The Role of UNESCO and the Uzbek Nation Building Process

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1 Introduction

In February 2010, French newspapers announced that the Uzbek government had forbidden rock and rap music because of the dangerous connections perceived with drugs and loose morals (Libération Network 2011). This measure seems less surprising when we look at Uzbek cultural policies and modern nationhood narrative, both of which are marked by an extremely national rhetoric. I will ask if this is perhaps unintentionally favored and encouraged by UNESCO’s involvement in Uzbekistan.

Within the framework of the research project “The Modernity of Tradition, Uzbek Textile Culture as an Economic and Cultural Resource,”¹ I investigate practices and discourses regarding the traditional Uzbek textile culture in a globalized fashion market. How does global fashion consumption exercise an impact on local actors? What kinds of cultural and social differences are created by global fashion – for example, differences in social status, differences between the older and younger generations, the creation of new ideas of ideal women coming from new body images broadcast by the media, and social stratification between globally orientated elites and groups within the local population. The Uzbek government pays great attention to its national image and presentation abroad; an image in which the

¹ Research project, 2010-2012, grant by VW-Stiftung.
ethnic variety of traditional textile cultures of the Central Asian population are 
fused into a coherent Uzbek identity via modern fashion design.

While UNESCO initiatives and policies are not at the center of my research, I 
saw traces of UNESCO in all of the places I visited. In fact, handicrafts, in particu-
lar textile handicrafts, are counted among the main focuses of UNESCO engage-
ment in Uzbekistan. Markedly, many designers and craftsmen – the players on the 
lowest level – mentioned UNESCO as their in ways unknown, mysterious sup-
porter. I have been carrying out ethnographic research among designers, craftsmen 
and fashion consumers (mainly in Namangan in the Fergana Valley). Drawing 
from this material, I try to analyze the results and effects of UNESCO’s programs. 
The realms of craftsmen and designers in Uzbekistan are closely intertwined. At 
this point in my research, I can only try to answer some of the questions put for-
ward by this volume’s focus on heritage regimes. I will mainly consider the political 
layout and the ideological perspectives on culture. Along with the ethnographic 
material drawn from interviews with designers, and visits to workshops, craft cen-
ters, and bazaars, I consulted internet sources about UNESCO activities in Uzbek-
istan. The official website only provides very rough and basic information. This 
information was full of confusing hints and tracks, some leaving me with the im-
pression of an intentional cover-up – an issue I will return to later. My task con-
sisted of deconstructing this puzzle of information in order to reconstruct a 
somewhat more coherent concept of UNESCO’s actions and intentions in the 
country. In the end, I am left with more questions than answers!

2 The Case of Uzbekistan

The commitment of UNESCO to Uzbekistan goes back to Soviet times when the 
project Silk Road was started in 1988:

UNESCO launched a ten-year project entitled “Integral Study of the Silk 
Roads: Roads of Dialogue”. As part of the project, several expeditions were 
organized to retrace, by land and by sea, some of these routes, with the par-
ticipation of experts from all the countries involved. The purpose of the 
project, which uses a multidisciplinary approach, was to carry out field stud-
ies of the scientific, technological and cultural exchanges which took place 
between the East and the West along these routes with a view to stimulating 
further research at the international and national levels and promoting the 
concept of multiple identities and a common heritage. (UNESCO 2002: 1)3

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2 For advice concerning websites, I would like to thank Philipp Socha for his instructive remarks. 
See also the article of Sue Williams: Sur les routes de la soie (Williams 1996: 15).

3 According to Frederico Mayor, former Director-General of UNESCO, the first UNESCO initiative 
on the Silk Roads Project tended “to shed light on the common heritage […] that links the people of 
Since then, political changes have made these intentions outdated. Instead of claiming the common cultural heritage of the Silk Road, the five nations (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) each emerged with wishes for separate support, insisting on focusing on cultural differences rather than what is shared in common. Hence, an analysis of UNESCO’s role must take into consideration the particular historical and political situation from which these new Central Asian nations emerged.

Uzbekistan obtained national independence in 1991 together with the four other Central Asian countries after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. However, differently from the countries of Northeastern Europe, Uzbekistan was not prepared for the new status of sovereignty nor had there been a real struggle for independence. Instead, some parts of the population would have preferred to stay under the great, protective roof of the Soviet Union. The romantic and Western idea of nationhood conveying a distinct entity connected with a fixed territory was alien to the population of Central Asia.

This seems surprising, but a closer look at history can explain the different attitudes. Uzbekistan, along with the other states of Central Asia, was an invention of the Soviet government. It defined new regional areas with provincial governments during the 1920s in an effort to create clear administrative structures. These were partly based on ethnolinguistic borders or on the political structures of the former principal feudal territories (*Khanat*) (Baldauf 1991; Hiro 2009). Demarcated and officially founded in 1925 (Bell 1999: 2), the newly created national republic of Uzbekistan faced the problem of inventing its own nationhood inside the former Soviet frontiers.⁴

### 3 UNESCO’s Initiatives in Uzbekistan

What role can UNESCO play in this new geopolitical layout and what goals are to be implemented? The following goals concerning Central Asia were proclaimed in a 1996 issue of *Sources UNESCO*, and each of the goals was also elaborated in separate articles:

UNESCO a été appelée à la rescousse pour préserver l’environnement⁵ […]

rénover les systèmes éducatifs⁶ […]

développer des médias indépendants⁷ […]

faire renaître l’identité de cette région à travers son héritage culturel⁸

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⁴ Nevertheless, the concept of nation was not alien to Soviet ideology but a basic category in their conception of collectivities. Concerning Uzbek nation formation, see Eckert 1996; Melvin 2000. For the conception of Eurasia, see Kaiser 2004.


⁷ Hadlow 1996: 11.

Between 1992 and 1993, all five states had joined UNESCO, which first opened an office in Uzbekistan in 1996 which was headed by Michael Barry Lane until 2007.

Uzbekistan has four cultural sites on the World Heritage List: The historic districts of Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and Shahrisabz. UNESCO’s interests here concern the safeguarding of historical architecture. The first, enormous scientific project was installed in the regional district of Boysun as part of the intangible and immaterial cultural heritage. Boysun district was proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001. Boysun was “submitted by the National Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan for UNESCO […]: Surkhanddarya Region” in January 18, 2008.10 A year before, on December 12, 2007, the Uzbek Republic edited a law on the “ratification of an international convention on protection of immaterial cultural heritage of 2003.”11

One goal of UNESCO is to encourage regional identities. Therefore, a good portion of the initiatives revolves around supporting traditional handicraft activities, in particular in the textile sector, with the concrete intention of revitalizing and restoring old techniques and handiwork items. This protection of folklore and ethnic features was also a concern of the Soviets in former times. Thus, Laura Adams argues that: “Soviet institutions, far from destroying traditional culture, acted to preserve traditional culture even as they transformed it, not just in a socialist way, but also by participating in the establishment on international cultural norms […]” (Adams 2010: 106). She goes on, adding that, in the case of Uzbekistan, we deal with a special Central Asian version of post-colonialism not comparable to other post-colonial situations. To the question how Soviet discourses and practices shaped the ways Uzbekistan’s elite conceive culture, Adams answers that “the contemporary public expression of national identity in Uzbekistan gives us evidence that a Soviet version of Uzbek ethnic identity was successfully institutionalized and remains hegemonic among cultural and political elites” (Adams 1999: 356).

Adams’ study (2010) refers to the national holiday Navro`z (the Persian New Year) – an institution of particular continuity and popularity which has enjoyed UNESCO status as Intangible Culture Heritage since 2009. By taking on this case study, she has furnished proof of the restorative cultural policy which confirms and reinforces the assuredness and identity of the old and new cultural elites which had already been in existence during the Soviet period. The situation regarding textile handicrafts seems to be more varied and complicated. Uzbekistan is not

9 Otchet 1996: 16.
10 Boysun UNESCO Heritage Centre 2011.
only counted among the world’s most important producers of cotton (currently it is number five),\textsuperscript{12} but can look back on a rich history of textile handicrafts, including the colored \textit{Ikat} textiles (made of silk or cotton, or both), Bukhara golden embroidery, the abundantly embroidered wall carpets \textit{Suzani}, and the Karakalpak embroidered handbags and accessories. Modern Uzbek fashion design refers to these traditions by using traditional handicraft techniques, but above all, by citing and applying ornaments, colors and fabrics of Central Asian traditional dress cultures.

This phenomenon of revitalization is often addressed as “re-orientalization,” i.e. adopting and playing with old oriental stereotypes which, in the case of Uzbekistan, date from the time of the Tsarist colonialism (Leshkowich and Jones 2003). Thus, actual textile crafts, as well as new fashion design, have become strong markers of the new Uzbek national identity.\textsuperscript{13}

During the Soviet period, certain traditional textile handicrafts were actively practiced but only for official, industrial or private purposes, whereas some crafts, such as the golden embroidery of Bukhara, were considered to belong to the feudal past and excluded. The Soviet government never allowed Uzbeks to exercise a handicraft profession on their own and for personal profit. One of my interviewees in Margilon reported that his father was punished with a five-year prison sentence for attempting to work independently.

It was difficult to find out what types of handicrafts UNESCO is encouraging and in what ways the development of textile handicrafts is being forwarded. There are only tentative answers to some questions. UNESCO provides no financial means, but mostly material and technical support instead. At times, UNESCO assistance is dependent upon the personal interests and preference of UNESCO actors in the field – an opinion which is confirmed by other studies.\textsuperscript{14}

The official aim is to encourage craft-workers to use traditional skills and materials. The establishment of the Seal of Excellence program (referred to as the Seal\textsuperscript{15}), initiated in 2001 and expanded to Central Asia in 2004, aims to ensure the continuation of traditional knowledge and skills and the preservation of cultural diversity in the region. It is based on the following key criteria:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} However, Uzbekistan is number two for cotton export. See Battes 2007: 29-53, 36 (production), 32 (export).
  \item \textsuperscript{13} For a good survey, see also Zernickel 1995; Rezvan 2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} For example, by a study from 2010 entitled \textit{Искусство Узбекистана на современном этапе социально-культурного развития} (Eng. \textit{Arts of Uzbekistan at the present stage of social-cultural development}), which was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. http://cultureuz.net/analitica/coll/1/first.html <accessed 13 May, 2012>.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} The SEAL of Excellence for Handicraft Products in Central Asia 2004 was jointly established by UNESCO and CACSA (Asian Crafts Support Association) in order to establish quality standards and to enhance regional and international awareness of traditional and innovative handicrafts; UNESCO 2004.
\end{itemize}
Creative and successful alliance of traditional skills and innovation in material, form or design;
- Expression of cultural identity and traditional aesthetic value;
- Respect for the environment in materials and production techniques; and
- Marketability of the craft products with potential for the world market.

(UNESCO Office Bangkok, accessed May 13, 2012)

The following centers have profited from UNESCO support:
- **Bukhara Artisan Development Center** is an association of artisans’ “everlasting heritage” whose main goal is to receive and develop ancient handicrafts. Bukhara belongs to the Central Asian Crafts Support Association (CACSA) which has been a partner with the Seal program in Central Asia since 2004.
- **Marg’ilon (Margilan) Craft Center** is supported by UNESCO (silk *Ikat* weaving center). A private, successfully working silk factory is also located in Margilon.

It was only by word of mouth that I became acquainted with a center of designers who have constructed a workshop for traditional handicraft, in this case block-printing, and modern design in Tashkent’s old city. This center, **Human Wear**, was founded in 2000. Only the architecture of the building in which the center is housed (a 19th century house) was sponsored by UNESCO in 2006-07. The aim was to restore the historical district and make modern usage of its buildings – in this case as both a handicraft workshop and an educational center for young women who are willing to learn a special handicraft. In this way, the designers concerned were able to provide employment and, at the same time, attract tourists to the old city. There are plans to open an exhibition hall. The design and craft center stimulated the creation of a designer marketing organization and shop called **Human Wear** inside Tashkent where designers can show and sell their own products – with relative success and strikingly modest appearance and advertising campaigns.

The craft center in Margilon is quite impressive: It was supported by UNESCO between 2003 and 2007 with material equipment rather than financial support in an effort to ensure sustainability. The proclaimed goal was to encourage the development of all the traditional crafts of Uzbekistan and to reunite them in the center of Margilon. The director stressed in a personal communication the

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18 The founders of **Human Wear** were Lola Sajfi, Jurij Pak und Dina Malkova. At the beginning, the shop was organized as a Limited Liability Company (LLC) called *Kischilar libosi*. Today, the business is privately owned by Natalja Kim (Field research, November 2010). Since recently, the shop has concentrated more on internet marketing due to several reasons. For further information, see: Человеческая одежда <accessed May 13, 2012>.
individual efforts of Michael Barry Lane, former director of the Tashkent UNESCO office, who, according to my source, confessed a strong personal interest in carpet weaving. Today, the center appears to be functioning well with 45 employees ranging from students to master craftsmen. Only highly skilled craftsmen are hired. Some, like the block printer, can look back on an old family tradition within their chosen craft. The center has also organized folklore festivals with the help of UNESCO. The carpets can be ordered via the internet. The craftsman I interviewed stated that the employees are able to earn a living as well as make a small profit. Another silk carpet workshop was successfully initiated in Chiva, one of the most touristic places in Uzbekistan, with the help of UNESCO and marketed via the Internet. Due to the suggestion of UNESCO, the weavers have developed a different design similar to that of the traditional wooden doors (field research October 2011).

One of the main concerns of UNESCO in Uzbekistan appears, therefore, to be the encouragement of textile handicrafts which, according to UNESCO (UNESCO 2007), provide a central element in sustainable development. In fact, textile handicrafts and fashion design are very popular among the Uzbek population and refer to old traditions, knowledge, values, and symbolic representation.¹⁹

UNESCO’s strategic support goes hand in hand with the Uzbek government’s efforts to develop a handicraft economy with decrees in favor of the producers (i.e. exemption from taxes). The same is valid for Bukhara, where the association Hunarmand, comprised of national foremen, handicraftsmen and painters, is based on a particular decree of the president.²⁰ The association has as its target “the preservation of centuries-old national art traditions, development rich in both diverse and applied art of Uzbekistan, support it not only on a home market, but also progress in the external world [global] market.”²¹

The purpose of the association is the coordination of activity and the protection of the rights and interests of the national foremen, handicraftsmen and experts in applied art.

In some areas, such as the Fergana valley, the reinforcement and consolidation of handicraft industries seem to diminish the high degree of unemployment and, at the same time, encourage women in particular to become more economically independent. This was illustrated by a country woman I met near Namangan who specialized in the production of the traditional headgear Tubetejka. She had established a small, functioning and successful manufacturing plant with one hundred female
employees. Another good working example was a small workshop comprised of two women who produced the very rare and expensive velvet, *Ikat bakhmal*, which has become fashionable. There are several other successful examples which improve the situation at the local level, such as bringing golden embroidery to the Bukhara folk market. In most cases, work is distributed on a “take home” basis and female family members provide labor. The products are targeted mostly at domestic consumers within the small middle class who still wear traditional dress on festive occasions, family gatherings, weddings, and so on.

4  **Broader Impact of UNESCO Initiatives**

However, the measures, in the long run, reinforce a resurgence of traditional practices and discourses within Uzbek community life which can be compared with the process of *malhallization* in Uzbek society. Thus, the old neighborhood institution *malhalla* – which existed even throughout the Soviet era and represents an interface between state and local communities – is more or less instrumental as a new organizational unit of political control, using old patterns of social practices: Family, kinship and patriarchal structure organize the life of citizens on a local level (Massicard and Trevisani 2000: 206-208). The term *malhallization* is used in research to refer to a discourse that claims the natural emergence of the Uzbek state out of Uzbek traditions, fostering particular hierarchical structures. It is a system based on patriarchy and family, with elders holding a high position and the individual coming after the family, the *bokim* (mayor), the city, and finally the president, who is considered the natural head of the nation (Massicard and Trevisani 2000: 217). In fact the project’s interviews about consumer attitudes towards traditional textile consumption indicate an increase of patriotic rhetoric and a gradual incorporation of national discourses.  

The situation becomes more complicated when looking at the fashion sector because of the diversity of the UNESCO support programs, the number of sub-organizations and their connections with a multitude of competitors, such as the Seal program which organizes fashion shows for Central Asian participants – a welcome opportunity for Uzbek designers to go abroad. The Seal program was initiated in 2001 by the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Office in Bangkok and the ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association (AHPADA), and has expanded into Central Asia. The Seal program’s explicit intention is to raise the quality control and marketing of traditional crafts and allows Uzbek fashion designers to participate in international platforms (UNESCO, accessed May 13, 2012).

Thus, the different programs also support efforts to build an independent fashion industry which is of vital interest for Uzbekistan’s government.

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22 Interviews in Namangan during field research in November 2010.
Fashion shows offering platforms for Uzbek designers operate on an international level and allow the representation of Uzbek fashion as a national brand. Fashion design is the particular concern of the fashion house *Dom Stilya* (House of Style) under the direction of the President’s daughter, Gulnara Karimova. She also acts as a chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the Fund Forum which cooperates directly with UNESCO through joint projects.

Gulnara’s importance for fashion design and to the country is proved by the fact that until recently, she was considered as a successor to her father as president. The other daughter, Lola Tillyaeva, was nominated a Permanent Delegate of UNESCO in 2008. Gulnara, above all, is serving as an effective interface between different networks of fashion, fashion designers and the global Asian fashion market. She seems to thus be slowly gaining control of the fashion design sector, which also implies a strong influence in the educational sector, particularly within the design departments of universities. As director of the famous internationally known *Dom Stilya*, she organizes exclusive fashion shows. Small labels, in contrast, have difficulty surviving and competing successfully; perhaps this is the reason why small labels are concentrating more and more on internet marketing.

UNESCO cannot bypass this organization of fashion design. Uzbekistan, as a so-called “presidential democracy,” is marked by a particular organization and conception of state institutions in which kinship affiliation plays an important role (Collins 2006). Thus, unwillingly or not, UNESCO’s interventions are involved in state interests and strategies.

Handicraft development and design are closely linked to each other, but they serve different interests and markets: Consumers from the Uzbek middle classes and tourists, on the one hand, and the upper class as a global player in the realm of fashion design, on the other. The Uzbek fashion industry seems to be, as argued by Lise Skov (2011) in a study about small national fashion labels, more “orientated towards international validation rather than domestic power” (Skov 2011: 139). In the case of Uzbekistan, it helps to not only construct a new national image, but also to strengthen the nation’s claim as the natural heir to the Silk Road. For this reason, it does not matter anymore that the fashion design industry is based on a successful fashion market.

Meanwhile, as a result of globalized fashion competitions, the link with media and communication has become more vital in selling a national image via fashion. It is all about being included or excluded.

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23 Collins’ definition of clan: “[...] clans are rooted in the informal kin-based communities, tribal or non-tribal, of traditional society organized around extended family units that engage in social, economic, and political activities” (2006: 68). See also her remarks on the current situation in Uzbekistan (2006: 256).

24 The strong connection between craft and design is also confirmed by Yurkova 2004. See also the recent study by Krebs 2011.

25 This argument is put forward by Lise Skov on the basis of her research on national fashion designs operating on the global market (2011: 139).
The trend for the working classes to wear cheap print textiles with traditional oriental ornaments and colors from China or sometimes Arabian countries is completely excluded from this cultural policy. This reinforces and widens the already existing social and cultural gap between educated and non-educated parts of the population.

The actors on the lowest level are the craftsmen, who are looking at UNESCO as a deus ex machina promising help and future, without any understanding of the mechanism of UNESCO procedures. They were surprised by the sudden interruption of UNESCO support to handicrafts which cut them off from new relations with festivals and exhibitions abroad (e.g. Santa Fe, Mexico).

Last but not least, it seems that personal relationships and the personal tastes of UNESCO principals play a role in the strategies of support. This was apparently the case during the time of the former head of the Uzbekistan office, Michael Barry Lane, who was honored several times by Uzbek officials for his great commitment to Uzbek culture (Uzbekistan National News Agency 2007).

5 Conclusion

UNESCO’s strategies to revitalize traditional crafts are, in some cases, also accompanied by intensive scientific research, as in the case of ethnographic field research in the Boysun district or the founding of the International Institute of Central Asian Studies in Samarkand (IICAS), which “was established under the aegis of UNESCO in 1995” (UNESCO 2009). UNESCO initiatives aim to forge a cultural identity through the exact historical knowledge of regional variety and to meet economic expectations and needs. However, these efforts remain ambiguous because they reinforce the tendency of present-day Uzbek society which is dominated by a dual mentality: “Uzbekistan’s traditionalism and modernity” (Dadabaev 2004: 141-142).

Given the actual political structures, regional networks combined with kinship affiliations, one can conclude with certainty that the major part of UNESCO initiatives within Uzbekistan are organized from the top and are kept under strict state control. This explains the lack of transparency which is reflected in the opinions of the craftsmen.

The same impression is also shared by members of the cultural elite. In an interview with Laura Adams, a woman responded to the questions about her feelings on the new cultural politics: “Yes, I feel I’m part of a larger movement toward [sic] cultural renewal […] but it comes from the top […]” (Adams 2010: 113).

26 Another example for the relationship between UNESCO and Uzbek President Karimov is his decoration with UNESCO medals Avicenna and Borobudur. The awarding was accompanied by the protest of human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (Silverstein 2009; Carter 2006).
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Mais il est jalonné d’obstacles et de périls, que l’UNESCO aide à surmonter.

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