Ritual, Memory and Identity: Postcolonial Readings of Bukhara and Khorezm's Cultural Continuity

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the relationship between ritual, memory and identity in the postcolonial geography of Bukhara and Khorezm, two historically important regions of Central Asia. Drawing on theoretical concepts from cultural memory studies, postcolonial theory and semiotics, this research pursues an understanding of how the commemorative and ritual practices function as mechanisms of cultural continuity in the face of colonial and Soviet transformations. Based on qualitative analysis of 50 scholarly sources, the study shows that these regions serve as outstanding cases of cultural resilience that are embodied in religious syncretism, adaptive hybridity and the strategic use of memory in identity formation. The results show that Bukhara and Khorezm are comparative microcosms of a postcolonial culture of cultural negotiation in which the pre-Islamic, Islamic and Soviet legacies combine to form distinctive modes of collective identity. This work makes a theoretical intervention in postcolonial Central Asian studies by bringing together Lotmanian semiotics and modern memory studies and illuminating areas of research deficits in terms of minority experiences and contemporary transformations.

Keywords: Postcolonial identity, Cultural memory, Ritual transmission, Religious syncretism, Central Asian heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Bukhara and Khorezm are the sites of the postcolonial negotiation of identity whose collective memories, involving ritual practices, are preserved in the space of historical discontinuities. These parts of Central Asia, imbued with successive waves of Persian, Turkic, Mongol, Russian and Soviet influences, reveal an impressive cultural continuity in spite of interventions of colonial powers aimed at transforming indigenous traditions (Malikov, 2020; Pickett, 2020). The question of the relationship between ritual and memory in the maintenance of identity in postcolonial societies have been gaining growing momentum in the light of the recognition that cultural resiliency operates less on static preservation and more on dynamic adaptation and instrumental reinterpretation (Aluede and Ikhidero, 2024; Holtorf, 2018).

This research fills a critical gap in postcolonial Central Asian studies in the context of the ritual practices and commemorative traditions of Bukhara and Khorezm as semiotic systems in the encoding of cultural memories and the formation of identities. Although there is a rich body of work on the history of Central Asia and the cultural policy of the Soviet period, few studies integrate postcolonial theory and cultural memory models to explore the ways that continuity has been preserved by local actors (Cash and Kinnvall 2017; Parui 2024). The novelties of the article are the theoretical synthesis of Yuri Lotman's semiotic analysis of cultural memory; Homi Bhabha's idea of

postcolonial hybridity; Jan Assmann's framework of collective memory to reveal the ritual mechanism of cultural resilience (Kang and Yu, 2022; Mishra, 2025; Devi and Krishnan, 2025).
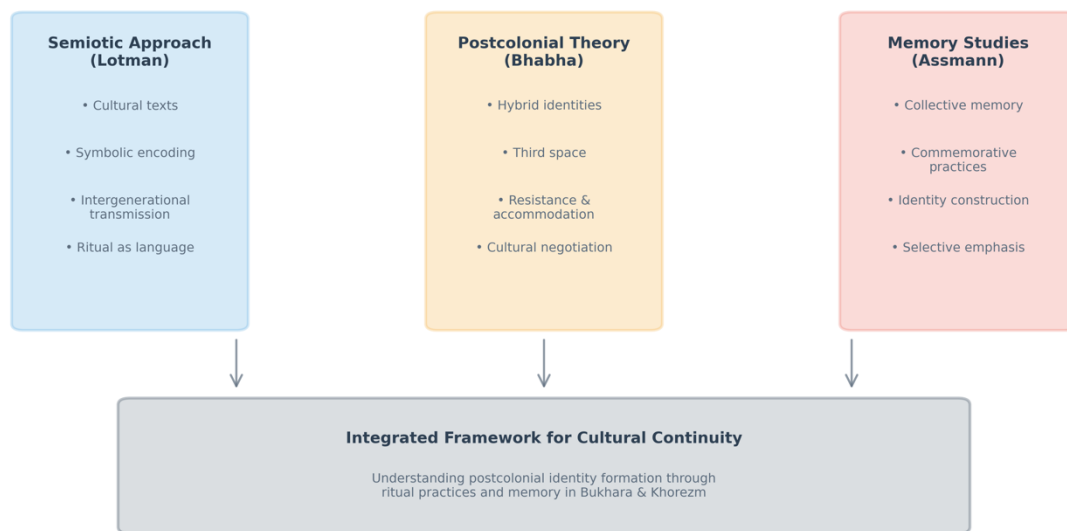
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Combining Lotmanian semiotics with postnatal theory (Ghassan Kanafani Bhabha) and the study of memory (Assmann) in ritual and memory formation and identity construction in Bukhara and Khorezm.

The theoretical underpinning of this research is based on several disciplinary traditions. First, semiotic approaches to rituals show how cultural knowledge is encoded in symbolic behaviours, objects and spatial arrangements and how this can be passed down from generation to generation (Kang and Yu, 2022). Second, the postcolonial theory sheds light on the way in which colonial experiences create hybrid identities and ways of culture that are both opposing and assimilating to the outside (Mishra, 2025; D'Cruze, 2023). Third, memory studies show the way that communities selectively highlight some historical features while marginalizing others in the process of constructing a collective identity (Sumartojo, 2020; Qasmi, 2017). Together, these frameworks make it possible to analyze how the Bukhara and Khorezm communities navigate the tension between continuity and change in postcolonial contexts. The model of Figure 1 shows the integration of Lotmanian semiotics, Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity and Assmann's collective memory theory to describe ritual and identity formation in Bukhara and Khorezm (Kang and Yu, 2022; Mishra, 2025; Assmann in Parui, 2024).

The research aims are threefold: in the first place to analyze the role of ritual practices in Bukhara and Khorezm as the mechanisms of transmission of cultural memory; in the second place to examine the role of postcolonial hybridity in cultural identification formation in these regions; and in the third place to identify patterns of religious syncretism characteristic of the cultural resilience in these regions. By aiming at these objects, this research makes a contribution to understanding how peripheral territories in empires develop unique strategies of cultural survival that combine adaptation and preservation (De Tiegenhausen, 2021; Narkulov et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ritual as Cultural Memory System

Ritual scholarship is now beginning to appreciate that ceremonial practice is a sophisticated system of encoding, storing and transmitting cultural memory. Kang and Yu (2022) offer a Lotmanian semiotic analysis showing that rituals function as texts bridging temporal gaps, maintaining communal coherence across generations. This position goes beyond functionalist understandings of ritual to acknowledge its communicative aspects, with symbolic features of gesture, material objects, space, etc., containing coded cultural information that is decoded and re-encoded through performance (Akar and Kara 2020).

The transmission of memory is illustrated with regard to agriculture rituals, wedding and religious rituals in Bukhara and Khorezm. Jumaeva and Utaeva (2020) write about Bobodehqan traditions in the Bukhara oasis, in which ecological knowledge and social hierarchies are repeated through the performance of ceremonies to reproduce farming culture. Similarly, Shamsieva (2023) has used wedding ceremonies of Bukhara region and shown

how functions of rite of passage are used to reproduce kinship structures and reproduction of gender norms from generation to generation during the weddings. These studies show that rituals are not just cultural memory but also generate cultural memory through embodied practices (Demmer, 2014; Liao and Dai, 2020).

Anthropological literature on syncretism and cultural resilience also serves to shed light on the way rituals adapt to changing situations, yet remain relatively stable. Aluede and Ikhidero (2024) analyze the coexistence of traditional Itolimin and Christian funeral cultures in Nigeria and reveal patterns relevant to Central Asian contexts where pre-Islamic and Islamic elements combine in their ceremonies. Liu and Wei (2024) study the maintenance of the ritual of the Feitao among China's Maonan ethnic minority, making clear the strategy of how ritual practice can be maintained under the pressure of globalization. According to the comparative cases, ritual resilience depends on communities' ability to reinterpret symbolic elements while preserving essential meanings, which is displayed in the ceremonial landscapes of Bukhara and Khorezm (Sabirova, 2024; Homann, 2025).

Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Hybridity

Postcolonial studies provide an important analytical framework in understanding the ways in which colonial encounters alter Indigenous cultural practices. As summarized by Chittaranjan Mishra (2025), postcolonial theory has presented an elaborate discourse on negotiated belonging between resistance and accommodation by colonized populations while constructing their identity. The theoretical viewpoints acknowledge that the postcolonial subjects inhabit what Bhabha terms the 'third space' where hybrid identities are forged through the colliding of the colonial and indigenous factors (Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024; D'Cruze, 2023).

In the case of Central Asia, postcolonial analysis must consider the distinctive character of Russian and Soviet colonialism—an amalgam of territorial conquest and ideological conversion (Owczarzak 2009). Studying the different sides of the national identity construction in Central Asia, Phillips and James (2001) consider the tensions between tradition and reflexive modernization, suggesting that post-Soviet states struggle under competing demands to maintain indigenous tradition and to become part of modernity. This tension is especially reflected in the subject of commemorations, which due to the selectivity in the state's practices, some historical narratives are highlighted while others are sidelined (Jacquesson, 2021; Kudaibergenova, 2016).

The concept of postcolonial hybridity is particularly useful for understanding the cultural productions that took place in Bukhara and Khorezm. Jafarova and Ozkaleli (2024), etc. show how the wedding ritual in Soviet Azerbaijan was creating the third spaces of negotiation between the state ideology and local tradition, which is mirrored in Central Asian contexts. Sartori (2019) took a look at Soviet efforts to separate Islam from local traditions and documents the hybridization of religious identity through living-in-tense coexistence of official atheism and folk beliefs. Indicating that a postcolonial identity (in Bukhara and Khorezm) is not born out of the opposition between indigenous and colonial fractions but rather through their productive entanglement (Rizoev 2023; Cash and Kinnvall 2017).

Memory Studies and Commemorative Practices

As is widely written in studies of memory, collective memory is not an organic remembering but is actively and intentionally performed through acts of commemoration and the organizational systems provided by appropriate institutions. Sumartojo (2020) traced new geographies of commemoration illustrating how spatial practices of remembrance contribute to nation and regional identity. Primarily, this geographic approach acknowledges the fact that memory is mediated through material sites including monuments, museums and heritage landscapes that position abstract historical narratives in the concrete (Paskaleva and Van Den Berg, 2023; Elabd et al., 2021).

The relationship between memory and identity becomes particularly complex in postcolonial contexts, in which competing historical narratives competing for validity and visible demand. Parui (2024) has studied the memory studies and postcolonial writing and has uncovered the negotiations between the colonial archives and the oral traditions among the literary and cultural practices. Eldar, 2024 Postcolonial commemoration: Denmark in analysis Eldarusses Colin Eldar, postcolonial commemoration in the Netherlands, Fulbrook, UCL Press, 2020, pp 181-200. is an analysis of Denmark's Postcolonial Landscape of Commemoration that shows how the colonial histories are actually contested in commemorative practices. These theories reveal how the communities of Bukhara and Khorezm strategically use memory to make identity claims (Qasmi 2017 and Cho and Chae 2020).

Special holidays and national commemorations are especially important memory practices in postcolonial states. Qasmi (2017) discusses how the national calendar of Pakistan creates a sense of identity from selective commemoration with a focus on religious holidays while marginalizing the pre-Islamic heritage. Malikov (2020) discusses the Nowruz celebrations in Bukhara and Samarkand and shows how this pre-Islamic spring festival was variously suppressed and co-opted by various political regimes to justify their regimes. These studies demonstrate

that commemorative processes serve as arenas of contestation, through which various subjects impose their versions of meanings of collective identity (Narkulov et al., 2023; Jacquesson, 2021).

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Continuity in Central Asia

The religious life of Bukhara and Khorezm is an example of complex patterns of syncretism in which Islamic, Zoroastrian, Christian and indigenous Turkic elements coexist and penetrate into one another. Ismoilov (2025) provides evidence of the religion and religious communities in Khorezm in the 10th-11th centuries, indicating the survival of various religions and religious communities in the presence of cultural dominance of Islam. Kyzy et al. Religious Development of Ancient Cities in Central Asia (9th-13th Centuries) shows how cities were the places of interreligious exchange and theological synthesis (Pickett, 2020; Bruno and Puschnigg, 2022).

The Jewish communities of Bukhara are another part of a diversity of religions and continuity of culture. Abdulkhamidovich (2022) examined the traditions and ceremonies of the Jewish population in Bukhara, in which she uncovered the ways in which this minority kept its unique ritual practices and how it took part in much wider patterns of culture in the region. This case clearly illustrates how ethnic and religious minorities negotiate cultural survival through selective adaptation, which involves maintaining core markers of identity and adopted elements of the majority culture (Ghahramani et al., 2020; Taufiq et al., 2024).

Material evidence of religious syncretism is further presented through architectural and archeological evidence. Bruno and Puschnigg (2022) reviewed the cultural associations of Bukhara using ceramic evidence which showed trading networks that promoted religious and cultural exchange. Malikov and Torlanbayeva (2022) analyse Shaybani Khan's monumental building project in early 16th century Samarkand in terms of architectural patronage, which expresses hybrid identity claims derived from Persian, Turkic and Islamic traditions. Whereas textual sources are often understood in the context of religion as the realm of introspection or cognition of religious ideas, studies of material culture offer important insights into how religious identity is performed through the material (Dastgerdi et al., 2019; Raxmatullaev, 2024). As Figure 2 illustrates, the cultural strata of Bukhara and Khorezm show the existence of a diachronic continuity between pre-Islamic traditions and post-Soviet adaptations, providing the expression of forms of religious and cultural syncretism (Bruno and Puschnigg, 2022; Malikov and Torlanbayeva, 2022; Pickett, 2020).
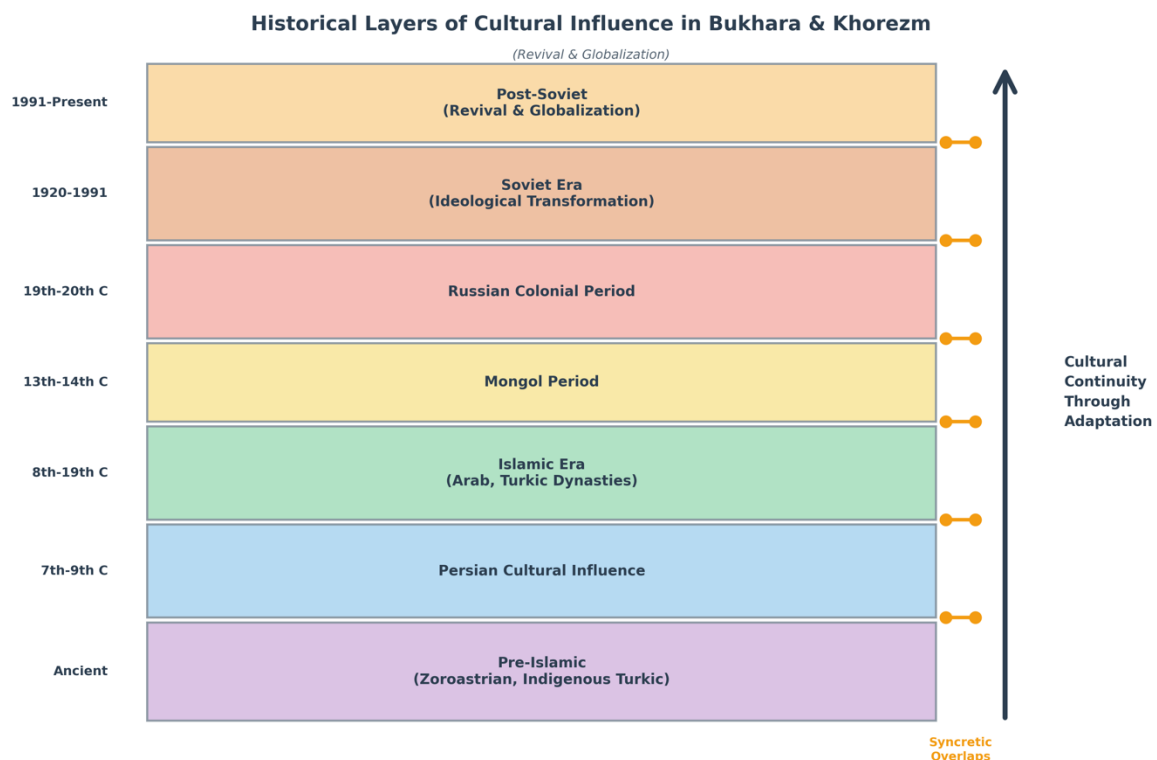
Figure 2. Historical axiom of cultural layer the cultures of Bukhara and Khorezm historical layers from the pre-Islamic times till the post-soviet relief, showing cultural continuity through adaption and cultural syncretic overlaps.

Contemporary Transformations and Research Gaps

While a fair amount of scholarship has been devoted to the historical aspects of Bukhara and Khorezm's cultural continuity in the past, there are some serious lacunae with regards to the modern change. Jumaeva (2023) sheds light on the agricultural culture in the Bukhara oasis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but there is a

lack of studies on the extent to which agricultural traditions are subject to economic pressure of modern times. Similarly, the theoretical analysis of the ritual folklore of Khorezm has been established by Sabirova (2024), as well as the ritual transmission in less popular regions but the processes of globalization and migration in the ritual transmission have received less attention (De Tiesenhausen, 2021; Jha and Dudrah, 2018).

Another area that is lacking is the impact of digital technologies on cultural memory. Parui and Raj (2025) studied the Anglo-Indian community using the augmented reality application and showed that digital platforms have the ability to preserve and pass on cultural memory in diasporic settings. Although potentially offering a way to capture the endangered ritual practices and support intergenerational transmission, such methods are largely not investigated and reproduced in Central Asian contexts (Blackwood, 2005; Ochilov, 2025).

The experiences of oppressed groups that are women, ethnic minorities and religious minorities need more attention in scholarly scholarship. While Kudaibergenova (2016) analyzes gender representations in the national formation in Central Asia and Abdulkhamidovich (2022) records Jewish traditions, there is still a lack of a comprehensive analysis that illustrates how the experience of cultural continuity and its contest in Central Asia is shaped by different social groups. This gap mirrors general trends in postcolonial studies which are dominated by elite male perspectives in historical accounts (Blackwood, 2005; Demmer, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses an interpretive, qualitative approach through a systematic review of secondary sources. The approach integrates cultural theory with close readings of ethnographic, historical and anthropological works to develop a theoretical understanding of ritual, memory and identity in Bukhara and in Khorezm. This meta-analytical strategy allows the combination of multiple disciplinary perspectives such as semiotics, postcolonial theory, memory studies and religious studies to build up a holistic framework that permits the understanding of cultural continuity (Kang and Yu, 2022; Parui, 2024).

The corpus was built from 50 academic peer-reviewed sources that were found via an extensive literature search from multiple databases. The selection criteria were based on: (1) direct application to the cultural community of Bukhara/Khorezm (2) theoretical insight into the understanding of ritual/memory/identity; (3) empirical description of the structural tradition of ceremonies; (4) postcolonial changes; and (5) religious syncretism. The purposive sampling approach allowed theoretical saturation while keeping the geographic and thematic focus (Mishra, 2025; Sumartojo, 2020).

The analytical procedures consisted of thematic coding to find patterns across sources. Initial coding themes were written from theoretical standpoints (semiotic encoding, postcolonial hybridity, memorial practices, religion syncretism, cultural resilience), while allowing for emergent themes. The ritual performances were analyzed comparatively, in order to reveal similarities and dissimilarities in the functioning of rituals in different contexts: agricultural rites versus urban commemorations, Islamic versus pre-Islamic rites, elite versus subaltern rituals. An iterative analytical strategy allowed refinement of theoretical categories by empirical patterns (Devi and Krishnan, 2025; Holtorf, 2018).

Theoretical triangulation enhances the analysis by combining different points of view. Lotmanian semiotics offers tools for the analysis of the process of encoding cultural information in rituals, postcolonial theory shows the power relations and the processes of hybrid identity formation, memory studies offers the frameworks for understanding the processes of commemoration as the construction of collective identity, while religious studies approaches document the mechanisms of syncretism. This multi-theoretical approach is non-reductionist in its acceptance of the complexity of cultural continuity (Cash and Kinnvall, 2017; D'Cruze, 2023).

Limitations include the study being based on secondary sources published elsewhere, as opposed to original fieldwork, as this excludes live experiences that are contemporary. The linguistic range mainly includes the languages of English, possibly marginalizing the sources of languages such as Russian, Persian and Central Asian. What the geographical focus on Bukhara and Khorezm has in terms of depth is, however, sacrificed in terms of its generalizability to broader Central Asian contexts. These limitations point to the directions of future primary research, which deals with contemporary transformations and marginalized perspectives (Jumaeva, 2023; Sabirova, 2024).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Ritual as Mechanism of Cultural Memory Transmission

The analysis shows the ritual activities of Bukhara and Khorezm as complex mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of cultural memory, which are based on the multiple semiotic channels of transmission operating at the same time. Kang and Yu (2022) show that rituals are 'cultural texts' and encode information through symbolic

elements (gestures, words, objects, spatial relations) that are decoded and recoded by participants in a performance of the ritual. This semiotic view sheds light on ways in which ostensibly simple ceremonies are capable of completing complex communicative tasks, conveying knowledge about ecology, social hierarchy and moral values and passing down accounts of history.

Agricultural rituals are a good example of this memory-transmitting activity. Jumaeva and Utaeva (2020) document the example of the Bobodehqan traditions in the Bukhara oasis and demonstrate how embodied practice was used to maintain detailed knowledge of planting cycles, irrigation techniques and weather patterns through farming ceremonies. These rituals are not only celebrations of agricultural heritage but They serve as dynamic vehicles for transmitting ecological knowledge for food production in drylands. Similarly, Jumaeva (2023) had worked on the analysis of late 19th-early 20th century differences in farming culture and showed continuities in the transmission of agricultural knowledge despite political changes.

Wedding rituals are another area where cultural memory is transferred through rituals. Shamsieva (2023) in her comprehensive typology of the wedding rituals of the Bukhara oasis shows how the kinship structures, gender roles and social hierarchies are reproduced in matrimonial rituals. Every ritual aspect, including bride price bargaining, henna ceremonies and processions, contains implicit knowledge about how to act toward other people and what moral responsibilities one has towards them. As economic and political circumstances change over time, these rituals continue to serve as the basis for reinforcing social structures (Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024; Raxmatullaev, 2024). Figure 3 is a schematic representation of the main ritual types (agricultural, life-cycle and religious) that act as communication channels of cultural transmission in Bukhara and Khorezm based on ethnographic and semiotic studies (Kang and Yu, 2022; Jumaeva and Utaeva, 2020; Shamsieva, 2023).

The temporal structure of rituals is important to the function of memory. Malikov (2020) examines the celebrations for Nowruz in Bukhara and Samarkand to show how this yearly spring festival is a fest of the cyclical time to which the communities exist and which links the community of present days to the legacy of the different generations. Fire jumping, special foods and ritual cleanings of the house mark these transitions in time and assure cultural continuity with the pre-Islamic Persian past. We used to bring to the graves with corn and the rituals have long endured political shifts like Soviet suppression to remind society of their presence in the countermemories and the ritual's ability to maintain the collective memory (Liao and Dai, 2020; Narkulov et al., 2023).

Figure 4. Three categories of ritual practices (agricultural, life-cycle and religious) and their functions in transmitting cultural memory through the semiotic encoding system. Figure 4. Three categories of ritual practices (agricultural, life-cycle and religious) and their functions in transmitting cultural memory through the semiotic encoding system.

Ritual Functions in Cultural Memory Transmission
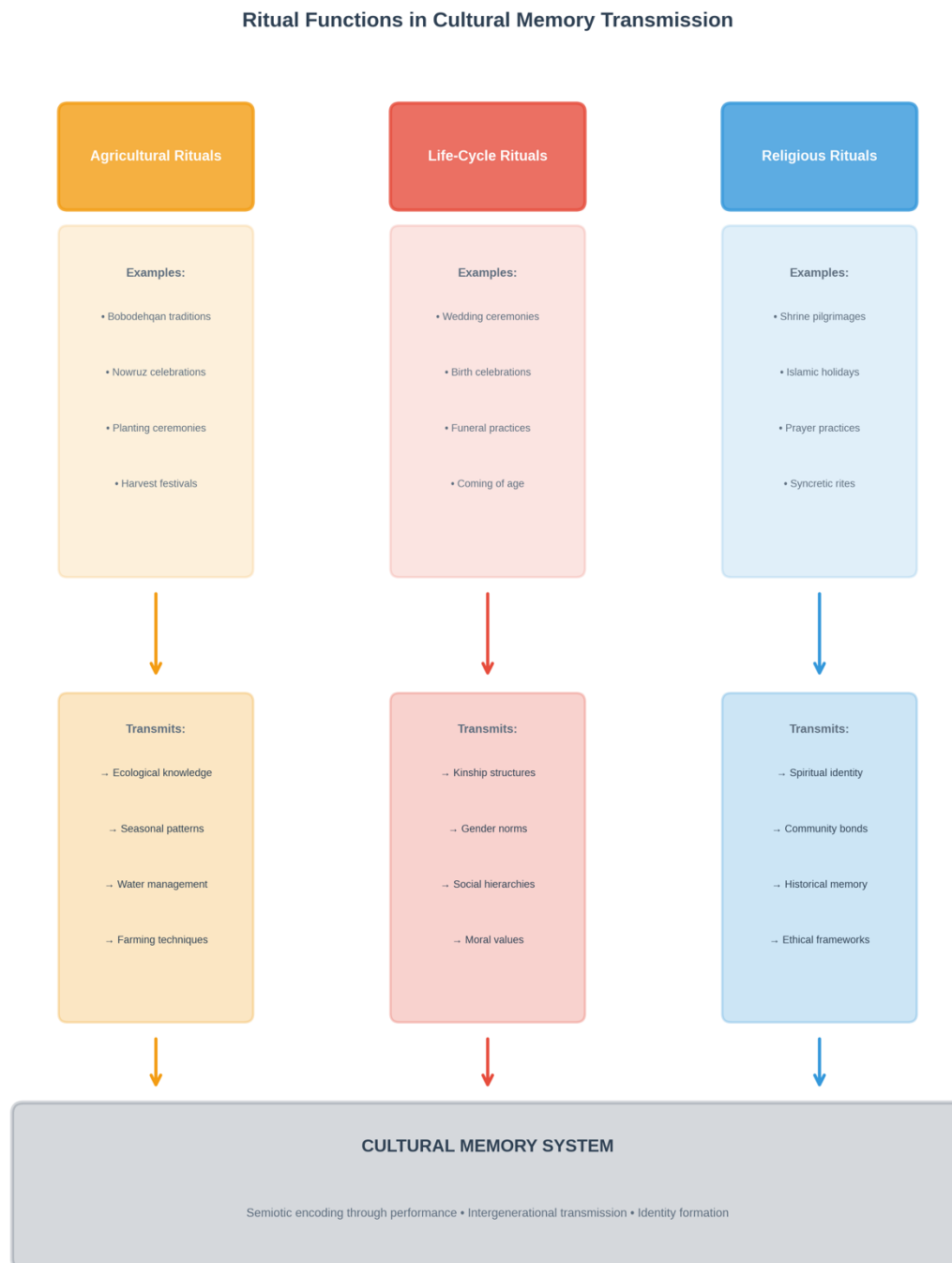
Figure 3. Three categories of ritual practices (agricultural, life-cycle and religious) and their functions in transmitting cultural memory through the semiotic encoding system.

Postcolonial Hybridity and Identity Negotiation

Using a postcolonial approach to understanding cultural identity, it demonstrates that the appearance of Bukhara and Khorezm cultural identity is not through the maintenance of pure indigenous practices but through intricate hybridising processes of indigenous and external elements. Mishra (2025) suggests that postcolonial subjects occupy the spaces in between where they resist and accept colonial forces and generate hybrid identities that drift between the presumed binaries between tradition and modernity. Such a theoretical approach is particularly fruitful for analyzing Central Asian experience in which Persian-Turkic-Russian-Soviet strands permeate an indigenous practice.

Soviet cultural policy is an example of how the colonial interventions were not simply a case of erasure. Sartori (2019) examined the Soviet efforts in disentangling Islam from the Central Asian society and showed how the official atheism co-existed with the persistent religious rituals that accommodated themselves to survive. Religious acts remained in internal spaces - homes and cemeteries - while official commemorative practices took over public

spaces. This spatial segregation fostered hybrid identities, as individuals navigated between official and unofficial cultural worlds as they publicly acted as Soviet citizens and privately retained their religious identity (Owczarzak, 2009; Phillips and James, 2001).

Commemorative practices show some especially clear examples of post-colonial hybridization. Malikov (2020) illustrates how Nowruz celebrations were used by different political regimes to legitimize their rule. Pre-Soviet rulers stressed the Islamic aspects of the festival, Soviet authorities were trying to secularize it as a 'spring festival' without religious connotations and post-Soviet States have reasserted the Islamic and national importance of the festival. Each new interpretation has superimposed new meanings upon the pre-existing practice, resulting in hybrid commemorative forms bearing multiple and sometimes contradictory, meanings (Jacquesson, 2021; Qasmi, 2017).

Architectural heritage enacts hybridity in its material aspect. Using the early sixteenth-century building procedures of his complex Shaybani Khan, Malikov and Torlanbayeva (2022) demonstrate how the claims of hybrid identity were expressed through architectural patronage in Samarkand. These monuments are a synthesized mix of Persian architectural shapes, Arabic inscriptions, Turkic decorative elements and Islamic symbolism that produced visual statements of complex cultural identity. Such architectural hybridity set the example for later building programs in Bukhara and Khorezm, in which structures physically represented the interactions of many cultures (Bruno and Puschnigg, 2022; Pickett, 2020).

The 'third space' discussed by Bhabha and its use by Jafarova and Ozkaleli (2024) in the context of Soviet Azerbaijan is a productive concept for analysing hybrid cultural formations in Bukhara and Khorezm. In third spaces such as weddings, religious practices and commemorations, participants negotiate state ideologies and local traditions and create new cultural forms that fall entirely outside of both indigenous and colonial rubrics. The hybridity that we are talking about is not a contamination leading to loss of authenticity but a creative cultural production allowing the communities to survive and thrive under colonial circumstances (D'Cruze, 2023; Cash and Kinnvall, 2017). As illustrated in Figure 4, Bhabha's "Third Space" shows how the process of negotiation between the indigenous and colonial cultural forces gives rise to hybrid identities in the ritual and commemorative practices of Central Asia (Bhabha in Mishra, 2025; Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024).

Postcolonial Identity Formation: The Third Space
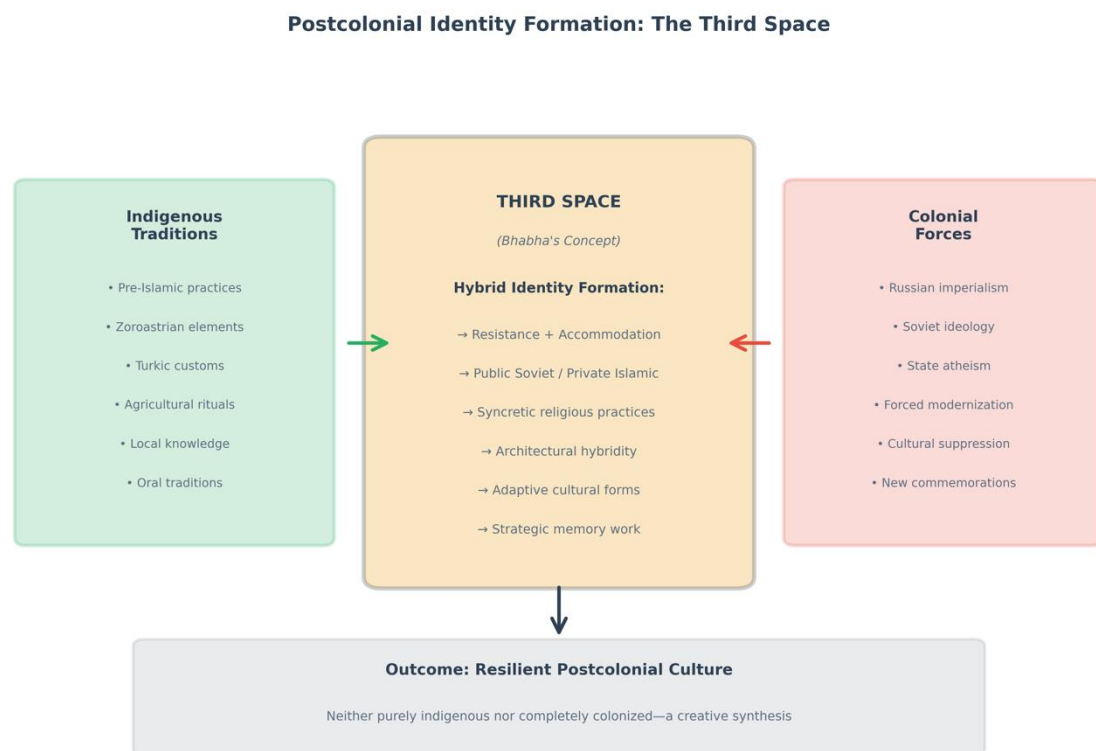
Figure 4. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" as showing the postcolonial identity formation in the negotiation between indigenous traditions and colonial forces leading to hybrid cultural forms.

Commemoration and Identity Construction

Commemorative practices are important places where collective identity is actively created through the selective focus and marginalization of parts of the past. Sumartojo (2020) traced new geographies of commemoration showing the ways in which spatial practices of remembrance help to form national and regional identities by fixing abstract historical narratives in material sites. In Bukhara and Khorezm, the memorials of their

landscapes consist of religious shrines, architectural monuments, festival calendars and heritage designations that constitute the articulation of specific visions of the cultural personalities (Paskaleva and Van Den Berg, 2023; Eldar, 2024).

Religious shrines are a good example of the identity-building of commemoration. Sartori (2019) has investigated Soviet-era policies towards shrines of saints in Central Asia and uncovered how these shrines were sites of contest between state efforts to secularize them and popular religious practices. Despite the denouncement on the part of the government, such visits to shrines continued as one of the commemorative practices that asserted Islamic identity against state atheism. The post-Soviet era saw the revival of veneration of shrines as governments skillfully used Islamic heritage to come up with claims of juridical legitimacy to national identity (Ismoilov, 2025; Kyzy et al., 2025).

Calendar holidays are another area where commemoration is used to create group identity. Qasmi (2017) studies the national calendar of Pakistan, how selective commemoration of some historical events and religious holidays and marginalization of others is a key factor in the formation of national identity. In a similar manner, in Bukhara and Khorezm, a balance between Islamic holidays (Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha), pre-Islamic festivities (Nowruz), Soviet holidays (May Day, Victory Day) and post-Soviet national holidays expresses specific visions of cultural identity that emphasize some continuities with the past and elide others (Malikov, 2020; Jacquesson, 2021).

Heritage designation is institutional commemoration that creates identity by the institutional recognition of cultural significance. Dastgerdi et al. (2019) analyze challenges of climate change to existing cultural heritage policy and discuss how heritage frameworks privilege certain forms of cultural expressions (monumental architecture, elite textual traditions) and then marginalize vernacular practices. In Bukhara and Khorezm, the designation as World Heritage sites of historical centers has created certain identity narratives that focus on architectural magnificence and Islamic civilization and that may neglect living cultural practices, as well as minority traditions (Elabd et al., 2021; Ghahramani et al., 2020).

The contestation of commemorative patterns sheds light on competing notions of collective understanding. Parui, 2024 Negotiating curricular content within the dynamics of colonial archives and Indigenous Oral traditions: postcolonial writing, memory and evidence of historical truth Tracing the processural affects of postcolonial deployment of remediation to history: memory as always selective, always political 5. In the case of Central Asia, discussions about what historical figures to celebrate, what festivals to celebrate and what heritage sites to preserve are all parts of ongoing conflicts over cultural identity amongst secular nationalists, Islamic revivalists, ethnic minorities and regional factions (Cho and Chae, 2020; Narkulov et al., 2023).

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Resilience

Religious syncretism—the coexistence and interaction of multiple religious traditions— in the same era and territory and penetration of the first traditions into the second are an eminent conductor of cultural essence in Bukhara and Khorezm. Ismoilov (2025) traces the presence of several religious communities with institutional presence in Khorezm in the 10th-11th centuries, which uncovers patterns of coexistence between different religions that lasted for centuries. This religious pluralism allowed communities to access (multiple) symbolic resources to build their identities and create culturally resilient forms not reliant on the use of single doctrinal traditions (Kyzy et al., 2025; Pickett, 2020).

Pre-Islamic elements remain in apparently Islamic practices, indicating the extent of syncretism. Malikov (2020) demonstrates how the celebrations of Nowruz, which are based on Zoroastrian tradition, have been Islamized by being linked to the birthday of Ali ibn Abi Talib while preserving pre-Islamic ritual elements such as jumping over fire and the worship of nature. Similarly, agricultural ceremonies described by Jumaeva and Utaeva (2020) involve Islamic incantations mixed with pre-Islamic fertility rituals performed for invoking pre-Islamic gods. This layering of the religious elements over the centuries creates rich symbols systems that enable multiple interpretations and appeal to diverse constituencies (Aluede and Ikhidero, 2024; Sabirova, 2024).

The experiences of ethnic and religious minorities throw light on the social aspects of syncretism. Abdulkhamidovich (2022) records how the Jewish community of Bukhara continued to have unique traditions and while engaging in regional cultural patterns, adopted Central Asian forms of dress, music and food, preserved the Hebrew liturgy and observance of the Sabbath. This adoptive choice provided Jews a role as cultural translators fostering economic and intellectual connections among the Jewish and Muslim population while keeping communal divides intact (Ghahramani et al., 2020; Taufiq et al., 2024).

Material expressions of syncretism have been retained in the archaeological and architectural evidence. Bruno and Puschnigg (2022) have re-evaluated the cultural connections in Bukhara by analysis of ceramics, which showed trading networks allowing religious and cultural exchange. Pottery styles and decorative motifs and production techniques moved along these networks which had a symbolic meaning combining Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Christian and Islamic elements. Material culture thus was the medium for syncretic expression that allowed for

cultural continuity through the adaptation of foreign influences instead of their rejection (Pickett, 2020; Rizoev, 2023).

The theoretical frameworks of religious studies help to shed light on the mechanisms of syncretism. Aluede, Ikhidero (2024) is an analysis of the coexistence of traditional and Christian burial practices through compartmentalization, situational code-switching and creative synthesis in Nigeria. Similar mechanisms are at work in Bukhara and Khorezm where people use Islamic, secular and indigenous ritual systems depending on the situation: Islamic rituals for the transition points in life cycles, secular Soviet commemorations for political occasions and indigenous ceremonies for agricultural ceremonies. This code-switching between religions allows for cultural resiliency in that it allows for multiple resources for meaning making (Holtorf, 2018; Liu and Wei, 2024). Figure 5 shows how the Muslim, Zoroastrian, Turkic and indigenous belief systems interacted creating syncretic cultural forms throughout Bukhara and Khorezm that bolstered long-term viability and pluralism of identity (Ismoilov, 2025; Kyzy et al., 2025; Aluede and Ikhidero, 2024).
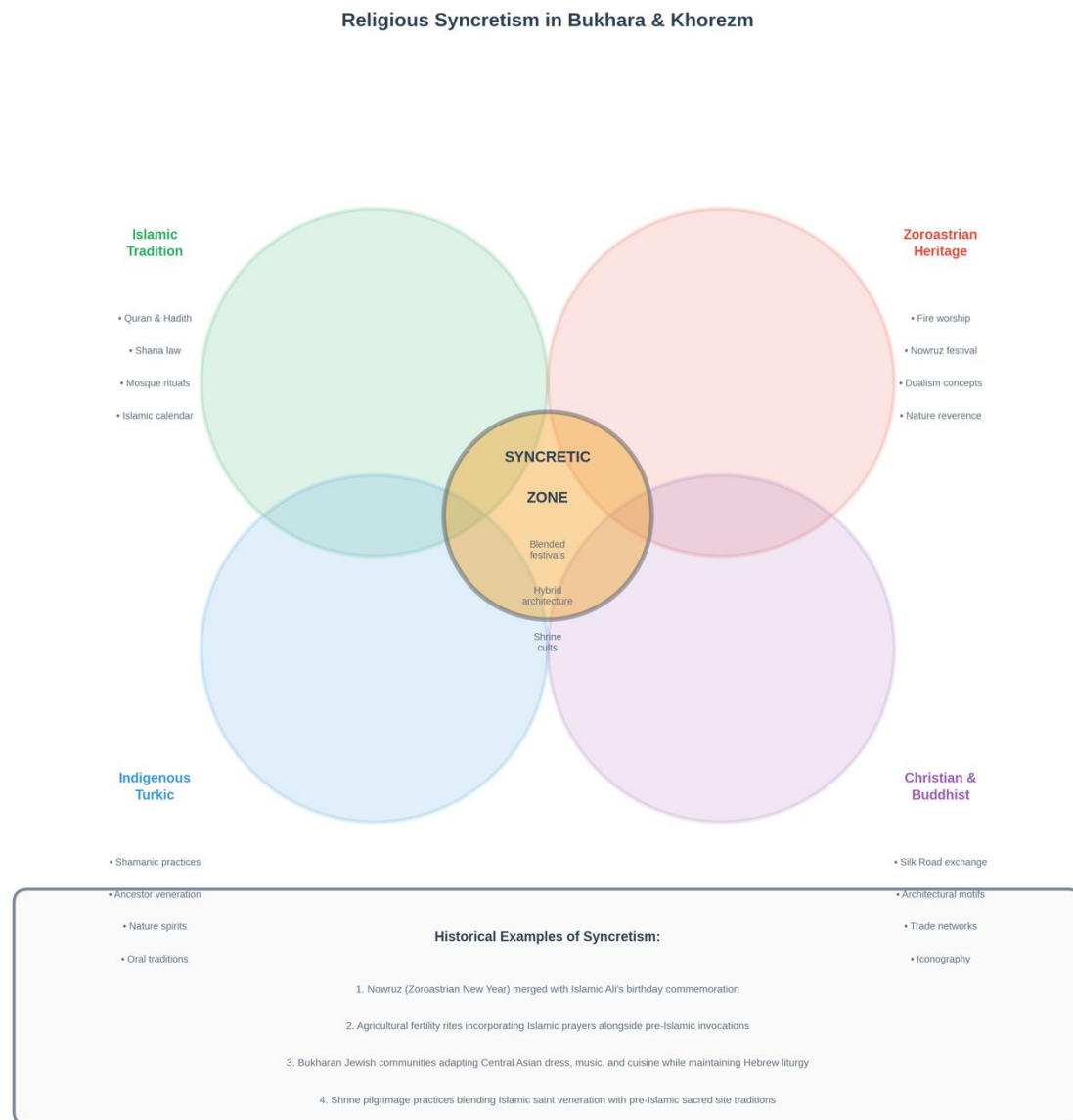
Figure 5. Religious syncretism in Bukhara and Khorezm showing the interaction of Islamic, Zoroastrian, indigenous Turkic and other religious traditions creating syncretic cultural practices.

Modern Transformations and Contemporary Challenges

Viewed from the perspective of mechanisms of continuity, the challenge of contemporary transformation is great; viewed from the perspective of potential for cultural sustainability, they may be creating new opportunities. Globalization, urbanization, labor migration and digital technologies have fundamentally changed the terms on which ritual practices and cultural memory have to operate (De Tiesenhausen 2021; Jha and Dudrah 2018). A perspective with reference to continuity and rupture with historical patterns of the Bukhara and Khorezm communities is important for understanding how they dealt with these changes.

Labor migration is one of the most important challenges facing the world today. At the same time, massive migration out of rural Bukhara and Khorezm to cities or overseas deprives the ritual knowledge and cultural memory of intergenerational transmission. The trend is that the younger generation growing up in an urban environment is not exposed to agricultural ceremonies, as confirmed by Jumaeva (2023) and Jumaeva and Utaeva (2020), which can break the links to ecological knowledge and agricultural traditions. However, there may also be diasporic communities which result from migration and which may exaggerate certain cultural practices as markers of identity in new contexts (Ghahramani et al., 2020; Blackwood, 2005).

Digital technologies have ambivalent potentials for cultural continuity and change. Parui and Raj (2025) considered the potential of AR applications to preserve and pass on cultural memory for diasporic Anglo-Indian communities, which might have useful applications for Central Asian settings. Digital representation of rituals, virtual communions linking groups of diaspora and online social media distribution of ritual knowledge might offset reduced in-person channels of transmission. However, in digital mediation rituals are also altered in terms of the embodied nature of the media and may value visual spectacle over experience-based participation (Ochilov, 2025).

Climate change is affecting cultural practices linked to agriculturally related cycles and natural settings. Dastgerdi et al. (2019) analyze the dilemma that climate change poses to current cultural heritage policy, pointing out that environmental changes jeopardize cultural livelihoods that are reliant on certain ecological conditions. In Bukhara and Khorezm, shifting precipitation patterns, lack of water and increasing the intensity of agriculture have disturbed the ecological settings in which traditional farming rituals occur. According to Elabd et al. (2021) communities will have to either adjust the ceremonial calendar to new ecological conditions or face the possibility of rituals becoming unmoored from their practical agricultural purposes.

Tourism and commodification of heritage is another recent change in cultural practices. If heritage designation brings resources to the preservation effort, it is also in danger of making living traditions into an act for tourist consumption. Holtorf (2018) suggests that cultural resilience is about change rather than stasis and argues that adaptability to tourism economies can help them continue to exist under new circumstances. However, such adaptation presents questions of authenticity and the interests that are served by heritage practices (De Tiesenhausen 2021).

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Synthesis: Ritual, Memory and Postcolonial Identity

The analysis shows that ritual, memory and identity in Bukhara and Khorezm are working through interrelated mechanisms which can be combined in a theoretical model of postcolonial cultural continuity. This model combines three important dimensions: (1) semiotic encoding of the cultural knowledge through ritual performance, (2) postcolonial hybridization producing innovative cultural forms and (3) strategic commemoration constructing collective identity. Together these displaced dimensions allow communities to remain culturally continuous not through a tightening of milk at-node-ends (Jerosimo-Dias, 2022) but through a creative shaping of cultural continuity (Kang and Yu, 2022; Mishra, 2025; Sumartojo, 2020).

Lotmanian semiotics offers a conceptual ground for an understanding of the workings of rituals as cultural texts encoding and transmitting memory. Kang and Yu (2022) show that rituals function through a multiplicity of sign systems - linguistic, gestural, spatial, material - that contribute to the development of meaning that is beyond and beyond what is communicated through an individual element alone. This semiotic complexity allows rituals to transmit thick cultural meaning from one generation to another while at the same time being malleable enough to allow their reinterpretation. In Bukhara and Khorezm, agricultural ceremonies, wedding rituals and religious observances are all examples of this semiotic density, all at the same time carrying ecological knowledge, social structures, moral values and historical narratives (Jumaeva and Utaeva, 2020; Shamsieva, 2023; Malikov, 2020).

In highlighting the ways in which colonial encounters transform, rather than destroy, indigenous cultures, postcolonial theory sheds light on the consequences of colonial encounters. Mishra (2025) and D'Cruze (2023) focus on the process of postcolonial subjects in juggling between resistance and accommodation resulting in the formation of hybrid identities bridging the binary oppositions. Soviet colonialism in Bukhara and Khorezm tried to destroy religious and traditional practices but pushed them into behind-the-scenes areas where they changed and continued. This created hybrid cultural forms - Islamic rituals practiced in the private sphere, Soviet commemorations practiced in the public sphere, pre-Islamic festivals selectively resurrected - that have facilitated cultural reproduction under the terms of colonial domination (Sartori, 2019; Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024; Phillips and James, 2001).

Within the framework of memory studies the selective highlighting of some aspects of the past and the marginalisation of others is recognised as the process by which commemorative practices (re)construct collective

identity. Sumartojo and Parui (2020) and Qasmi (2017) show that memory is never neutral but always political and for the service of certain identity projects. In Bukhara and Khorezm competing forms of commemorative practice - shrines, festivals, locations of heritage, calendar holidays etc. - encode different visions of cultural identity involving different emphasis on Islamic heritage, pre-Islamic continuity, Soviet modernization and ethnic nationalism. The very presence of two or more commemorative regimes is a testament to the enduring struggle over what is (and is not) part of the constitution of collective identity (Eldar, 2024; Cho and Chae, 2020; Jacquesson, 2021).

Regional Significance: Bukhara and Khorezm as Postcolonial Microcosms

Bukhara and Khorezm serve as comparative microcosms that shed light on the general patterns of post-colonial cultural adjustment of the Central Asian world beyond. These regions represent what happens when peripheral regions within empires develop a particular strategy of cultural survival, which refers to a strategy balancing adaptation with preservation. Their place in the history as hubs of Islamic knowledge and Persian culture, then colonized by Russian and Soviet power, set up the conditions for especially intense cultural negotiations (Pickett, 2020; Rizoev, 2023; Malikov and Torlanbayeva, 2022).

Religious syncretism in such areas offers models for the study of the ways that various religious traditions coexist and interpenetrate. Ismoilov (2025) and Kyzy et al. (2025) report centuries of interreligious interaction which gave rise to unique Central Asian styles of Islam which incorporated Zoroastrian, Christian and indigenous Turkic elements. This syncretism helped build resilience in that it allowed a wide variety of symbolic resources from which to draw for meaning making rather than relying on one and only one doctrinal reference. Such dynamics have been noted in other postcolonial settings, where the pluralism of religion makes it possible for cultural survival (Aluede and Ikhidero, 2024; Taufiq et al., 2024).

Bukhara and Khorezm's material culture is full of examples showing how hybrid identities are reflected in the architecture. Malikov and Torlanbayeva (2022) as well as Bruno and Puschnigg (2022) show how buildings, ceramics and urban planning materialise the cultural hybridity in the combination of Persian, Turkic, Arab and later Russian/Soviet motifs. Its hybridity of material produces long-lasting traces of cultural negotiation that only survive when the text or the oral tradition has disappeared. Similar processes of architectural hybridization have manifested themselves in other postcolonial settings (Dastgerdi et al., 2019; Elabd et al., 2021).

The experiences of the regions under Soviet cultural policy are illustrative of the way in which ideological colonialism is different from the territorial colonialism. Sartori (2019) and Owczarzak (2009) demonstrate that Soviet efforts at cultural transformation were key in bringing together violence of the state and ideological persuasion, under which circumstances communities formed elaborate strategies of public deference and private subversion. This spatial division between official and unofficial culture can be found in other contexts where authoritarian regimes seek to reinvent culture (Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024; Phillips and James, 2001).

Conceptual Model: Mechanisms of Postcolonial Cultural Continuity

Based on this research, we suggest a conceptual framework for post-colonial cultural continuity of six related process mechanisms:

First, semiotic encoding via ritual can be used to successfully pass cultural knowledge through generations. Rituals are multilayered texts which at the same time transmit practical knowledge, social norms, moral values and historical accounts in symbolic performances (Kang and Yu, 2022; Akar and Kara, 2020).

Second, religious syncretism can offer multiple symbolic resources for identity formation: that is, communities are able to access multiple traditions without being forced to depend on a single source. This pluralism has the effect of resilience, providing other frameworks when the primary traditions are suppressed (Ismoilov, 2025, Kyzy et al., 2025, Aluede and Ikhidero, 2024).

Third, postcolonial hybridization gives rise to creative forms of cultural hybridity that cross the indigenous/colonial boundaries. As opposed to contamination, hybridity allows for adaptive creativity that maintains fundamental cultural patterns while at the same time integrating new aspects (Mishra, 2025; D'Cruze, 2023; Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024).

Fourth, spatial separation of the public from the private allows communities to conform to the demands of colonialism while sustaining alternative practices in spatially enclosed areas. This process is especially important under authoritarian regimes that are trying to transform the culture (Sartori, 2019; Phillips and James, 2001).

Fifth, strategic commemoration is based on the construction of collective identity through the selective emphasis of some historical elements. Communities use commemorative practices to make specific identity claims and refute other narratives (Sumartojo, 2020; Qasmi, 2017; Eldar, 2024).

Sixth, material culture serves as strong records of cultural negotiations that continue after their textual and/or oral transmissions. Architecture, pottery and other artifacts are literally hybrid in their identities and chronic historical processes (Bruno and Puschnigg, 2022; Malikov and Torlanbayeva, 2022; Dastgerdi et al., 2019).

It is important to note that these six mechanisms work together rather than separately. The ritual encodes the memory which provides the information for the construction of identity through commemoration; religious syncretism allows for hybridity; spatial segregation defends ritual practice; and material culture records all these processes, as follows. This systemic interaction works to create the resilience of cultural continuity; if one of the mechanisms is disrupted, others make up for it. In Figure 6, six interrelated mechanisms (semiotic encoding, hybridity, religious syncretism, spatial segregation, strategic commemoration and material documentation) are summarized based on the comparative analysis of the ritual life of Bukhara and Khorezm (Kang and Yu, 2022; Mishra, 2025; Sumartojo, 2020; Ismoilov, 2025).
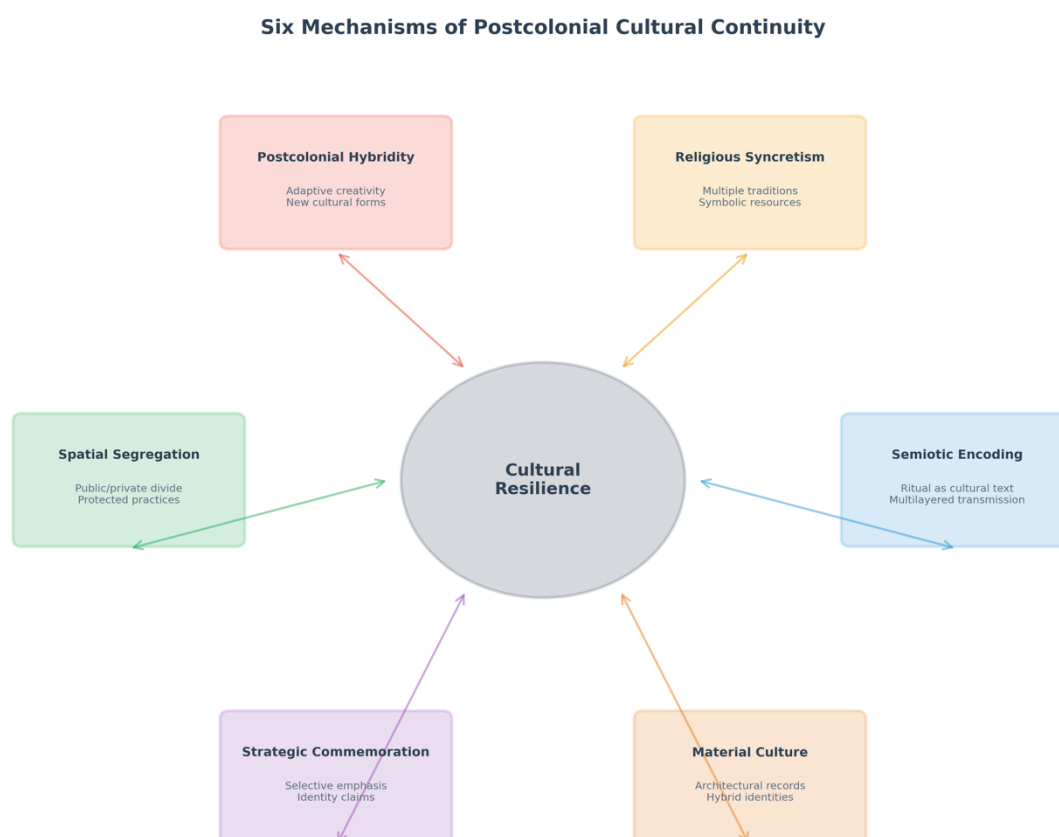
Figure 6. Six interrelated mechanisms of postcolonial cultural continuity: semiotic encoding, religious syncretism, postcolonial hybridity, spatial segregation, strategic commemoration and material culture documentation.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this study indicate important directions for future research. First, dependency on secondary sources limits opportunities to engage any lived experience of it. In addition to this theoretical synthesis, contemporary communities in Bukhara and Khorezm would be analyzed with a primary ethno-critical ethnography of continuity and change in contemporary Turkic cultures under conditions of globalization, migration and digitalization (De Tiesenhausen, 2021; Jha and Dudrah, 2018).

Second, linguistic limitations have the potential of marginalizing non-English-speaking scholarship. Future research should include sources in Russian, Persian, Uzbek and other Central Asian languages to make the subject fully covered. The centrality of some scholars in this analysis may be a consequence of patterns of publication in English, rather than scholar influence in regional contexts (Rizoev, 2023; Raxmatullaev, 2024).

Third, the experiences of marginalized groups need to be paid more attention. While this study considers the experience of women from the analysis of the wedding ritual (Shamsieva, 2023; Jafarova and Ozkaleli, 2024) and the minority communities from the research of Jewish traditions (Abdulkhamidovich, 2022), a holistic analysis of various social groups and their experience and challenges of cultural continuity is limited. Future studies should focus on subaltern perspectives by considering the ways in which different groups such as women, ethnic minorities, religious minorities and other marginalized groups negotiate cultural realities (Kudaibergenova, 2016; Blackwood, 2005; Demmer, 2014).

Fourth, current transformations need urgent documentation and analysis. As stated by Parui and Raj (2025), the use of digital technologies presents new possibilities for the preservation of cultural memory; this is, however, an area that is underexplored in the literature in the context of Central Asia. Research studying social media use, virtual reality and digital archives can help to identify opportunities and dangers in the transmission of ritual (Ochilov, 2025).

Fifth, comparative research would shed light on whether the patterns found in Bukhara and Khorezm are found in other Central Asian contexts or other postcolonial contexts around the world. Comparative studies of similar regions, such as Samarkand, Khiva and Fergana Valley, could help to identify whether these patterns are regional distinctiveness or widespread Central Asian characteristics. Global comparisons to other postcolonial contexts may help to test whether the conceptual model developed here can be applied in other regional contexts (Ghahramani et al., 2020; Taufiq et al., 2024; Liu and Wei, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study focused on ritual, memory and identity in Bukhara and Khorezm using postcolonial theoretical frameworks and revealed how these Central Asian regions represent cultural continuity mechanisms which are in operation in postcolonial contexts throughout the world. The analysis proves that cultural resilience is not a result of static forms of preservation but rather through dynamic processes of adaptation, hybridization and strategic re-interpretation. Ritual practices are sophisticated semiotic systems of thought that encode and communicate cultural memory; postcolonial hybridity; and commemorative practices are ways to create collective identity through selective emphasis on historical elements (Kang and Yu, 2022; Mishra, 2025; Sumartojo, 2020).

This study makes several important contributions to postcolonial Central Asian studies. First, it offers a theoretical synthesis combining Lotmanian semiotics, postcolonial theory and memory studies frameworks for the analysis of the processes of cultural continuity. This integration allows an understanding of how ritual, memory and identity all work in ways that are not independent of one another (Kang and Yu, 2022; Parui, 2024; Devi and Krishnan, 2025). Second, this research defines religious syncretism as a key mechanism of cultural resilience by showing how several traditions of religious faith actually supply varied symbolic materials for building one's identity (Is miestoov, 2025; Kyzy & al., 2025; Aluede, & Ikhidero, 2024). Third, the analysis offers a six mechanism conceptual model of postcolonial cultural continuity as applicable not only to Bukhara and Khorezm but also to other post-colonial contexts.

The regional significance of Bukhara and Khorezm extends beyond Central Asia. These regions function as comparative microcosms illuminating broader trends in cultural survival strategies in the case of the peripheral regions within empires. Their experiences with Russian and Soviet colonialism and especially the challenge and conflict between ideological change and territorial domination provide insights into the impacts of authoritarian cultural policies (Sartori, 2019; Owczarzak, 2009; Phillips and James, 2001). Their religious syncretism is an example of how pluralism helps to resilience (Ismoilov, 2025; Kyzy et al., 2025). Their architectural heritages are testimony to the material culture containing hybrid identities (Bruno and Puschnigg, 2022; Malikov and Torlanbayeva, 2022).

Research gaps include the influence of contemporary transformations (on cultural continuity), the experience of marginalised groups, effects of digital technologies on cultural memory transmission processes and the comparative aspects testing the applicability of this model to other settings. The limitations of the study, which depends on secondary sources, focuses on the English language and pays little attention to the perspectives of subalterns, indicate avenues for further primary sources (De Tiesenhausen, 2021; Kudaibergenova, 2016; Blackwood, 2005; Parui and Raj, 2025).

Globalization, migration, climate change and digital transformation are some of the hurdles which essentially change the terms of cultural continuity. Labor migration breaks the cycle of ritual knowledge passing down from one generation to the next (Jumaeva, 2023; Ghahramani et al., 2020). Digital technologies present ambivalent possibilities for documenting and transmitting (Ochilov, 2025; Parui and Raj, 2025). Climate change endangers practices that are dependent on certain ecological conditions (Dastgerdi et al., 2019; Elabd et al., 2021). The living traditions are commodified by tourism (Holtorf, 2018; De Tiesenhausen, 2021). These changes need urgent research to understand how communities are going through the transformations.

This theoretical approach views cultural continuity not as the maintenance of unchanging traditions but as a continuous process of negotiation, adaptation and creative reinterpretation. The maintenance paradigm's resistance to assimilation challenges essentialist notions of authenticity defies essentialist notions of cultural authenticity being defined as maintenance over change. It appreciates that communities dealing with colonial pressures develop sophisticated strategies for cultural survival that involve a combination of resistance and accommodation that lead to hybrid forms that allow communities to flourish under adverse conditions (Mishra, 2025; D'Cruze, 2023; Cash and Kinnvall, 2017).

In conclusion, Bukhara and Khorezm illustrate the linked role of ritual, memory and identity that create continuity of culture in a postcolonial situation. Their experiences highlight more general patterns in other peripheral areas within empires, other sites of ideological colonialism and other parts of the world in which communities negotiate multiple influences within communities. The six-mechanism model proposed here, that is, semiotic encoding, religious syncretism, postcolonial hybridization, spatial segregation, strategic commemoration and material culture documentation, offers a framework for the analysis of mechanisms of cultural continuity that can be applied to other than these aspecific Central Asian contexts. Future study needs to test the applicability of this model as well as to address the identified gaps related to contemporary transformations and marginalized perspectives and how communities deal with the ongoing cultural negotiations in rapidly changing global contexts (Narkulov et al., 2023; Paskaleva and Van Den Berg, 2023; Homann, 2025; Central Asian Journal of Social Sciences and History, 2023; Ochilov, 2025).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest:

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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