen per cent in 1991 to two per cent in 1999.

Unemployment is nearly impossible to estimate. In 1997 Clark et al. estimated rural unemployment to be as high as 60 per cent; in 2009 TACIS estimated it to be closer to 30 per cent, though I believe TACIS was underestimating.

Punctuating the language issue was the change in alphabet that had been instituted in 1996. It deliberately distanced the people from Russian, and oriented the country toward Turkey and the West. Most importantly, it was another symbolic break with the Soviet past.

This included ethnic Russians, Armenians, Ukrainians, Azerbaijanis, Poles, Jews; essentially anyone who was not Turkmen ethnically and those Turkmen who could not speak the Turkmen language.

Türkmen reside in Afghanistan (one million), Iran (two million), and China (one-hundred thousand). There are also Türkmen in the other Central Asian countries as well as Iraq.


Not unlike a form of ancestor worship, with flowers being lain at monuments to each parent on holidays, manifestations of this secular religion (in parallel with Islam) inherently supported worship of Nyýazow himself.

Parents were outraged by the vacuous content of the book, but also annoyed by the fact that each student had to purchase their own two-dollar copy rather than be assigned a book from school as was usual practice with books. Conversations, 2001–2012.

Türkmenbaşy, 2002: 9; 66–7; 77; 293, claimed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that Türkmen have lived in the land today called Turkmenistan for 5,000 years. For example, he claimed that Türkmen lived in the city of Merw 4,000 years ago. The scholar whose books were destroyed and lost his position wrote, in accord with other respected histories that Türkmen tribes migrated westward from lands close to the Chinese border less than 2,000 years ago.

Reference to a ‘cult of distraction’ is inspired by Kracauer (1987).

Signs with these phrases, ‘Mukaddes Ruhnama’ (Holy/Sacred Ruhnama) and ‘Halkyn Şamçyrągь’ (Lighthouse for the People) and others, such as ‘The President’s path is our path,’ were seen around the nation and most especially in the areas in and around Asgabat.

Sunday-Saturday: Old system – Yekşenbe, Duşenbe, Sişenbe, Çarsenbe, Penşenbe, Anna, Şenbe; New System (Sunday–Saturday) – Dynçgün (Day of Rest), Başgün (Firstday), Yaşgün (Youthday), Sogapgün (Blessingday), Annagün (Muslim day of rest), Ruhgün (Day of the Soul).

This program was later changed to ‘Ten Years of Stability’.

While there were public protests their numbers were small and opposition in-exile remained disunited.

References


