

## **Islamic Culture and the Uyghurs**

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Religion is one of the earliest states of consciousness known to human society and a common historical and cultural phenomenon. It constitutes not only a special state of awareness but also a social force, exerting a deep influence on processes of history and on day-to-day living. Since its birth, every country and every nationality has at one time or another believed in some form of religion. For this reason, it is almost impossible to separate the development of human society from religious belief.

The influence exerted by religion on society and culture is far-reaching, and we have accordingly come to think of religion as 'culture.' In a broad sense, we can see religion as a component part of culture; in a narrow sense, we may consider it a cultural form in its own right. This particular form of culture is comprehensive and multi-faceted. Through religion, we can learn about the past of an ethnic group; we can discover developments and transformations in its history, culture, customs and habits, spoken language, and written script. Religion can greatly affect the cultural development and historical fate of an ethnic group. Islam is no exception; under particular conditions, it has spurred on the development and increased the prosperity of the Arab peoples. In this way, we have come to think of Arab culture as synonymous with Islamic culture.

Islamic culture, with the Islamic religion at its core, may be seen as a new entity born of the evolution of a religious system. In the process of its own development, Islamic culture has merged with the traditional cultures of the past, giving way to a new form, rich in new content. This synthesis of Islamic culture and traditional cultural forms is the very embodiment of cultural continuity and change. The merging of traditional and new cultures forms the basis of, and precondition for, cultural development. Moreover, it controls the direction in which the new form evolves. Islamic culture is founded on the Islamic religion; at the same time, it has both inherited and enhanced the refined cultural heritage of the Arab peoples, creating a cultural system characterised by magnanimity and flexibility.

If we focus on these characteristics of the Islamic culture, we can see that it possesses a high level of adaptability and vivacity. Furthermore, in examining processes of historical change, it becomes clear that those places, regions, and peoples touched by Islam have all been able to fuse Islamic cultural elements with their own ethnic and regional cultures, in an almost organic process; the result is the formation of a 'fused' culture, which displays at the same time Islamic cultural elements and the group's original cultural features. Such processes may be described as the mutual impact or complementarisation of two cultures.

At the end of the tenth century, Islam spread into Xinjiang in the northwest regions of China. King Sudan Satuk Bughrahan of the Karahan Kingdom was the first to convert, declaring Islam a legitimate religion and coercing the inhabitants of the region to

become Muslims.<sup>1</sup> This indicated the adoption of Islam as the 'state religion.' From this time on, Islam began to exert a powerful influence on the everyday practices, literature, philosophy, history, language, arts, and architecture of the Uyghur people. As it did so, the enthusiasm and devoutness of the Uyghurs toward the Islamic religion began, to a large degree, to dilute collective memory of their former cultural heritage.

Following conversion to Islam, the Uyghurs endeavoured to continuously enhance their study and knowledge of the Qur'an and of the teachings of the Prophet. In order to fully master and apply each element of the doctrine and religious canon, more and more people rushed to study the Arabic language and culture. One consequence of this process was that a considerable number of Arabic and Persian words entered the Uyghur language. In other words, as the people studied Arabic, their own language underwent a huge transformation. The pre-existing script was gradually abandoned, and, in its place, Uyghurs began to use the Arabic script to transliterate the Uyghur language. In using this new script, they simultaneously absorbed what has been heralded as one of the world's most exquisite forms of calligraphic art: Arab calligraphy. Arab calligraphic art, like other forms of art, has in the course of its development brought humanity a sense of aesthetic appreciation as well as spiritual substance. Now, the Uyghurs inherited and improved this excellent tradition, adding new colours and hues to its grace and vigour.

Secondly, conversion to Islam affected the way in which Uyghurs conducted funeral rituals. When it comes to burial, each ethnic group conducts funeral rites according to its own specific customs and habits. This is a question of custom and, as such, falls within the scope of the discipline of folklore. However, customs pertaining to funeral rites are also closely connected with everyday practices and religious beliefs.

Before Uyghurs converted to Islam, they followed a particular pattern when performing funeral rites. They would dress the departed in burial clothes and leather products and place them in a casket; they then laid some food items and everyday articles in the casket to be buried alongside. Following conversion, however, funeral customs changed dramatically. When a person passed away, the corpse would first have to be washed and dressed in white burial clothes; it would then be carried to the mosque, where funeral rites would be conducted. Then, upon reaching the place of burial, it would be interred within a tomb, the entrance to which was sealed. Finally, prayers were said and the ritual was complete. This change reflects the influence of the Islamic religion on Uyghur funeral customs.

Thirdly, traditional Uyghur architecture also underwent some changes. Uyghur architectural design has a very long history. Influenced by society, the natural environment, and everyday practices, it developed over the ages its own unique style. Out of the nature worship of the original Uyghurs came symbolic depictions of mountain peaks expressed in arched lines, and of the light of the sun portrayed through circular geometric patterns. After the Uyghurs embraced Islam, however, the religion assumed a dominant position in Uyghur homes, which began to display the characteristics of Islamic and Arab architecture. This quickly became the prominent feature in Uyghur building style. One finds for instance that decorative wall art

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<sup>1</sup> The 3rd king of the Karahan dynasty. He died in 995 A.D.

constitutes a component part of Uyghur architectural style, its content rich and colourful, its forms varied. Amid the unique patterns of its composition and craftsmanship, the special decorative touches stand out as quintessentially Islamic, bringing new vitality to the original Uyghur architectural and decorative arts.

Islam has long flourished in the Arab world, influencing political systems, the economy, religious and cultural practices, the family and society. The fundamental source of the Islamic religion, meanwhile, is the Qur'an. For Muslim believers, it provides a guide to living and a system of norms governing ethics and behaviour. Its content is rich, covering religious faith; the Islamic doctrine and canon; the birth of reason, morality and society; and everyday life. It appeals to the people to follow Allah, and to take the path of truth and light. The Qur'an highlights equality between men, whether rich or poor, intelligent or dull, and regardless of race; all are equal before Allah. It is precisely because the Uyghur people deeply acknowledge the Qur'an as the scriptures of God, and Muhammad as his messenger, that this guide to living has in turn impacted on every aspect of Uyghur life, including name-giving practices.

Primitive man's knowledge of natural forces and natural matter was incomplete, and his means of production un-advanced. In his battle to conquer Nature, he came up against many difficulties, and so the mystery of the natural world thus came to exert a deep influence on humanity. Among the Uyghurs, this stimulated a wave of imagination and gave rise to a plethora of given names with new meanings. To give some examples: kün (sun); ay (moon); yultuz (Chinese transliteration: youlitusi, star); kök (translit: kuke, sky); dängiz (translit: di'ezi, sea), and so on.

Before the Uyghurs switched to Islam, they used the Uyghur language in its pure form when choosing given names. The vocabulary they chose tended to closely reflect everyday Uyghur customs, means of production, practices of totemism, and natural phenomena as Uyghurs experienced them. Thus, we see that Uyghurs selected names of animals prominent in Uyghur traditions, such as yolwas (Chinese transliteration: youliwusi, tiger); arslan (translit: a'ersilan, lion); bōrä (translit: buwula, wolf); boka (translit: baoka, bull), etc.

Following conversion to Islam, Uyghur ways of thinking, the way of life, social customs and so on were completely transformed. The new religion exerted differing levels of influence on different aspects of Uyghur life. In order to strengthen devotion, love and esteem toward Allah and the Prophet, and to better grasp and apply the doctrine and canon of Islam, the people intensified their study of the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings. From here they drew inspiration, so that Uyghur ideology, consciousness, social practices, and everyday customs were further developed and raised to an advanced level. One area where the change was most visible was in the practice of name-giving. It became common for Uyghurs to draw given names largely from the pages of the Qur'an, for instance, laudatory titles of Allah, titles of prophets, and other items of vocabulary steeped in Islamic characteristics:

1. The Qur'an mentions 99 laudatory titles for Allah. These are frequently selected by Uyghur parents when choosing given names for their children. To give some examples: bari (Chinese transliteration: bali); rahman (translit: reheman); rahim

(translit: reyimu); halik (translit: halike); razak (translit: rezake); ghupur (translit: wupu'er), and so on.

2. To express piety, respect and love toward Allah, it is common to add the suffix – allah on to certain Arabic words, to create a given name. This particular practice indicates a deeper level of Islamisation. For instance: amirullah (Chinese transliteration: amirula, executor of Allah's command); nurullah (light of Allah); hayrullah (translit: hairula, bountiful Allah); rawaydullah (translit: rewaidoula, Allah, guide to the straight path); nasrullah (translit: nasirula, Allah's support); habibullah (translit: aibibula, friend of Allah); patihullah (translit: patihula, Allah's support); ziyawullah (translit: ziyawula, light of Allah), etc.

3. The Qur'an contains 55 titles for the prophet Muhammad. Uyghur parents often pick these titles as names for their children in order to show respect to the Prophet. Such names include: muhammad (Chinese transliteration: muhaimaiti, the praised one); ahmad (translit: ahemaiti, the favoured and praised one); sadik (translit: shadike, the loyal one); mustafa (translit: musitafa, the chaste, pure one); raxid (translit: rexiti, guide to the straight path); muti'e (translit: mutiyi, the obedient one); nasir (translit: nasi'er, the victorious one; the supportive one); nabi (translit: nabi, prophet), and so forth.

4. In addition to calling children by the Prophet's name itself - muhammad - Uyghurs also regularly use the name muhammad as a prefix or suffix to other words, thus creating a new name. Examples of this type might be: muhammad ali (Chinese transliteration: muhemaiti aili, the praised one; the superior one); muhammad imin (translit: muhemaiti yiming, the praised one; the loyal one); yarmuhammad (translit: ya'ermuhaimaiti, composed partly of the name muhammad and partly of a word meaning 'the praised one'); nurmuhammad (translit: nu'ermuhaimaiti, light of Muhammad); muhammadniyaz (translit: muhaimaitiniyazi, entreating Muhammad); muhammattursun (translit: muhaimaititu'ersun, Muhammad in my heart); muhammatreyim (translit: muhaimaitireyimu, the praised one; the merciful), etc.

5. The Qur'an makes mention of 25 prophets. Some of these are prophets also found in the Christian or Judaic religions. In the Qur'an, they are all considered equal, and are acknowledged and accepted by Muslims all over the world. Not surprisingly, it is fairly common for Uyghurs to use the names of these prophets when choosing children's names. Examples would include: aysa (Chinese transliteration: aisha); musa (translit: musha); israyil (translit: yisireyili); and dawut (translit: dawuti).

6. To express faith and devoutness toward the Islamic religion, some add the suffix - din (religion) to certain Arabic words in order to form new given names. This gives a stronger religious flavour to the child's name. For instance: arxidid (Chinese transliteration: ai'eroxiding, throne of religion); qawsidin (translit: aiwusiding, protector of religion); jamaldin (translit: jiamaliding, the beauty of religion); ansardin (translit: ansai'ering, supporter of religion); and qiyasidin (translit: aiyasiding, supporter of religion).

7. To demonstrate their feelings of devotion and respect toward Islam, the Uyghur people often borrow the titles of certain chapters and sections, or other vocabulary, from the Qur'an when selecting children's names. Consider, for instance: samat

(Chinese transliteration: saimaiti, eternal); wali (translit: waili, cherish/care for; friend); akbar (translit: aikebai'er, immense); ahat (translit: aihaiti, unparalleled); yasin (translit: yasen, humanity; also, Chapter 36 of the Qur'an: Quintessence); and rahmutulla (translit: rehemutula, Allah's benevolence).

In conclusion, Islamic culture has had a deep effect on the Uyghur ethnic group. We know that people always have fine intentions when naming their children. This may perhaps be characterised as a search - and thirst - for truth, virtue, and beauty. This essence of religion, together with all its positive elements, should be harnessed so that it may contribute both to the development of Chinese culture as a whole and to the unity of China's nationalities.