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The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search of a Secularized National Ideology

Marlene Laruelle

For more than a decade, the five Central Asian republics have been “readjusting” their academic institutions in response to the new borders created by the fall of the USSR and subsequent independence in 1991. Both the university system and the Academy of Sciences have been called on to rethink their research policy in order to meet the new national stakes and current political demands. Thus, the elaboration of a national discourse is a particularly relevant object of study in order to observe the different modes of legitimization of the new Central Asian states and the scholarly tools they deem necessary for their political ratification. Consequently, in retracing the genealogy of the contemporary historical analyses we must pose a question regarding the development of the academic disciplines and the data concerning their political environment. Does Tajik independence in 1991 involve rethinking the genesis of the nation and the scholarly fields linked to the elaboration of the national narrative? Why have the political authorities declared 2006 the “year of the Aryan civilization”?

According to the pressure put on academic circles by the Tajik authorities and the ideological obsessions of the current regime, all human and social sciences can be considered as being more or less politicized. As in all the post-Soviet republics, the issue of the nation’s ancient presence on its contemporary territory represents the elemental matrix of national discourse. The historical analysis of this phenomenon is performed in an essentialist mode, retroactively projecting onto the past the existence of a Tajik nation born out of Soviet modernity: ethnic groups exist as objective and natural facts from which the contemporary national construction inevitably ensues. The autochthonous question is considered to be all the more a crucial key element of the political and economic reality of contemporary Tajikistan as this country is in competition with its Uzbek neighbour. Thus, archaeology and ethnology have become highly strategic: archaeology because it alone can confirm or invalidate the relation between the world-famous sedentary civilization that developed in the mythic Khorassan, Bactria and Sogdia and the contemporary population, and ethnology because this discipline provides a scientific justification, in the Soviet tradition, for the policy on nationalities carried out within the country.

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This article focuses on the scholarly works produced by the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnology at the Academy of Sciences in Tajikistan. It argues that one of the main elements of the current discourse on national identity tackles the Aryan origin of the Tajiks. After presenting how the president of the republic has rewritten history, I will attempt to analyse the roots of this Aryanist discourse in Soviet science. I will then study how contemporary academic circles go deeper into this discourse and to which ethnicist and anti-Turkic currents it is related. The article concludes with a focus on the preparations for the Aryan year in 2006 and its political consequences. I do not have room, in this article, to compare Tajikistan at length with the other post-Soviet states, all of which are participating in the same drive for autochthony.¹ Neither will I attempt to provide a more realistic historiography of Tajikistan: the aim of this article is not to assess the degree of exaggeration or to assert the existence of a more truthful version of national history. It is instead to examine how the academic works of local historians consist of an affirmation that their respective national identities have existed from time immemorial and can be grasped as an objective fact. Furthermore, there has been no sociological study conducted as of yet which measures the impact of these discourses, and thus it is difficult to know to what extent such depictions enjoy popular legitimacy. Although local populations are often disconnected from the ideological discourses promoted by political powers, the omnipresence of such discourses in schools, as well as the difficulty of gaining access to other sources of knowledge, lead one to suspect that they do have a real impact, however difficult to assess.

The Political Context and the Presidential Rewriting of History

The interaction between academic circles and the elaboration of a discourse on the nation cannot be grasped without introducing a third major element: political power. The influence of politics on the intellectual sphere remains fundamental within societies that have been little affected by the Gorbachevian liberalization of the 1980s and whose current governments are now withdrawing into more paternalistic and authoritarian methods. Although the degree of politicization of education, in particular history, differs in each Central Asian republic, they are all involved in the same process of working out a “presidential thought,” which increasingly tends to be quoted in reference to all scholarly thinking. The government, in effect, assumes the right to retell history, creates “places of memory” for the nation-state under construction, and invites the blossoming of a new officialese, the “politology” (the local version of political science), centred on the 1991 independence as the only relevant object of study.

In Tajikistan, the dissolution of the Soviet Union signified civil war. As early as 1992, several regional factions confronted one other. They were gathered into two principal camps, each with ambiguous political appellations: on the one side were

the “communists” and on the other there were “Islamists” and “Democrats.”² After peace agreements were signed in June 1997, President E. Rakhmonov attempted to launch Tajikistan on the road followed by other countries of the region: the road leading to the construction of a nation-state and to the strengthening of presidential authority. Indeed, both phenomena go hand in hand, as Central Asian presidents try to establish authoritarian power by contending that young states that have recently become independent, and consequently lack a firmly established national identity, need a strong state.³ In this context, academic circles must adapt themselves to the new situation created by independence and find a balance between their participation in the narrative-creation of the nation-state and their willingness to, at least partly, free their discipline from political pressure. From this point of view, Tajikistan constitutes, along with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, one of the most liberal countries in Central Asia in terms of intellectual autonomy. Controversies between scientists are numerous and conflicts are debated publicly in the media.

There is, however, an official science which has been validated by Tajik political power and which thus benefits from greater financial support. This official science does allow researchers the right to express their differences and to disagree with the political authorities, but in this case they have limited access to places of scholarly power. For the official historians and ethnologists, the goal of post-Soviet sciences is to justify and explain the 1991 independence and the state borders. Most local researchers share the same premise that scholarly knowledge on the ethnic history enables each citizen to “become self-aware” as a member of the national community: “the knowledge of the origin of peoples is very important, [for] it plays a part in the development of a just, ethnic consciousness among the population and has an important influence on the nature of the relationships of nations.”⁴ In Tajikistan, the interactions between the Institute of History and a presidential figure who has become increasingly involved in historical matters have focused mainly on one theme: the Aryan origin of the Tajiks.

On the level of identity, Tajikistan has a certain “symbolic” handicap that other Central Asian countries have not had to deal with. For instance, the Tajik language, which connects Tajikistan to the Iranian-speaking zone, cannot be too highly praised for fear of submerging the Tajik identity within a far larger ensemble already dominated by Iran. Persian literary figures (like Firdusi, Rudaki), who had been re-emphasized shortly after independence, then again after the civil war, have gradually been marginalized in favour of a symbolic identity system which it is hoped will be less Muslim and less Iranian speaking.⁵ Furthermore, the former cultural capitals of Samarkand and Bukhara were included in Uzbekistan when the Soviets divided the territory in 1924. If, between 1989 and 1992, some elements of the elite had publicly demanded modification of the borders to allow the return of these two leading Tajik cities, these territorial claims have now disappeared and been supplanted by a symbolic reading of their membership in the country.⁶ The contemporary withdrawal is in effect carried out around land values corresponding to the current borders.

The historical and ethnological disciplines must thus locate identity referents that can lead to a consensus and that can be “utilized,” or that, in other words, do not already belong to other states, and allow Tajikistan to justify what represents, in the whole contemporary post-Soviet space, the bedrock of national recognition: the autochthonous nature of the people on its land. These disciplines have also had to deal with the involvement of political authorities in the academic sphere, and more generally in the ideological sphere: not only does the state put pressure on these disciplines so that they assert its legitimacy and independence scientifically, but the authorities, being increasingly authoritarian, claim for themselves the right to shape national discourse, following the Soviet tradition. Thus, the journal of the Institute of History, *Merosi niëgon—Nasledie predkov [The Ancestors’ Legacy]*, almost systematically devotes its first page to President Rakhmonov. The author of these editorials, and director of the Institute of History since perestroika, Rakhim Masov, must praise the head of state, who has supposedly given the people back their memory. In 2003, the journal even openly called for votes in favour of Rakhmonov during the referendum by presenting the extension of his term of office as the only sensible choice to secure the country’s stability.⁷

After hesitating for several years during the civil war and its aftermath about the historical symbols that should be given to the new state, the presidential apparatus decided in favour of a rehabilitation of the Samanids, a prestigious dynasty that ruled over Transoxiana in the ninth to tenth centuries. The Samanids are now presented as the founding dynasty of Tajikistan and in 1999 the authorities organized with great pomp the 1,100th jubilee of the foundation of the Samanid state. Taking this state that embodied the great medieval Iranian-speaking Muslim culture as a model, Tajikistan is now expected finally to experience a period of rebirth and international recognition, after more than a millennium of what Rakhmonov considers to be the “genocide”⁸ of the Tajiks. Indeed, for the president, after the fall of communism the world entered into an “era of the rebirth of the ancient nations,” which corresponded to a confirmed “historical law.”⁹

In order to emphasize this reading of history, Rakhmonov became famous—like all presidents of other Central Asian republics—with the publication, in 1999, of a large, multi-volume historical book, *The Tajiks in the Mirror of History*. At the time of writing only first volume has so far been published, entitled *From the Aryans to the Samanids*. The erection of the Samanids as a national symbol is, as indicated by the book’s title, competing with the rehabilitation of the ancient Zoroastrian era and, with it, of the Aryan ideal. Indeed, Samanids entered the historical stage too late, so that one has to seek a reference era further back in ancient times. According to the president, in spite of a religious chasm potentially separating Zoroastrianism from Islam, there is a close but unknown link between these two great periods in the history of the Tajik people. As a consequence, despite being Muslim, “Ismail Somoni remained unfailingly faithful . . . to the elements of Aryan statehood,” and even allowed “the wise implementation, through the state apparatus, of the spiritual standards of Islam

and their fusion with the Aryan heritage.”¹⁰ In a primarily Muslim country, whose intellectual and artistic history is inherently connected to Islam, it may seem paradoxical to hear the president of the republic claim that Zarathustra was “the first Prophet of the Tajiks,” and to hope that he “will be the spiritual leader and guide of the Tajik people.”¹¹ This tendency is deeply rooted in the Soviet history of the country and now corresponds to precise identity strategies.

Tajik Aryanism, an Old Discourse Anchored in Soviet Science

The official discourse on the Aryan question did not emerge suddenly and solely from the mind of the president but continues—and magnifies in return—research that has been carried out on location for several decades. The theme of the Aryan origin of the Tajiks already represents a classical example of tsarist historiography: the Russian academic Orientalism of the late nineteenth century had developed a very clear “tajikophily” and “ariophily” that was denounced by key figures of Turkology such as Vassili Barthold (1869–1930).¹² This tendency was continued within Soviet scholarly circles between the wars, and the first generation of Tajik researchers, many of whom emerged primarily after World War II, have been re-appropriating the theme. For example, in his *History of the Tajiks [Istoriya tajikov]* (1947), Bobodzhan Gafurov (1909–1977), the founder of Tajik historical discourse and First Secretary of the Communist Party in the republic from 1946 to 1956, undertook an extensive analysis of the importance of the indo-European issue in order to assert the autochthonous status of the Tajiks.

After finishing his studies at the Moscow Communist Institute of Journalism and beginning a Ph.D. at the Institute of History in Moscow, Gafurov was appointed Secretary of the Central Committee of the Tajik Communist Party for propaganda. Then, in 1946, he was appointed First Secretary of the Tajik Communist Party. His most famous book, *A Short History of the Tajik People [Istoriya tadzhikskogo naroda v kratkom izlozhenii]*, was published in Tajik in 1947 and then in Russian in 1949,¹³ after which he received his doctorate. The book was a great success and was re-edited in Russian in 1952 and 1955. Gafurov held the position of First Secretary until 1956, when de-Stalinization compelled him to leave his office and continue to devote his life to historical works. At that point he was appointed head of the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies, ran the magazine *Aziya i Afrika segodnya*, and, after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, reorganized the Institute to adapt it to the conception of the East as promoted by Nikita Khrushchev. However, he continued to work on Tajik history, initiating with A. A. Semionov (1873–1958) the *History of the Tajik People*, published in three volumes in 1963–1965, and he ultimately joined the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan in 1968.

Gafurov questioned the historical discourse of the 1920s, formulated for Tajikistan by Vassili Barthold in his 1925 *Tajikistan: An Anthology of Articles*

[*Tadzhikistan: sbornik statei*], in which the author likened the Tajiks to Persian culture.¹⁴ Gafurov inverted the comparison by alleging that the Tajiks were at least as ancient as the Persians and that they had been the mouthpiece of Persian culture. He also endeavoured to give historical primacy to the future Soviet territories and refused the proposition that Iran be considered as the only inheritor of the ancient period. He was also the first to venture out of the geographic framework of the republic—which he deemed was too narrow and did not correspond to the reality of settlement—and to reinscribe Tajik history across the entire Central Asian zone, consequently clashing directly with Uzbek historiography which tries to appropriate the same antiquity. Gafurov also insisted on the necessary nationalization of the past: according to him, the historiographic trend of the 1920s, in which authors wrote regional rather than national histories of Central Asia, was quite largely distorted since each people has a specific past that it does not have to share with its neighbours.¹⁵

In his book, which spans a wide period of time from the origins of the Tajiks to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Gafurov aimed to negate the crystallizing role of the Samanid dynasty (875–999), considered too late to symbolize the Tajik ethnogenesis. Gafurov reminds us that the statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*) of the Iran-speaking tribes dates from the first millennium before our era. Ancient Chinese sources, as well as the Avesta, would confirm that the first state in the region was Iranian speaking and was located on the borders, in the eastern outermost bounds of the Iranian world, and therefore within the current territory of Tajikistan. On this account, Gafurov quotes Nikolai Marr several times and asserts that in the first millennium BC, “on the ethno-linguistic level, the population in Central Asia was Japhetic [*yafeticheskii*].”¹⁶ If he supports the notion of the superiority of the Indo-European peoples, he does not, however—like Marr—share the idea of a massive migration of the ancient peoples, a theory supported at that time by many Western researchers. Gafurov thus insists on both the Aryanity and autochthonism of the first Iranians:

Iranian nationalities and tribes have never presented a “pure race”, they were not “pure blood Aryan”, victorious newcomers, as *bourgeois* historians have asserted groundlessly. It is well known that the theory of a “pure blood race” is a reactionary lie, a myth. The Iranian eastern populations did not come to Central Asia out of nowhere but constituted themselves there, on the ground.¹⁷

As a result, cultural supremacy is understood as being proportional to how long a people has been present within its national territory. Thus, “Bactria, Sogdia and Khorezm turn out to be the most ancient centres of the central-Asian peoples and their stateness has been constituted before that of western Iran,”¹⁸ even playing a key role in the Achaemenid empire.¹⁹ In Gafurov’s logic, the ethnogenesis of the Tajiks cannot start with the Samanid dynasty, since, on the contrary, it ends with it: one must talk of the Tajiks and no longer of the Tajiks’ ancestors, for the Samanid rulers brought to completion a “tendency to unification and to the fusion of a series of sedentary Central-Asian peoples into one, the Tajik people.”²⁰ In this Soviet

historiography, the Arab and Mongolian presence in Central Asia is considered to be the product of assaults and invasions, and the cultural contributions of Islam to Tajik national identity are discreetly put aside.

Gafurov continued his research on the most ancient possible Tajik ethnogenesis in his last book, *The Tajiks: Antique, Ancient and Medieval History* [*Tadzhiki. Drevnejshaya, drevnyaya i srednevekovaya istoriya*], published in 1972. If one compares it with the 1949 version, there are two noticeable differences: the complete disappearance of any reference to Marr and the Japhetids, who had fallen into disgrace in the 1950s, as well as the increasing criticisms of the Turkic people, especially the Uzbeks. Indeed, during the 1970s Gafurov was much more willing to make a distinction between Tajiks and the Uzbeks. For instance, in a sub-chapter specifically devoted to the “issue of the ethnogenesis of the Uzbek people” (which is in itself, according to the Soviet scholarly division, a provocation in a book dedicated to the Tajiks), Gafurov asserts in no roundabout way that “the Uzbek people have taken shape on the basis of a sedentary Iranian-speaking population.”²¹ Not only did the Uzbeks arrive there tardily, but they were autochthonous in Central Asia only as a result of their Iranian substratum. Gafurov also proceeded to question Turkicness on the level of cultural contributions: according to him, a person considered in Tashkent as Uzbek, Al-Biruni, spoke khorezmi, that is to say oriental Iranian; the Uzbek literary language would have reached its development only in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries and half its lexicon would remain Arab or Persian in any case; the learned elites would write in Farsi until the arrival of the Russians in the region, etc.

Understandably, the book was received with great indignation in Uzbekistan. As early as the 1930s, Uzbek scientists were insisting that Tajik history be clearly limited to the borders of the federated republic and that it not trample on the borders of the neighbouring entities. In 1972, the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan again complained officially to the Central Committee of the Communist Party that figures considered as Uzbek, such as Al-Khorezmi, Al-Farabi and Al-Biruni, were presented in a book about the Tajiks. Uzbek researchers have criticized the fact that the scientific editor of the book was B. A. Litvinski, a Russian whom they believe should have been more impartial in matters of competition between the Soviet peoples.²² Tashkent, hoping to have these claims validated, even attempted to get Leningrad Orientalists to make critical revisions to the book. Yet despite these actions, Tajik–Uzbek controversies continued unabated. In 1976, Gafurov and Litvinski claimed at a conference that the conclusion of the Tajik ethnogenesis was particularly precocious by comparison with that of the Turkic people’s, which would have been achieved only around the sixteenth century.²³ Each republic thus hopes to establish its autochthonism by denying the autochthonism of its neighbours and by projecting away from itself all sources which show the late arrival of exogenous populations. Contemporary historiography simply stresses the old reference to Aryanism but does not, however, represent a “breaking off” or rupture with the historical discourse of the Soviet period.

The Frantic Quest for an Aryan Identity in Contemporary Tajik Science

For several years now, the Aryan theme has become a well-established object of research within the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. In 2001, the political decision to celebrate 2,700 years of the Avesta²⁴ prompted numerous publications on Zoroastrianism and, indirectly, on Aryanism as well. In these works, often the results of symposiums, Zoroastrianism is monopolized as a Tajik national product and thus represents another point of contention with Iran. The Avesta is considered by the majority of local experts as a reliable historical source, providing information that could explain the ethnogenesis of the Tajik people and “the ancient Aryan society” as well.²⁵ Zoroastrianism is systematically presented as a modern faith: it has transformed the ancient Aryan polytheism into monotheism, helped to sedentarize nomads, has been well-integrated into a developed and urbanized social structure, and so on. In the 1990s some researchers even publicly converted to Zoroastrianism, proclaiming it to be the “national religion” of the Tajiks.²⁶ If this movement, restricted to small, secular, nationalist group of elites who took little interest in the Muslim map, had no real scope, the issue has now moved to scholarly discourse.

Much of the current research in progress aims to demonstrate that the cradle of Zoroastrianism should be looked for in Central Asia, and more specifically in Tajikistan, instead of in Iran or in Afghanistan. This is indeed the argument of several works in archaeology and historical geography devoted to the rivers and the mountains described in the Avesta, which would include those of Tajikistan. Thus, “the new ethnic word ‘Tajik’, used by all Iranians, turns out to be synonymous with the ancient word ‘Aryan.’”²⁷ Several articles published in the *News from the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan* attempt to explain how only the oriental part of the Iranian world, and not its better-known western part, could have engendered such a developed religion: it is from this eastern space that the holy scriptures would have been spread to the South, in India, where they would have been transformed into Vedas.²⁸ The Greek and Egyptian myths would also have been indebted, indirectly, to the Tajik world: as Rakhmonov alleges, “the glory and greatness of the Iliad and the Odyssey grow dim in front of the famous work of our ancestors.”²⁹

Many Tajik researchers are interested in the word “Ariana” and present it as the ancient country of the Aryans, whose historical existence has been proved and whose territory would have corresponded closely to contemporary Tajikistan. As the researcher I. V. P’yankov summarizes it: “In Antiquity, Ariana was the territory that corresponded more or less exactly to the territorial formation, at some later time, at the beginning of the Middle-Ages, of the Tajik people. Ariana as well as the question of the existence and formation of an historical Aryan community are very closely linked to the prehistory of the Tajik people.”³⁰ The books published in Dushanbe over recent years have maintained that, in terms of politics and culture, highly developed proto-Aryan peoples were already in existence several centuries before Christ.³¹ Many texts throw themselves into a literal reading of the Avesta

and declare the historicity of mythical dynasties such as the Pechdovids or the Kaenids. The Tajik world would thus have been born out of the crystallization of a high Aryan civilization in the second millennium before our era. The retroactive constitution of identity links between Aryans and Tajiks permits the local historical science to monopolize the representation of the great empires of Asia Minor, the Achaemenids, the epic of Alexander the Great, and the Selevids.³²

The official historical discourse of Tajikistan is indeed the only such discourse throughout Central Asia to assume a vengeful tone: it competes mainly with the Turkic world and more particularly with the powerful Uzbek neighbour, but also, to a lesser extent, with Iran, deemed too prestigious for a rich ancient heritage, which should be shared with, if not credited in full to, Tajikistan. The president of the republic thus complains that “our historical product becomes often an object of theft.”³³ Khorasan, Bactria and Sogdia were not late provinces of Iran but were, on the contrary, the cradles of Zoroastrianism and of the Aryan peoples. In the autochthonist interplay underway in the region, Tajikistan is keen on presenting itself as the sole possessor of the Indo-European heritage of Central Asia: Iranians turn out to be direct competitors, although they are brothers, in the appropriation of this past against the Turkic people. Turks are understood as foreigners who arrived tardily and should have no right to the symbolic mastery of the ancient past of the region. However, Tajik texts on the question are systematically devoid of any reference to Western research, which, in the twentieth century, questioned the relevance of the Aryan reference and the idea of a primary cradle. This advance in reflections on the Indo-European question remains unknown in Central Asia: local researchers seem to have access only to ancient nineteenth-century texts or to certain contemporary archaeological research taking place in their country. First and foremost they make use of the classics of Soviet historiography devoted to archaeology or to Indo-European linguistics and ignore that fact that the idea of a cultural unity between Indo-European peoples and even of a linguistic unity built on a genealogical principle has been refuted by contemporary Western science.³⁴

The Ethnicist Obsession of Tajik Science: The Development of Racialist Discourses?

The Tajik Aryanism that has been elaborated by researchers and made official by the authorities has also occasionally been accompanied by radical remarks concerning the anthropological specificities—in the Soviet sense of physical anthropology—of Central Asian peoples. In such examples, the Iranian competitor-ally is no longer targeted and Turkic peoples in general are the subjects of all the Tajik resentment. The willingness of an independent Uzbekistan to appropriate the historical past of Tajik territory and retroactively to declare it Uzbek or at least Turkic³⁵ is indeed understood, inside Tajik intellectual circles, as an outrageous usurpation of identity. Thus, the Uzbek authorities’ organization of the year of the Avesta in 2003 under the aegis of

UNESCO was received negatively in Tajikistan and considered a betrayal by the UN. Speaking on this subject, the head of the Institute of history, Rakhim Masov, declared that “one could say, quite frankly, that once more we’re witnessing an organized conspiracy against the history of the Tajik people. A conspiracy whose final aim is, as always, to belittle the great past of the people and the role of our Aryan ancestors in the history of world civilization.”³⁶

The Aryanist obsession of certain Tajik academic circles goes hand in hand with the willingness of an ethnic, if not racial, separation between the Turkic and Indo-European peoples, obviously with the intention of asserting the superiority of the latter. Thus, the Soviet tradition of physical anthropology, developed particularly in the study of the peoples of the region, has now been strengthened by its fusion with the ethnicist discourse. Until the 1970s, research in anthropology attempted to retrace the great phenotypes present in Central Asia and was almost systematically dissociated from historical and ethnological discourses that focused on “the ethnogenesis” of the eponymous peoples. Thus, there were no direct links established between the great original races and the contemporary peoples. On the contrary, the Soviet doctrine on that subject insisted on the common racial origin of the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, while allowing that they each had their own specific “ethnogenesis.” In the last decades of the regime the two discourses have tended, among some local researchers, to merge. The two adjectives “racial” and “ethnic” are now used almost synonymously in Tajik publications, the aim being to dissociate Tajiks completely from the Uzbeks and to revalue the Aryan line of descent and, in its wake, the racial question.

The famous Tajik nationalist historian N. N. Negmatov is interested, for example, in the “racial genesis” (*rasogenez*) of Central Asian peoples. In his work, the author endeavours to remind his audience that the “racial formation” of the Tajiks was finished well before the arrival of the first Turkic people.³⁷ “The racial type of the Tajiks is ancient, local, and has not suffered any fundamental change during the last two millennia, although there was a slight mongoloid crossbreeding on the main europeid type.”³⁸ Here one can see that although most Tajik researchers rely on references to Soviet anthropology, some of them also attempt to appropriate Western research in relation to genetics. Such researchers hope to enhance the prestige of their approach, and to validate it with argumentations coming from the West, often unconsciously considered as undeniable. Thus, according to F. Nasirova, molecular genetics will be able to “help establish the different ages, historical formations, and paths of migration of the various peoples of Central Asia.”³⁹ This, more so than some local authors, gives a completely deterministic interpretation of the progress of genetics by asserting that genes, peoples and languages develop in a parallel fashion. Such an ambiguous approach to genetics then reinforces the deterministic apprehensions of the reference to “the ethnic group”: unquestionable, biological, scientific elements would allow one to define once and for all the place of every ethnic population in world history. The idea here is to demonstrate, no longer historically or linguistically, but genetically, that Europe’s cradle is indeed in Tajikistan,

which has already been “proven to be the proto-motherland not only of indo-European languages but the cradle of the world civilization.”⁴⁰

These discourses are often reinforced by Rakhim Masov, as he himself is very much involved in the racialization of the national discourse on Tajik identity and has been particularly virulent towards Uzbekistan. Despite the fact that his books have been criticized by certain Tajik historians, owing to his institutional status and his close ties to the presidential apparatus, Masov is still considered to be representative of a certain kind of official resentment towards the Uzbeks. He has in fact placed himself in charge of the historical criticism concerning the 1924–1929 border division deemed to be so detrimental to Tajikistan. His work thus sanctions the spreading, at a narrative level, of non-acceptance of the current borders by Tajik authorities and many of the elite. The historian regularly speaks of the “racial-ethnic [*rasovyi-etnicheskii*] substratum” of the peoples and condemns any crossbreeding or cultural assimilation between Tajiks and Turkic peoples. “Tajiks, who represent the western part of the huge Aryan area, have taken upon themselves the difficult but soothing role of bringing enlightenment to the Turkic-Mongol nomads.”⁴¹ On the other hand, he shows himself to be very pleased about the intricate links between Tajikistan and Russia, links that have continued in spite of the disagreements of the Soviet period, and explains this long-lasting friendship by noting the racial and linguistic proximity between the two peoples, both of which he implies are Aryans.⁴²

His first goal remains the denial of any Turkic culture and, by extension, any link between the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. Therefore, he refuses the theory of the Soviet period that both peoples share a common racial background. For him, “there cannot be any common roots, any ethnic community between peoples originating from entirely contrary races.”⁴³ He also insists on the Tajik origin of many Uzbek key figures, especially national communists who in the 1920s accepted the proposal to deprive Tajikistan of Samarkand and Bukhara: they were “ethnogenetically Tajiks”⁴⁴ and must be considered traitors to the motherland. According to him, the whole history of the country since the coming of the Turkic peoples to the zone from the first millennium AD until the rebirth of the state in 1991 was a history of submission, of humiliation, and of the genocide of the Tajiks by the culturally inferior Uzbeks. “The period of the formation of the Uzbeks as an autonomous ethnos dates, in historical terms, from yesterday. In such a short historical period, it is impossible to create important cultural values like those created by the Tajiks over millennia.”⁴⁵ One can thus see how such a revengeful historiography combines all the possible argumentations in order to assert its autonomy, and, following its own principles, its superiority: the contempt of the sedentary people towards the nomads would be justified by elements of racial and/or ethnic superiority thus attributing to Turkic people a fundamentally negative “essence” which rendered them incapable of progress. The old stereotypes of nineteenth-century Western sciences regarding the Orient are thus re-appropriated in the competitive relations between the peoples of the Central Asian region.

The Presidential Decree of 2006 “The Year of the Aryan Civilization”

The officialization of the Aryanist reference in Tajikistan suddenly gained momentum in September 2003 when Rakhmonov ordered that the 15th year of independence would be the “year of the Aryan civilization.” In the presidential decree it was declared that the aim of this jubilee would be “to study and make known the contribution and the role of the Aryans in the history of world civilization, to educate generations in the spirit of national consciousness and self-determination, to develop connections between peoples and cultures.”⁴⁶ Since this official anniversary would be managed at the level of state structures—the person in charge of the Organization Committee would be none other than the prime minister—one cannot but notice that it corresponds to a strong tendency in contemporary Tajik historiography.

The organization of this jubilee aroused some unrest in intellectual circles. It was initially accompanied by new publications validating the presidential choice of identity, and an international conference dedicated to Aryan culture and managed by the Institute of History was organized in October 2006. Yet early in 2006 several observers noticed the growing number of propagandistic public notice boards, ornamented with swastikas, announcing the jubilee. The presence of the swastika seems to have given rise to some debate, since Abdukhakim Sharipov, head of the Ideological section of the administration for the Sogd region, resigned himself to admitting that the population did not really understand this symbol: he regretted that members of the World War II veteran associations who had fought Nazism in Europe had made a false analysis of the swastika and did not understand that it only represents, according to him, the “eternal movement of the sun.”⁴⁷

In all the Russian-language Tajik scholarly books concerning the Aryan question, the absence of references to the German Aryan myth, even negative ones, remains striking. It was indeed only after the official proclamation of the jubilee, and the international reactions to it, that one began to see the emergence of awareness from the Tajik academic community regarding the comparison raised by the Aryan argumentation. The first to defend the presidential decree was the historian N. N. Negmatov. In an article published in the Russian-speaking national newspaper *Narodnaya gazeta*, he mentioned Hitler and German “fascism,” accusing them of “brazenly offending the good name of Ariana and the ancient, agricultural and talented people that the Aryans were.” Despite being conscious of the tendentious nature of the Aryan reference in the West, Negmatov defended the president’s choice of officially linking Tajik identity with Aryanism: “Why deprive people of the possibility to specify their objective historical origin? Were our Aryan ancestors guilty? . . . Do we have the right to reject our ethno-cultural heritage? . . . The Tajik people are the direct historical descendants of the proto-homeland Ariana.”⁴⁸

This line of argument was taken up afterwards by Masov, who sought to dismiss what he considered to be a misunderstanding. To him, it was necessary to rehabilitate the Aryan culture and symbols and to give them back their genuine meaning for “this

[Aryan] idea has a humanist, cultural nature, it is an attempt to rehabilitate the historical reality."⁴⁹ The same applied to the president of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Mamadcho Ilolov, who regretted that "the theme of the Aryans was terribly perverted in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century,"⁵⁰ condemning the Nazi mystification of the subject. Today, the Aryan symbol had to be, according to him, linked to democracy, peace and well-being. One therefore needed to rehabilitate it in the eyes of the international community and to free it from its political presuppositions: "We reject the development of the hatred of man on behalf of the restoration of our ancestors' very rich heritage."⁵¹

This Aryan heritage, claimed over many years and suddenly brought to light by the 2006 jubilee, has led to several controversies with Tajikistan's Uzbek neighbour, which is also in search of an ancient presence within its national territory. As early as September 2003, the Aryanist movement had been denounced by the Uzbek historian A. Gershenson as totally incoherent from a historical and linguistic perspective, without even presupposing its political relevance.⁵² The subject, far from being neutral, constitutes an old source of controversy between Tajik and Uzbek researchers. In 2001, the publication of a much-disputed book by L. Levitin, a Russian politist and former advisor to an Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, had already inflamed relations between the two countries. Tajik elites judged that they had been mistreated and openly scorned in his book *Critical Remarks from a Partisan of President Islam Karimov* [*Kriticheskie zametki storonnika Prezidenta Islama Karimova*]. Thus Masov responded with a small book of his own entitled *Critical Remarks to Order* [*Kriticheskie zametki po zakazu*]. In 2004, another book, published in Moscow and Tashkent by G. Khidoyatov, *The Fall of the Samanids* [*Krushenie samanidov*], was again perceived as a direct attack against the independence of Tajikistan, and as a belittlement of the political and cultural role of the Samanid dynasty.

In 2005, when preparations for the Aryan jubilee were announced, one of the principal Uzbek archaeologists, A. Askarov, who has worked for some time now to assert the presence of the Uzbek people on its national soil and who purports to be one of the leaders of the new ideologization of archaeological science, published an article on the Aryan question entitled "The Aryan Issue: New Approaches and New Thoughts."⁵³ In this article, Askarov invalidates Tajik claims to an Aryan line of descent, denounces the "pan-Iranianism" of Western and Soviet science, and tries to appropriate the prestigious Aryan heritage for the Uzbek people. He also attempts to demonstrate that Aryans should be differentiated from Indo-Europeans, with whom they have been mixed up for too long. He argues that the Aryans were Turkic-speaking peoples living a nomadic life in the Eurasian territories, from the Siberian steppes of the south to the Danube: their cradle was not the Altai but ancient Bactria and Sogdia. His article therefore lists the arguments in favour of an analysis of the culture of Andronov as Turkic, insists on presenting shamanism as a version of Zoroastrianism, and also asserts that the Achaemenid dynasty would have been of Turkic origin and Iranianized only later.

This text sparked virulent controversy between Uzbek and Tajik researchers, a controversy which was expressed on the *CentrAsia* Web site. As often happens in Central Asia, where scholarly debate is limited because of difficult material and political circumstances (especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), it is through the Internet that academic discussion attempts to endure. Over the first semester of 2006, a dozen articles were published on the Web. Masov was, of course, the first to answer Askarov's offensive. According to him, the sole aim of Askarov's article is to credit the legacy of the first inhabitants of Central Asia to an independent Uzbekistan and is therefore a matter of political and not scholarly discourse.⁵⁴ Another Uzbek researcher, A. Akhmedov, who works at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, defended Askarov and denounced "the creative intelligentsia of Tajikistan [that] has been living for a long time, at least since Gafurov's *The Tajiks* published in 1972, in a chauvinistic and national spirit," even referring to the Nazi Aryanist tradition and accusing Masov of advocating Nietzschean principles.⁵⁵ Masov replied several times to Askarov and criticized the lack of scientific evidence presented by him in favour of the Aryanity of the Turkic peoples.⁵⁶

As Masov continues to take part in the controversy by denouncing the "falsification" of history carried out by Uzbek scientists, Tajik academic circles, through A. Gafurov, have supported him in these accusations.⁵⁷ The head of the Dushanbe Institute of History cannot avoid racial references in which he reads a revealing feature of "the essence" of peoples. Masov confines himself to assert the impossibility of the Uzbeks being Aryans on the ground of somatic features: "they are in no way similar by their physical appearance and their racial origin: . . . the Aryan had blond hair, blue eyes, were tall, while the Turks have large faces, small eyes, squashed noses, little beards and a mongoloid physical appearance."⁵⁸ Despite the so-called "humanism" of the Aryan idea, it is in fact a phenotypical line of argument that reappears in the clashes between Tajik and Uzbek discourses. In the autumn of 2006, during the 15th anniversary of independence, the Institute of History published all the texts written by Rakhim Masov during his controversy with Uzbek scholars⁵⁹ and devoted a special issue of the journal *Nasledie predkov* to the Aryan question. The introduction, written by Masov, defended the Tajik point of view and attacked the criticisms coming both from Uzbekistan and Western countries.⁶⁰

Between the accusation of "pan-Turkism" on one side and of "pan-Iranianism" on the other, the debate between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remains limited to ritualized discriminating injunctions, without any hindsight regarding the very notion of Aryanity or the identity anachronism of the debate. Yet the ideological background of the Aryan reference remains present. Thus, the 2006 jubilee has held the attention of Russian nationalistic circles, who have not underestimated the significance of the gesture and the various ways in which it can be utilized racially. Thus, in *Zavtra*, the main nationalist newspaper, an article by Marina Strukova, published on 29 December 2004 and entitled "The Light Comes from the East," praised the choice of the Tajik president. The author congratulated E. Rakhmonov on what she

considered an “awakening of the national and racial consciousness,” called on Russia to follow this example, exalted Russian Aryanity against the other peoples of the Russian Federation, and concluded the article with the politically charged refrain: “Aryans of all countries, unite!”⁶¹

Conclusion

As in the other republics of Central Asia, the official ideology of Tajikistan is centred on national facts rather than economic or political goals. History, archaeology and ethnology are thus made much use of in this essentialization of the nation. Numerous local researchers regard this investment as necessary and completely in keeping with the Soviet tradition of intellectual circles taking part in the elaboration of official ideology. Furthermore, memories of the civil war confirm for intellectual elites the idea that the Tajik nation is not “complete” and must be “consolidated” around the state and the figure of the president. The focus of so many works on the Aryan theme, then, illustrates the conjunction between scholarly research on the national past and the call from the authorities for an ideology of the nation. As such, the Aryan myth has become the main issue by which Tajikistan, a small country lacking natural riches and manhandled by the carving up of the old Soviet Union, has disassociated itself from its neighbouring states in Central Asia. It is through the implementation of the Aryan myth that the presidential and intellectual apparatuses of Tajikistan have been able to insist on the autochthonous nature of its people. Likewise, the Aryan legacy offers Tajikistan the opportunity to reference itself to Europe, since an intrinsic link would connect European descendants to their original Asian cradle. Tajiks would thus be more “European,” through their origin and linguistic features, than the other peoples of Central Asia.

Can the Aryan myth actually be considered as a federating element of national identity? Does it not run the risk of causing internal tensions? The important Uzbek minority (about 1 million people, i.e. 15% of the population) in the country cannot recognize itself in this myth and feels marginalized within an identity construct which puts it at an awkward disadvantage against the official discourse and which makes it hostage to difficult relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Tajik presidential apparatus seems to think that Aryan identity is an efficient rhetorical means of erasing the problem of religious diversity in the country, divided between a Sunni majority and an Ismaelian minority presence in the Pamir. Many local observers also mention the president’s willingness, prior to the presidential elections of 6 November 2006, to send positive signals to the regional groups of the south and the east of the country; those who spearheaded the opposition during the civil war, and who supposedly could support the Aryan reference. He had done the same in 1997–1999 by establishing the Zoroastrian reference as the main element of opposition to the Islamist political and national project.

In any case, Aryanism is quite clearly understood as an alternative to Islam and in this way the authorities hope to weaken the social weight of Islamist movements. Mukhiddin Kabiri, vice-president of the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan, considers the idea that a more thorough knowledge of the pre-Islamic past is not in itself contrary to Islam. However, since the initiative comes from the political authorities, he reminds us that it will be understood as an eminently political gesture towards the opposition and not as an academic object.⁶² As a result, the insistent reminders of authorities regarding Zoroastrianism plays the same role as Tengrism in Kyrgystan: the role of an intellectualized neo-paganism for Post-Soviet elites, who are in search of a spirituality without transcendence, conceive religion above all as an element of national assertion, and are afraid of the possible social and identity significations of Islam.⁶³

Thus the Tajik partisans of Aryanism try to root the country in a strongly laicized and secularized form of nationalism, which would permit marginalization of the Islamists' identity project and would be satisfied with the current borders. The ultimate aim remains the reunification of a divided nation in which the aftermath of civil war can still be felt. The discourse on Aryan identity therefore represented a roundabout, retro-active way of interiorizing the 1924–1929 border delimitations, considered by many Tajiks, including Rakhim Masov, as the cause of the weak national unity of the country that led it to civil war. As a consequence, what matters most is that everyone finds some reward in the praise of a consensual past: the discreet marginalization of Islam, of the Iranian-speaking world and of a common literature with Iran is considered necessary for the strengthening of a national identity which from now on will focus on a heritage that is considered to be specific to the country: the heritage of Aryanism.

Nevertheless, the complete ignorance of the ideological basis of the Nazi regime—typical of Soviet discourses on World War II and its school teachings—explains the difficulty of communication between international representatives, in particular UNESCO, and the Tajik authorities concerning the organization of the “year of the Aryan civilization” in 2006. Indeed, the Tajik authorities do not have the intellectual tools to understand the negative reception of their initiative in the international community and try to avoid thinking over the ideological principles of it. Yet, despite their discourse regarding the so-called “humanism” of the Aryan reference, it seems as though this officialization cannot be developed without bringing in its wake numerous racial referents, targeted mainly against the Uzbeks. Thus, the Tajik Aryan myth quite unwillingly confirms the fast ethnicization of discourses on identity throughout Central Asia, and its possible destabilizing effects on weak states that have fundamentally bad bilateral relations.

NOTES

1. On this question of autochthony, see Suny, *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*; and Shnirelman, *Who Gets the Past?*

2. Dudoignon, “Le Tadjikistan existe-t-il?”; Djalili, *Le Tadjikistan à l'épreuve de la guerre civile*.
3. Laruelle and Peyrouse, *Asie centrale, la dérive autoritaire*.
4. “Predmet issledovanii—etnogenez,” *Vechernyi Dushanbe*, 9 February 1989, 3.
5. Shozimov, *Tadzhikskaya identichnost' i gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo v Tadzhikistane*.
6. Dudoignon, “Changements politiques et historiographiques en Asie centrale (Tadjikistan et Ouzbékistan, 1987–1993),” 85–135.
7. Masov, *Merosi niëgon—Nasledie predkov*, 2.
8. Rakhmonov, “Tysyacha let v odnu zhizn',” *Narodnaya gazeta*, 23 September 1999, 2.
9. Rakhmonov, Opening speech at the conference for 1,100 years of the Samanid state, *Narodnaya gazeta*, 13 May 1999, 1.
10. Rakhmonov, “Tadzhikskaya gosudarstvennost': ot samadinov do rubezha XXI veka,” *Narodnaya gazeta*, 10 September 1999, 1.
11. Rakhmonov, *Zoroastrizm i ego znachenie v razvitii tsivilizatsii narodov Blizhnego i Srednego Vostoka*, 28.
12. Laruelle, *Mythe aryen et rêve impérial dans la Russie du XIX^e siècle*.
13. According to the commentaries of those who were able to compare the Russian and Tajik editions, it seems that the text is different in the two versions, but nobody has drawn up a list of the differences between both texts.
14. See B. G. Gafurov: *dialog kul'tur i tsivilizatsii*.
15. See Mukhtarov and Sharipov, *Akademik Bobodzhan Gafurov*.
16. Gafurov, *Istoriya tadzhikskogo naroda v kratkom izlozhenii*, 23.
17. *Ibid.*, 26.
18. *Ibid.*, 50.
19. Tolstov et al., *Istoriya uzbekskoi SSR*, VI.
20. *Ibid.*, 173.
21. Gafurov, *Tadzhiki*, 294.
22. See Ashurov, “Ideinaya bor'ba vokrug knigi Akademika B. G. Gafurova *Tadzhiki*,” 72–78.
23. See Gafurov and Litvinskii, *Uzlovye problemy etnogeneza i etnicheskoi istorii narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana (teoreticheskii aspekt)*, 7.
24. The Avesta is a collection of the sacred texts of the Zoroastrian religion (Mazdeism). Although some of the texts are very old, the term “Avesta” itself only dates to the second century CE. The most important portion is the hymns thought to have been composed by Zarathustra himself around 1,000 BCE.
25. *Avesta i mirovaya tsivilizatsiya*, 153.
26. This information was provided by Nargiz Khodzhaeva, junior scholar at the Institute of History, and confirmed by Rakhim Masov, Dushanbe, June 2004.
27. *Vklad iranskikh narodov v razvitie mirovoi tsivilizatsii. Istoriya i sovremennost'*, 15.
28. Mumidzhanov, “Avesta ob etnogeneze tadzhikov,” 89–97.
29. Rakhmonov, *Tadzhiki v zerkale istorii*, 152.
30. P'yankov, “Ariana po svidetel'stvam antichnykh avtorov,” 39.
31. *Drevnyaya tsivilizatsiya i ee rol' v slozhenii i razvitii kul'tury Tsentral'noj Azii epokhi samanidov*.
32. Negmatov, *Tadzhiki*, 16.
33. *Ibid.*, 129.
34. Renfrew, *L'énigme indo-européenne*.
35. Laruelle, “Continuité des élites intellectuelles, continuité des problématiques identitaires,” 45–76.
36. Masov, “Turan—eto ne Turkestan,” 21.

37. Negmatov, *Tadzhikskii fenomen*, 97–104.
38. Negmatov, *Gosudarstvo samanidov (Mavaramakhr i Khorasan v IX–X vv.)*, p. 231.
39. Nasirova, “Chtrikhi k prarodine ariev (gorizonty molekulyarnoi genetiki cheloveka),” 187.
40. *Ibid.*, 199.
41. *Nasledie predkov*, no. 4 (1999), 7–8.
42. R. Masov, “Rol’ Rossii v istoricheskikh sud’bakh tadzhikskogo naroda i ego nacional’no-gosudarstvennoi stroitel’stve,” *Nasledie predkov*, no. 5 (2001), 4.
43. Masov, *Tadzhiki*, 20.
44. *Ibid.*, 87.
45. *Ibid.*, 29.
46. E. P. Rakhmonov, “O gode ariiskoi tsivilizatsii,” *Narodnaya gazeta*, 12 September 2003, 1.
47. Available from <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2005/12/09/rahmonov/>; INTERNET (accessed March 2006).
48. N. N. Negmatov, “Istoki etnogeneza i kul’turogeneza ariev ariany,” *Narodnaya gazeta*, 24 March 2004, 4.
49. V. Volkov, N. Bukhari-zade, and Yu. Chernogaev, “Storony ‘ariiskoi’ medali,” *Nemetskaya volna*, 8 January 2005, available from <http://www.materik.ru/print.php?section=analitics&bulsectionid=13049>; INTERNET.
50. M. Ilolov, “Nasledie nashikh predkov. 2006-oi—God ariiskoi tsivilizatsii,” *CentrAsia*, 26 June 2005.
51. *Ibid.*
52. A. Gershenzon, “Ariiskaya mifologiya i Tsentral’naya Aziya,” *CentrAsia*, 17 and 20 September 2003.
53. Askarov, “Ariiskaya problema,” 81–91.
54. R. Masov, “Tyurkizatsiya ariitsev: chush’ ili nedomyslie? Otvet na statiyu A. Askarova *Ariiskaya problema: novye podkhody i vzglyady*,” *CentrAsia*, 6 January 2006.
55. A. Akhmedov, “Vozvrachshayas’ k istorii ‘ariitsev’ (k polemike mezhdru R. Masovym i A. Askarovym),” *CentrAsia*, 20 January 2006. See also another article opposed to the Tajik point of view: R. Arslonzoda, “Istina rozhdetsya v spore,” *CentrAsia*, 2 February 2006.
56. A. Akhmedov, “Echshe raz ob ariiskoi probleme,” *CentrAsia*, 23 March 2006.
57. A. Gafurov, “Kto zhe obostryaet situatsiyu? K voprosu o diskussii istorikov Tadzhikistana i Uzbekistana,” *CentrAsia*, 8 February 2006.
58. R. Masov, “Fal’sifitsirovat’ i prisvaivat’ chuzhuyu natsitoriyu nel’zya (otvet pantukistam),” *CentrAsia*, 9 March 2006.
59. R. Masov, *Arii: istoriya i sovremennost.*
60. *Nasledie predkov*, no. 9, September 2006.
61. M. Strukova, “Svet s Vostoka,” *Zavtra*, 24 December 2004, available from <http://zavtra.ru/cgi//veil//data/zavtra/04/580/51.html>; INTERNET (accessed March 2006).
62. V. Volkov, N. Bukhari-zade, and Yu. Chernogaev, “Storony ‘ariiskoi’ medali,” *Nemetskaya volna*, 8 January 2005.
63. Tengrism is an intellectual and religious craze in Turkic nationalist circles which consists in presenting Islam as a faith alien to these populations and in rehabilitating the ancient animist cult of the god Tengri by presenting it as a monotheism ahead of its time that would offer a cosmogony that is perfectly adapted to the contemporary world. Cf. Laruelle, “Tengrism.”

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