



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

# IJDR

*International Journal of Development Research*

Vol. 15, Issue, 11, pp.69547-69549, November, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.30265.11.2025>



REVIEW ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF UZBEK ETHNOCULTURAL IDENTITY: AN ETHNOSYMBOLIST PERSPECTIVE

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2025

Received in revised form

20<sup>th</sup> September, 2025

Accepted 09<sup>th</sup> October, 2025

Published online 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2025

#### KeyWords:

Uzbek Ethnocultural Identity, Ethnosymbolism, elat, Irrigated Agriculture, Nomadic Pastoralism, Turkic Language, Islam, Central Asia, Sarts, Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks, Mawarannahr Turks, Irrigation System, Mahalla Tradition, SUFISM, sub-Ethnic Integration.

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical and cultural foundations of Uzbek ethnocultural identity, emphasizing its ethnic diversity and the predominance of irrigated agriculture traditions among Central Asian Turkic peoples. Using an ethnosymbolist framework, the research outlines the formation of Uzbek identity during the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, highlighting the consolidation of the Turkic language, the development of irrigation-based agriculture, urbanization processes, and the deep integration of Islamic norms into society. The analysis demonstrates differences between sedentary populations in irrigated areas (Sarts) and nomadic elements (Mawarannahr Turkic peoples and Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks), explaining their eventual unification by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through processes of assimilation, syncretism, and sub-ethnic integration. The concept of "elat" is operationalized as a pre-national territorial-linguistic-economic-cultural unit, enriched by nomadic cultural elements within the Turkic-Islamic synthesis but not entirely replaced by them. The study emphasizes the role of symbolic memory, mythic narratives, and collective consciousness in shaping identity through an ethnosymbolist lens.

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Citation: Ismoiljon Khujakhonov. 2025. "Historical and cultural foundations of Uzbek ethnocultural identity: an ethnosymbolist perspective." *International Journal of Development Research*, 15, (11), 69547-69549.

## INTRODUCTION

The Uzbek nation is ethnically highly heterogeneous, and analyzing it solely through genetic or tribal kinship proves insufficient. Hence, an ethnocultural approach - analyzing historical, linguistic, economic, and religious factors in combination - holds greater scholarly value. Uzbek ethnogenesis is closely linked with the broader ethnic processes of Central Asia, yet it exhibits a distinctive dialectic between agriculture and nomadism. While many other Turkic peoples based their identity on nomadism, traditional Uzbek identity primarily rests on sedentary practices. This specificity was reinforced over centuries through irrigated agriculture, urbanization, craftsmanship, and Islamic norms, forming the core marker of Uzbek ethnocultural distinctiveness. Sedentarism shaped not only economic life but also the mahalla system, territorial identity, and collective memory. This study does not aim to cover all aspects of ethnogenesis or ethnic history but focuses on ethnocultural characteristics in the process of identity formation. Ethnosymbolism - a theory explaining the emergence of nations from early ethnic grounds through ideology, symbols, and spiritual unity - serves as the primary theoretical foundation (Smith, 2004). The 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries were a crucial period for the ancestors of Uzbeks, during which distinctive features of lifestyle, language, and worldview emerged. By the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

centuries, a sedentary Turkic ethnic group emerged in irrigated oases through the integration of language, territory, spiritual norms, and economic-cultural practices. This process was closely tied to the political unification under the Karakhanid state, the institutionalization of the Turkic language, and the development of Islamic scholarship. The concept of **elat** refers to an ethnic community transcending tribal affiliation, united by territory, language, economy, and customs. It reflects a self-consciousness among Turkic agricultural populations, distinguishing them from Persian-speaking farmers and nomadic Turks. The Karakluq-Chigil language base and early Chagatai literature played an important role in this process. Thus, ethnocultural identity based on sedentarism was consolidated in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries through the concept of **elat**, forming the nucleus of the subsequent Uzbek nation. This concept serves as a symbolic and spiritual foundation for the transition to nationalism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnographic and historical studies identify the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries as the main period for the formation of the Uzbek **elat**, linked to

political, cultural, and linguistic consolidation under the Western Karakhanid rule (Shoniyozev, 2001). Smith's ethnosymbolism highlights the importance of mythological symbols, collective memory, and a shared sense of destiny in the transition from ethnicity to nationhood while critiquing modernist emphasis on industrialization (Smith, 2004). Bromley (1973) describes **el at** as a system that harmonizes local-level ethnic consciousness with shared cultural values, emphasizing that local variations do not negate overall ethnic markers. Western theories, in contrast, avoid the term **el at**, treating early ethnic communities as tribal-territorial formations and linking nationalism to capitalist bureaucracy and mass education (Gellner, 1991). Romantic approaches interpret the "national spirit" through language and cultural unity at a pre-national level (Herder, 1977). Uzbek scholars underscore the pivotal role of Islam in shaping ethnonational consciousness (Khujamurodov, 1994; Allworth, 1990), viewing it as both a spiritual and ideological factor.

Recent Soviet and post-Soviet studies analyze in detail sub-ethnic differences between Sarts (sedentary populations) and nomads (Karmysheva, 1960). Bromley (1973) links nomadism inevitably with tribalism while illustrating the erosion of sedentary kinship structures. Finke (2014) demonstrates the diversity of regional identity (e.g., bilingualism in Bukhara, dialectal pluralism in Khorezm, local features in Fergana and Kashkadarya). Philological analyses show that Chagatai evolved from Qarluq-Chigil, enriched with Arabic-Persian lexicon, and differentiated from Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen languages (Navoi, 2000). These sources collectively demonstrate the persistence of a sedentary Turkic-Islamic core, with nomadic influences remaining peripheral. Postcolonial critiques expose Soviet-era tendencies to "Mongolize" history (Slezkin, 1994).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs historical-comparative methods, analyzing archival and ethnographic sources, medieval manuscripts, genealogies, and modern monographs. Drawing on ethnosymbolism, identity is interpreted through symbolic-mythic systems, collective memory, and narrative continuity (Smith, 2004). Comparative analysis examines Sarts (sedentary) versus nomadic Mawarannahr Turks and Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks in terms of economy (irrigation vs. pastoralism), language (Karakluq vs. Qipchaq dialects), culture (mahalla vs. tribal genealogy), and psychology (territorial identity vs. tribal lineage). Primary sources include Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Divanü Lügati't-Türk*, Yusuf Khass Hajib's *Kutadgu Bilig*, Ahmad Yasawi's *Hikmatlar*, Sulayman Baqirghoni's *Hibat al-Haqaiq*, and Alisher Navoi's *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn* (2000). Secondary sources include Shoniyozev (2001), Smith (2004), Bromley (1973), Karmysheva (1960), and Finke (2014). The study rejects genetic determinism, emphasizing ethnocultural traits and critically evaluating Soviet-era ideological distortions. Territorial identity is explored through toponyms and ethnographic evidence.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

**The Concept of Elat and Scientific Distinctions:** **Elat** refers to the earliest ethnic community, united by territory, language, economy, and customs, transcending tribal affiliation. In Uzbek historiography, it denotes the local unity of irrigated Turkic populations in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, based on the Karakluq-Chigil language (early Chagatai) and the "us vs. them" distinction (Shoniyozev, 2001). Key features include:

**Territorial unity:** Mawarannahr oases (Zarafshan, Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya)

**Linguistic unity:** Karakluq-Chigil dialects → proto-Chagatai

**Economic life:** Irrigated agriculture, craftsmanship, urban trade

**Cultural symbols:** Mahalla, Sharia norms, Turkic literature. Manuscripts (Kashgari, Yasawi, Baqirghoni) exhibit early religious-poetic works in Turkic, competing with Persian literature. Navoi (2000) emphasizes the expressive power of Turkic, semantically and aesthetically equal to Persian. During the Timurid period, Turkification of administration and historiography reinforced language and identity. Lexical evolution incorporated Arabic-Persian layers, differentiating Uzbek from Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Karakalpak.

**The Role of Islamic Norms in Identity:** The Islamic revival of the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, alongside the Eastern Renaissance, profoundly influenced society, worldview, and daily life (Allworth, 1990). Islam emphasized the umma consciousness above other identities. Sedentary populations ("Turks," "Chagatais," later "Sarts") lost tribal exclusivity through Mongol invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and intermixing with Shaybanid nomads in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Sufism (Naqshbandi, Yasawi) merged sedentary and nomadic traditions spiritually, universalizing Sharia norms as shared cultural symbols.

**Dialectics Between Sedentary and Nomadic Cultures:** Sart identity was based on irrigated agriculture, mahalla traditions, territorial affiliation, and urban culture. Sharia norms manifested in daily life-halal-haram distinctions, spatial arrangements (inner-outer courtyards), aniconic decoration (stucco, carving), and cuisine. Irrigation systems (Batrakov, 1955) demanded political centralization, structuring micro-societies within oases. Nomadic worldviews emphasized mobility, **yurt** (felt tent) culture, nature-related spiritual beliefs, and tribal genealogies. Mawarannahr Turkic tribes (Karakluq, Barlas, Kenagas) lived semi-nomadically, combining agriculture and pastoralism, fostering Chagatai culture and Timurid civilization (Timur, Navoi, Babur). Their language retained archaic elements close to Qarluq dialects. Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks (Shaybanid dynasty and 92 tribes) introduced Qipchaq pronunciation, Mongoloid anthropological traits, and political hegemony but gradually adapted to sedentary life (Karmysheva, 1960). Sufism played a critical role in unifying nomadic and sedentary traditions spiritually. By the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, political fragmentation (Bukhara, Khiva, Kokand Khanates) strengthened regional identity, yet by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, common language, religion, and economic networks softened sub-ethnic differences. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sarts, Mawarannahr Turks, and Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks had merged into a single ethnic structure, although socio-economic-cultural distinctions persisted.

## CONCLUSION

Uzbek ethnocultural identity emerged around a sedentary Turkic **el at** formed during the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its core consists of irrigated agriculture, Turkic language, urban culture, and Islamic values. Nomadic layers-Mawarannahr Turks and Dasht-i Qipchaq Uzbeks - introduced phenotypic, linguistic, and political diversity but could not replace the sedentary-Islamic core. Ethnosymbolism explains this process through shared symbols (mahalla, Sharia, Turkic literature), mythic narratives (Alpomish, Navoi's heritage), and a sense of differentiation. Economic systems, irrigation centralization, and political fragmentation preserved regional identity diversity while integrating them within a unified Turkic-Muslim cultural narrative. Future research could further illuminate the traces of nomadic elements in folklore (epics), statehood (Shaybanid legacy), memory (toponyms), and modern national discourse, enhancing understanding of Uzbek national consciousness. This analysis reveals the dynamic yet resilient core of Uzbek identity.

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