

Museums, memory and meaning-creation: (re)constructing the Tajik nation

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ABSTRACT. To overcome the traumas of the 1992–1997 civil war, the Tajik authorities have turned to history to anchor their post-independence nation-building project. This article explores the role of the National Museum of Tajikistan, examining how the museum discursively contributes to ‘nationalising’ history and cultural heritage for the benefit of the current Tajik nation-building project. Three main discursive strategies for such (re)construction of Tajik national identity are identified: (1) the representation of the Tajiks as a transhistorical community; (2) implicit claims of the site-specificity of the historical events depicted in the museum, by representing these as having taken place within the territory of present-day Tajikistan, thereby linking the nation to this territory; and (3) meaning-creation, endowing museum objects with meanings that fit into and reinforce the grand narrative promulgated by the museum. We conclude that the National Museum of Tajikistan demonstrates a rich and promising, although so far largely unexplored, repertoire of representing Tajik nationness as reflected in historical artefacts and objects of culture: the museum is indeed an active participant in shaping discursive strategies for (re)constructing the nation.

KEYWORDS: national identity, national museums, nation-building, Tajikistan, use of history

‘The museum is a shining mirror that reflects the life and history of the people, its rises and falls, scientific and cultural achievements and the destiny of the famous and glorious sons of the Fatherland.’ (Tajik President Emomali Rahmon 2013)

Introduction

In March 2013, the poverty-stricken Central Asian republic of Tajikistan opened a brand-new national museum: a multimillion-dollar structure with nearly 24,500 square metres of exhibition and office space, containing thousands of new exhibits and with a tripling of its staff (Sharifzoda 2014). The new National Museum of Tajikistan forms part of a recently developed

architectural complex in central Dushanbe that includes the Independence Monument; a statue of Ismoil Somoni, a tenth century-ruler of Transoxania and Khorasan and a national hero in today's Tajikistan; the National Flag Park and the (once) tallest flagpole in the world; and the Palace of the Nation, the president's official residence (Hughes 2017). Since the end of 1992–1997 Tajik civil war, President Emomali Rahmon has taken an active lead in (re) constructing national identity in order to consolidate Tajikistan's precarious statehood (Laruelle 2007; Marat 2008; Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013). The size of the investment in the museum complex, the choice of location and the fact that the national museum from now on was to be directly subordinated to the Presidential Administration¹ all speak to the significance Tajik authorities have accorded to national history within the nation-building project (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010; Laruelle 2007; Suyarkulova 2013). This article explores the role the National Museum of Tajikistan is playing in ongoing efforts to (re)construct and entrench a unifying national identity.

As Aronsson and Elgenius note, 'National museums are uniquely placed to tell us about nation-building and its imaginations and illuminate, through collections and displays, that which Anderson identified as "imagined" or Hobsbawm an "invented tradition"' (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015: 7; see also Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1983). A growing body of work examines the changing place and role of museums as well as museum politics in former Soviet republics since the breakup of the USSR.² We seek to break new ground by focusing on museum *discourse*, exploring how the new National Museum of Tajikistan engages in a discursive 'nationalisation' of history and cultural heritage for the benefit of the Tajik nation-building project.³

While President Rahmon sets the nation-building agenda through his slogans, speeches and texts (see, for example, Rakhmonov 1996), he operates in a difficult terrain. The dissolution of the Soviet Union unleashed hitherto dormant regional, religious and political cleavages that culminated in the Tajik civil war (Lynch 2001; Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013). Despite the deceptive stability of the post-conflict political landscape, ideas about what constitutes 'the Tajik nation' remain highly contested. Therefore, we argue, understanding the impact of the current nation-building project requires moving beyond the politicised messages of the president and examining how this project is amplified by academic discourses on history, culture and heritage that provide it with enhanced credibility and cultural depth.

We see the National Museum of Tajikistan as a key arena for contestation and potential clashes over meaning between politically motivated nation-building strategies and expert knowledge. The museum discourse is unique in that, unlike political discourse on the nation, the National Museum allows a more implicit, yet no less powerful, transmission of the national discourse through its consciously curated visual and textual representations of 'the national'. Extending the discourse analysis beyond the study of the plain text, we include non-verbal aspects of communication and interaction (Wodak and Meyer 2009) and base our analysis on the collection of artefacts and

images on display in the National Museum, with accompanying wall texts. The resultant museum discourse combines cultural, historical and scientific perspectives, providing 'the Tajik' with multiple legitimation strategies.

We identify three main discursive strategies for (re)constructing Tajik national identity: (1) the representation of the Tajiks as a transhistorical community through a chronologically linear exposition of the objects on display; (2) implicit claims about the site-specificity of the historical events and epochs displayed in the museum halls by presenting these as having taken place within the territory of what today constitutes Tajikistan; and (3) meaning-creation, endowing the images and objects on display with a meaning that fits into, and reinforces, the grand narrative promoted by the museum. Whereas the two former contribute to anchoring the nation in time and space, respectively, the third strategy illustrates how lifeless artefacts can be reinterpreted and imbued with 'national' meaning to serve shifting ideological frames. Throughout the analysis, we compare these strategies systematically with President Rahmon's official speeches and writings on the museum, its mission and the history of the Tajiks. In conclusion, we argue that the National Museum of Tajikistan demonstrates a rich and promising, but largely unexplored, repertoire of representations of nationness reflected in historical artefacts and objects of culture.

Nation as discourse: strategic choices on identity and memory

We approach nations as a fundamentally modern phenomenon and apply a constructivist perspective. Viewed through the critical lens of constructivism, national identities appear not as static and ready-made socio-political phenomena but as contingent and continuous discursive practices of nationalisation or ethnicisation rooted in a system of statements about and representations of the nation (de Cillia et al. 1999; Finlayson 1998; Sutherland 2005; Wodak et al. 2009). Despite their apparent ethnic and cultural roots, we view nations not as facts of nature but as continuing processes of selection and self-construction: processes in which history, memory and culture are mobilised as a source of political legitimacy for the putative nation-state. As de Cillia et al. (1999: 153) argue:

The idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people and disseminated through the systems of education, schooling, mass communication, militarization as well as through sports meetings.

In the process of constructing national identity, the past – more specifically, what Halbwachs (1992) has referred to as 'collective memory' – plays an important part. Collective memory represents a selective recollection of past events perceived to be important to members of the group or community in question; it is knowledge and information that can be shared, passed on and

(re)constructed. The term ‘memory’ here obscures the constructed nature of people’s knowledge of history, which results from systematic education, schooling and reading of authorised textbooks, rather than actually remembering centuries of events and processes (Nora 1989). Our endlessly reconstituted recollections of the past shape our lives: each generation will tend to reformulate its past in line with current needs. While the past (like the future) is ontologically inaccessible, it forms a major part of our social imagination (Lowenthal 1985).

National identity is thus shaped by strategic choices about which ‘collective memory’ or ‘national history’ is to be told and how one connects various individual events in a coherent ‘national narrative’ (de Cillia et al. 1999: 155). As we return to in discussing national museums, this process of selecting and assembling, although realised within institutions of science, education and culture, is inherently political, as it involves selecting, emphasising, manipulating and appropriating some elements of the past, while neglecting, obliterating or negating others. In the process, one set of identities and qualities becomes normalised and legitimised as the ‘national’ at the expense of other potential identities that are ignored, suppressed or defined as foreign/alien.

A national museum is a prime example of what Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory (Nora 1989). As ‘the national’ is narrated, renegotiated and maintained through museum discourse, national museums offer nodal points for anchoring fragmented discourses on nation-building and national identity.

Museums as sites for ‘nationalisation’ of culture and history

In order to consolidate national identity and statehood, nation-builders tend to draw on a fairly standardised toolkit of symbols and practices: national flags, anthems, national days, etc. (Billig 1995; Kolstø 2006). Through this standardised repertoire, the proclaimed uniqueness of the nation is highlighted and defined. The institution of national history museums forms an intrinsic element in this repertoire of nation-making, nation-claiming and nation-branding as ‘part of the checklist for being a nation’ (Kratz and Karp 2006: 3). As Elgenius points out:

Although national symbols are often misunderstood to be mainly decorative, they represent at their core imaginations and interpretations of the nation’s origin, its past, present and future. (...) National museums being no exception, they constitute *strategic markers of nation-building* introduced at pivotal times. (Elgenius 2015: 145, emphasis in original)

A national museum is intended to (re)present and legitimise the nation by retelling and celebrating its history. It thus plays a key role in the process of developing a national master-narrative that incorporates national myths about origins and a glorious past (or perhaps a devastating national trauma) and

linking these up to the present national community in an organic whole. Alternative narratives (regional or ethnic) that do not fit this storyline are neglected or suppressed. In the emerging master-narrative, the past is 'articulated, framed, or co-opted as a precursor of what it will have become in the religious, national, social, or political order of things which constitute our present time' (Preziosi 2011: 58). In other words, by presenting authoritative versions of 'the national', the national museum gives meaning to the present and sets out aspirations for the future (Elgenius 2015: 150).

In the search for a 'usable national past' (Berger 2015: 14), the national community is frequently extended far beyond the actual existence of the state in question. To give an example, a wall text in the Danish National Museum – without problematising the reference to 'Danishness' thousands of years before the modern state came into existence – announces: 'In the lake at Koelbjerg on Funen a woman drowned 10,500 years ago. She is the oldest known Dane' (quoted in Aronsson 2011: 41). In this way, the contemporary nation is equipped with a history that anchors it in a dim, distant past. From these typically humble beginnings, the storyline is projected throughout the centuries (or millennia). As Aronsson notes, 'The traditional grand narratives of national museums are built out of embedded ideas about the linearity of history (...) and the teleological conceptions of state-making trajectories' (Aronsson 2011: 31). National history is presented as an unbroken chain of events that naturally leads up to the realisation of an independent nation-state.

National history museums function as repositories for treasures seen as manifesting the nation's uniqueness: artefacts that, in one way or another, claim to represent the 'nation'. Lifeless objects become endowed with national meaning, and material evidence of the 'national' past is organised in chronologically linear expositions. Based on these objects, and not least on the accompanying wall texts that contextualise and present the ideological framing of the objects on display, the exhibition halls are meant to connect the various historical epochs of the territory that comprise the contemporary state 'as the successive stages of the ethnic nation' (Apor 2015: 46).

At the same time, national museums are by nature 'boundary-making enterprises', as they implicitly – and explicitly – demarcate the boundaries against the nation's Other(s). Whereas conventional maps on paper provide an exclusively spatial delimitation of the nation, the 'museum as map' also takes a temporal form and helps in shaping and organising the spatio-temporal demarcation of the national community (Anderson 1991; Whitehead 2011: 106). The national museum, thus, performs the purported unity of the nation by historicising territory and territorialising history (Whitehead 2011: 119).

As guardians of national historical memory and shared history, museums of national history are commonly perceived as neutral, authoritative and trustworthy (Knell 2011: 4). But, as Aronsson and Elgenius point out, as institutions where historical identity is constructed, aestheticised and represented, national museums should be analysed as 'manifestations of cultural and political desires' rather than as 'straightforward representations of historical

or national facts' (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015: 2). National museums are inherently tied to the political, social and cultural discourses and power structures of the society of which they form part (Palhegyi 2017: 1049) – ultimately, the collections and displays claim, articulate and represent dominant national values and myths (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015: 1). National museums are not only pedagogic 'cathedrals of science': they are also 'normative agents', directing people 'what to see, think, and value' (Luke 2002: 3), and powerful centres for developing and popularising official mythologies about the nation and state (Aronsson 2011; Knell 2011; Molyneaux 1994; Palhegyi 2017; Tappe 2011). As Molyneaux reminds us:

the self-consciously selective accumulation of material objects in museums (...) [does] not preserve 'the' past; rather each institution provides the structure (architectural and ideological) within which much more specific pasts are conceived, structured, reinforced and promulgated. (Molyneaux 1994: 4)

The ordering and reordering of artefacts and representations in a museum of national history serves to legitimate – or 'naturalise' – a given configuration of political authority (Steiner 1995: 4) whereby contemporary statehood is accepted as the inevitable outcome of the nation's age-long quest for independence. In sum, then, we should expect the National Museum of Tajikistan to be not only a scientific repository of the 'nation's past' but also a profoundly political institution, actively engaged in the project of post-independence nation-building.

Nation-building and history in post-independence Tajikistan

A major challenge for nation-building in what today constitutes the Republic of Tajikistan is the fact that the 'Tajik nation' as a national community is a relatively recent construct and the very existence of the republic itself is fortuitous (Abashin 2012; Battis 2015; Khalid 2015). The intellectual and structural foundations of Tajikistan's post-independence nation-building project can be traced back to late Russian imperial rule in Central Asia and to the early Soviet nationalities policy. For millennia, the territory of today's Tajikistan had been controlled by ethnically indifferent empires or local feudal principalities (Bergne 2007). The language of nationhood and ethnicity was first applied to the population of Central Asia by Russian imperial ethnographers in the late nineteenth century. The ethnographic expertise developed in this period laid the foundations for Soviet nationalities policy and was one of the key principles behind the subsequent ethnoterritorial delimitation of the 1920s and 1930s (Hirsch 2005).

It proved particularly difficult to divide up Central Asia according to these new principles: the people of this region had, until then, generally

not defined themselves in national terms (Haugen 2003; Hirsch 2005). Indeed, the very existence of a separate Tajik nation was disputed (Battis 2015; Khalid 2015). Khalid conceptualises the Tajiks as a ‘residual category’ (Khalid 2015: 291): a Persian-speaking people not easily reconciled with – indeed, ultimately unwanted as part of – the Turkic-speaking community which the local Bolsheviks promoted as the titular nation of the new Uzbek SSR. This ‘absence of Tajiks’ (*ibid.*: 292) during the initial stages of the formation of local power structures and negotiations over the future status of Central Asian territories and communities was to have a lasting impact, as it affected what resources, territory and people would eventually get assigned to the Tajik nation-to-be.⁴

Bergne (2007) argues that the birth of Tajik identity coincided with the establishment of a separate Tajik union republic in 1929, when the Tajik SSR was carved out of the Uzbek SSR (see also Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013; Omelicheva 2015). This assertion dovetails with the widely held understanding of the sources of national identity in the Soviet context as being territorialised, with the level of state support and room for ethnic consolidation made contingent on what territorial status a given group was assigned (see, e.g., Hirsch 2005). However, new archival research has revealed that, despite some pressure to promote a unified national culture and identity, particularly under Stalin, representations of Tajikistan’s culture and populace remained ethnically ambiguous well into the Soviet period (Kuziev 2018; Nunan 2010).

After Tajikistan in 1991 stumbled into an unexpected independence it had neither sought, nor fought for, the new rulers, like their counterparts across the region, set about propping up statehood through various nation-building efforts. A key element in this push was a re-evaluation of the historical antecedents of the contemporary state. Smith has identified three tendencies underpinning post-independence nationalising discourses in the former Soviet republics: efforts to ‘essentialise’ the nation and to represent its identity as ‘linear, continuous and above all singular’; to ‘historicise’ the nation by rediscovering and/or inventing golden ages and national heroes; and to ‘totalise’ it by ‘turning relative differences into absolute ones’ and squeezing individuals into ascribed categories (Smith 1998: 15–16). All these trends manifested themselves in the Tajik nation-building project: to justify and legitimise statehood, the roots of the redefined national community were extended back in time to incorporate ancient cultures and state formations. As summarised by Laruelle, in post-independence Tajikistan

historical analysis (...) 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. (Laruelle 2007: 51)

In the interest of nation-building, history as a subject has been thoroughly politicised: historians have been called upon to legitimise the concept of a Tajik nation-state by contributing to the nationalisation of the past. But the powers-that-be have also themselves intervened more directly in the renegotiation of the historical grand narrative. For example, through his *Tajiks in the Mirror of History: From the Aryans to the Samanids*, President Rahmon provided the ideological signposts for subsequent academic contributions to the nation-building process (Rakhmonov 1996; see also Abashin 2012; Shnirel'man 2009).

In contrast to the primordialist tenor of official Tajik historiography (see, for example, Masov 2008; Negmatov 1997; Umarzoda 2006), most English-language studies of the post-independence Tajik nation-building process have been inspired by a constructivist approach, exploring the various ways in which the Rahmon regime has sought to articulate and entrench certain ideas and concepts about the Tajik nation and Tajikness. After the devastating 1992–1997 civil war, the regime implemented a series of state-sponsored campaigns to mobilise national pride and unity. These efforts were aimed at overcoming the significant regional, confessional, linguistic and ethnic divisions that still keep surfacing (Beeman 1999; Laruelle 2007; Marat 2008). These campaigns include various attempts at ‘nationalising’ history – to appropriate the Aryan civilisation for the Tajik nation (Laruelle 2007; Suyarkulova 2013) and promulgate the Samanid Empire (892–999) as the ‘golden age’ of Tajik statehood (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010; Nourzhanov 2001) – as well as more forward-looking mobilisation around the construction of the Roghun Dam as a ‘national idea’⁵ and symbol of national pride, prosperity and progress (Menga 2015; Suyarkulova 2014).

Scholars have explored the interaction between the political discourse of President Rahmon and official historians (Horak 2010; Laruelle 2007; Nourzhanov 2001; Suyarkulova 2013). However, the role of the National Museum of Tajikistan as the ultimate melting pot of nation-building and history, a site where the ‘national’ past is negotiated, represented and showcased, has remained an untapped but promising area of study.⁶

The National Museum of Tajikistan and the production of museum discourse

The National Museum of Tajikistan traces its origins back to the early Soviet period, with the local history museum (Russ.: *istoriko-kraevedcheskii*; Tadj.: *osorkhonai ta'rikhī-kishvarshionsī*) that was opened in Dushanbe in 1934 (Kuziev 2018). This museum was an intrinsic part of the Soviet nation-building programme (Hirsch 2005): with the establishment of the Tajik SSR in 1929, the republic had to be equipped with the standard repertoire of ‘national’ institutions, including a museum of local history. The museum was later merged with the fine arts museum and named after the mediaeval miniature painter Kamoliddin Bekhzod.

In 1999, the old Soviet museum was granted status as a national museum. As post-conflict recovery was slow and resources scarce, the new status did not entail any immediate significant changes in the exhibition practices. The only innovation in the collection was a series of exhibits presented as 'Tajikistan in the Independence Period' and an increasing number of memorabilia bequeathed by President Rahmon. In 2011, however, Rahmon approved the construction of a new home for the museum. Structurally, the new National Museum of Tajikistan is an enlarged, modernised and technologically improved version of the Bekhzod National Museum, whose collection has remained the core of the new museum's exhibits. The main differences between the two museums are found in their everyday operation, the textual framing and curatorial choices.

Since re-opening in new premises in 2013, the National Museum has become a genuine attraction not only for the local Tajik public but for international tourists as well. According to the museum's long-time director, Abduvali Sharipov, during the first year after the opening, the museum attracted about 500,000 visitors.⁷ The fact that considerable time and effort have been invested in producing multilingual presentations of its collection suggests that it seeks to serve a diverse audience. For example, all wall texts are given in Tajik and in most cases also in Russian and English; guided tours are offered in the same three languages plus Arabic. From a nation-building perspective, however, the fact that visiting the museum is a mandatory activity for local high-school and university students, civil servants, and military and law enforcement staff alike, testifies to the importance and role that the authorities have assigned to the National Museum.

The wall texts and labels on display in the National Museum are the primary source for studying how the museum is discursively 'nationalising' history and cultural heritage. These wall texts have been produced by multiple authors with varying types of training and background, as also reflected in the language. The initial drafts, composed by specialists within the relevant department of the museum, normally include a textual description of the object (production technique, geographic place of origin and, if possible, year of production). In the process of producing the wall texts, these specialists also draw on relevant literature and the expertise of external academics – usually the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan (Kuziev 2018).

While all current heads of the various departments of the museum are ethnic Tajiks, most of the Soviet-trained museum staff are usually more comfortable compiling labels and wall texts in Russian and then translating them into English and Tajik. Members of the post-independence generation of museum workers, by contrast, tend to compose the texts in Tajik.⁸ The three versions of the texts are not always congruent; especially in the longer wall texts that introduce the collections in a given hall, numerous inconsistencies can be noted. Usually the Tajik version stands out as representing more primordialist versions of the 'Tajik past'. Because Tajik is the language of the nation-building project, we base our analysis (below) on the Tajik-language version.⁹

Anchoring the nation in the past

As noted, a main task and mission for every national museum is to demonstrate the deep historical roots of the nation – to connect today’s imagined community with its alleged ancestors by anchoring the nation discursively in the past. This process frequently entails laying claim to ancient cultures and dynasties that have thrived on the territory of the present state formation as the historical forebears of the current national community and incorporating these as part of a ‘temporally extended Self’. The goal is to reinforce national myths and provide a comprehensive historical master-narrative of the people as ‘always’ having resided in the territory of the state: ‘The story begins with rocks and skulls: a soil charged with strong ethnic feelings suited to representing the blood of a population which has always been there’ (Porciani 2015: 125).

The National Museum of Tajikistan is no exception. The new museum inherited the chronological organisation of its historical collection from its Soviet predecessor and presents the collections in thematically organised exhibition rooms, offering visitors a virtual time travel as they move through various historical epochs. Upon entering the museum, members of the public are usually instructed in which order to explore the exhibits. Museum staff encourage visitors to start with the basement floor with the natural history collection; then proceed to the ground floor to acquaint themselves with the ancient history; then move to the next two floors for the mediaeval and modern history collection; and, finally, to explore the top floor, where fine arts are exhibited. If requested, a museum guide will give a tour through all the halls, following that same order.¹⁰

Each historical epoch that the visitor enters is illustrated by a range of objects as well as mock-ups and photographs of archaeological sites contextualised and explained through wall texts. Moving forward through time, the visitor first encounters the ancestors of the Tajiks in the fourth century BC:

The fight of the ancestors of the *Tajiks* against Alexander [the Great] of Macedonia. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text, emphasis added)

The text depicts the revolt of Spitamenes against Alexander in 329 BC, thereby incorporating the Sogdians into the official ancestry of the Tajiks.

The main thrust towards extending the nation temporally becomes evident in the way the Aryan civilisation and the Samanids are written into the national Self. Both these epochs have played key roles in President Rahmon’s post-independence, post-civil war nation-building efforts (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010). In recent years, for example, the retroactive constitution of identity links between Aryans and Tajiks has been performed through the promotion of *Nowruz*, the Zoroastrian new year at the vernal equinox, as the main national holiday of Tajikistan today (Nourzhanov 2015: 79–80). The National Museum writes itself into this (re)invented tradition not only by displaying objects and texts related to Zoroastrianism but also symbolically, as the museum was inaugurated as part of the 2013 official *Nowruz* celebrations. On that occasion, Rahmon declared:

This ancient holiday of *our ancestors* is a symbol of eternity, rebirth of nature, human morality, and for us Tajiks, it is a sacred and dear holiday. *Our Aryan culture and traditions* from ancient times to the present are inseparably linked with the traditions of Nowruz. (Rahmon 2013, emphasis added)

With the help of the abstract notion of ‘ancestors’, Rahmon constructs a genealogical link connecting the Aryan civilisation with contemporary Tajiks. In casting the relationship in terms of heritage and descent, he seeks to bridge dynastic, religious and ethnic divides in the interest of historical linearity and to incorporate the Aryans as an unquestionable element in the genealogy of the Tajik ‘Self’.

Given the emphasis on the Aryan heritage in official nation-building discourse, the wall texts devoted to the National Museum’s display of Aryan culture and Zoroastrianism appear remarkably subdued. For the most part, objects and events are presented without explicit references to the Tajik nation: not as part of the ethnicised history promoted by Rahmon, but rather as evidence that this culture and religion have existed and flourished on the territory of Tajikistan throughout the centuries.

Also, with respect to the other ‘temporally extended Self’, the Samanid state, we note a certain discrepancy between how the president and the museum pitch their messages. In keynote speeches devoted to national identity, President Rahmon has made repeated efforts to link the Samanid state with the present-day Tajik nation. The following excerpts demonstrate how he not only incorporates the Samanids into Tajik ancestry but also draws parallels between Samanid and contemporary Tajik statehood – and, moreover, presents these claims as well-established historical facts:

As has been repeatedly pointed out in my speeches and books on the history of our ancient people and the traditions of statehood of our ancestors, the Tajik people throughout its long history lived through a range of states and statehoods. However, it was the Samanid epoch (...) [that facilitated] the formation of *a mighty nation-state that united the Tajik people*, and favourable conditions for the revival of the cultural traditions, rituals and material and spiritual values of our people. (Rahmon 2015b, emphasis added)

You know very well that Shah Ismoil Somoni one thousand years ago founded a centralised Tajik state, introduced a Tajik method of governance. Our people, one thousand years later, acquired a nation-state, taking advantage of the traditions of the mighty Samanid state, once again proving that the ancient Tajik people are capable of upholding the fluttering banner of its statehood. (Rahmon 2015a)

There is no historical evidence to indicate that the Samanid state identified itself as ‘Tajik’ (it consisted of a range of tribal and ethnic communities) or that this feudal and dynastic state developed an inherently ‘Tajik’ mode of governance. In the museum wall texts, this seems to be reflected in the way the curators present the Samanid state: not as an ethnic ‘Tajik’ state, but focusing instead on the great achievements of this dynasty. The textual descriptions of the artefacts on display in the Samanid hall – examples of Samanid calligraphy, glass and ceramics, as well as descriptions of the historic monuments of

that epoch, including the Khoja Mashhad Madrasa and Hulbuk Citadel – generally make no reference to the Tajik nation. One exception is the wall text devoted to Samanid cultural achievements:

In the history of the development of classic *Tajik* literature, the 9th–10th centuries are considered one of the most important stages. This was the time of the founder of *Tajik*-Persian classical literature Abu Abdullo Rudaki. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text, emphasis added)

This juxtaposition of Samanids and Tajiks is even more evident in another wall text:

It should be noted that one of the 9th-century states – the Saffarid state – was founded by *Tajiks*. Its name reflects the copper works of its founders.¹¹ During the Samanid period, *Tajik* copper working was highly developed. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text, emphasis added)

There is thus a certain discursive contestation at play in the way the anchoring of the nation in time is attempted. The president unabashedly incorporates Aryans and Samanids into a ‘temporally extended Self’ to construct a seemingly unbroken chain of history that links the imagined community of the present to its equally imagined glorious past. On the other hand, the National Museum, while promoting the idea of continuity through the chronologically linear exposition, tries to maintain a more dry, scholarly tone, only occasionally allowing more primordial, essentialising rhetoric to slip into the wall texts.

Projecting the nation onto the map

While the linear exposition anchors the nation in time, simulating an assumed uninterrupted flow of ‘national’ history, the spatial dimension is related to the purported site-specificity of the events and epochs presented, of ‘historicising territory and territorialising history’. In the National Museum of Tajikistan, the wall texts take the current spatial delimitation of the state as their point of departure when setting out to amalgamate nation and territory. The supposedly transhistorical Tajik nation is projected onto the contemporary map.

The map constitutes an intrinsic part of the national imaginary of every nation-state, allowing the subject population to imagine where the Other ends and the Self begins (Anderson 1991). The first exhibit that the visitor sees upon entering the National Museum of Tajikistan is in fact a 3D map of Tajikistan under thick glass. This map allows the visitor to walk across the territory of Tajikistan and observe its natural and historical sites – as well as fragments of neighbouring states that appear as Tajikistan’s unembellished surroundings. This ‘map-as-logo’ (*ibid.*: 175) can also be read as an entry point to the history of the territory that unfolds in the wall texts located throughout the museum.

Analysis of the wall texts reveals how history is framed in a way that makes any and all ancient cultures and monuments found within this territory part of the ‘national’ history:

The Lower Palaeolithic in the early Stone Age was when primitive man appeared in *Tajikistan*, living in small groups. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text, emphasis added)

In this way, the artefacts are anchored discursively within, and thus help to reinforce, the territorial expression of the nation.

The National Museum’s official charter reveals how this ideological confluence of history, culture, territory and nation discussed above also has penetrated the legal discourse around the museum. ‘Tajik’ and ‘nation’ are used almost interchangeably with ‘pre-modern culture’, ‘heritage’ and ‘territory’:¹²

The museum building (...) is the treasury of the priceless heritage of the *national culture* (...). [The goal of the museum is to provide] a comprehensive representation of Tajikistan’s nature, the history, arts and culture of *the Tajiks* by way of acquisitioning and collecting the finest and most important material monuments, natural specimens and museum objects. (...) In the collection process [the National Museum is obliged to] pay particular attention to *the heritage of the glorious epochs of the Tajik nation*. (Ustav gosudarstvennogo utchrezhdeniia 2011, emphasis added)

In addition to this discursive nationalisation of the museum artefacts, the ideas of national continuity and community within the framework of the existing territory are also promoted in the wider museum discourse. A clear example is President Rahmon’s speech at the opening of the National Museum in 2013. Here, he situates archaeological finds and ancient history on display within the discourse on the Tajik nation, merging nation and state into a unified whole:

The halls of the museum display unique artefacts of the *ancient history of the Tajik people* from the Stone Age to the Islamic epoch, from the 10th century to independent Tajikistan. (Rakhmon 2013, emphasis added)

Rahmon thus presents the Tajik nation as a clearly defined, consolidated ethnic community that has existed across these historical epochs. The history of Tajikistan becomes the history of the Tajiks, who in their onerous but uninterrupted journey through time move towards the realisation of the ultimate goal: independent statehood for the nation within the borders of what today constitutes the Republic of Tajikistan.

Dealing with the Soviet national-territorial delimitation process of the 1920s represents a delicate challenge in this respect. On the one hand, this process gave birth to the historical forerunner of contemporary Tajikistan, the Tajik SSR, and is therefore crucial for underpinning the legitimacy of the current state. On the other hand, in the post-independence nation-building process, this is frequently framed as a ‘national tragedy’, as the new borders separated the Tajik

SSR from the Tajik-speaking cultural centres of Samarkand and Bukhara, which ended up in the Uzbek SSR (Masov 2008; Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013). While generally presenting the Soviet experience in a positive light, the portion of the exhibition devoted to the early Soviet period reproduces the dominant narrative of the Tajiks as victims of pan-Turkic and Uzbek machinations.

The national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia on the basis of the ethnic distribution has on the one hand given tremendous opportunities to the peoples of the region, but on the other hand, it separated the Tajik people from its cultural and educational centres, something which to this day is negatively reflected in culture, economy and politics, and which represented a national tragedy for the Tajik people. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text)

When the history of the nation and the history of the state cannot be easily reconciled, the solution is to privilege the narrative of the Tajik nation as a transhistorical community. The wall text leaves the visitor with an inkling of an alternative map, of what the state might have looked like. Apart from this one deflection, however, the overall message of the discourse promoted by the museum cannot be mistaken: the Tajik nation permeates the state territory in both time and space.

Nationalising objects through meaning-creation

Beyond contributing to anchoring the nation discursively in time and space, national museums also continuously engage in meaning production – defining and modifying the meaning of museum objects to reflect (and speak to) broader ideological frames. As Knell (2011) reminds us, a museum object is imbued with multiple meanings and can be used as material evidence to represent different epochs and historical narratives. Once the objects are placed in an ideological environment, value and meaning get attached to them, usually through text (wall texts, catalogues, curatorial and political statements, etc.). To illustrate how museum discourse in Tajikistan creates and changes the meanings of the artefacts on display in order to ‘nationalise’ these objects, we now turn to the presentation of a piece that has been central to the efforts to ascribe national meaning and significance to the collection of the National Museum: *the Iskodar Mihrab*.

A *mihrab* is an architectural element of a mosque, a niche that serves to indicate to the worshippers in which direction to face (that is, towards the Kaaba in Mecca). The Iskodar Mihrab is considered ‘the biggest wooden altar in the world dating from the 9th–10th centuries AD’ (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text). The most immediate role of this object is obviously to acknowledge the importance of Islam, which in Soviet tradition was broadly recognised as the ‘cultural heritage’ of the Central Asian peoples (Khalid 2007).¹³ However, the reason why this mihrab is given greater prominence than

other exhibits representing the Islamic heritage (mediaeval manuscripts, miniatures, etc.) is that it also displays 'evidence' of camouflaged pre-Islamic ideas.

Closer analysis of the texts describing and contextualising the mihrab reveals at least three instances of signification, that is, of different representations of meaning: first, as an actual mihrab without any particular meaning to the nation; second, as an artefact representing the pre-Islamic Aryan heritage of the Tajiks; and third, most recently, as material evidence of the renaissance of 'Tajik culture' under the Samanid Empire.

Evidence of the initial significance of the Iskodar Mihrab can be found in the wall text in the National Museum:

The mihrab was discovered in 1925 by the famous Russian ethnographer M.S. Andreev in the village of Iskodar in the Falgar (nowadays Ayni) district of the Leninabad (nowadays Sughd) oblast. According to the villagers, the mihrab was located inside an old mosque. But precise information about the original location of the mihrab is not available. (...) The mihrab was moved to the National Museum named after K. Bekhzod by its staff member V. Chelytko in 1946. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall text)

From this text, we can infer that before being 'discovered', the Iskodar Mihrab had no particular relevance as 'national heritage': it was used as an actual mihrab in an old mosque. The fact that the mihrab was moved to the museum only in 1946, some 20 years after it had been 'discovered', also indicates that its significance as a museum object was not immediately evident at the time.

The second instance of signification took place more recently and coincided with a key event in the process of contemporary national identity-building in Tajikistan: the celebration of the Year of Aryan Civilisation in 2006 (Laruelle 2007; Nourzhanov 2015). In conjunction with this celebration, the mihrab was restored as part of the project 'Pre-Islamic Heritage in the Culture of Tajikistan' (Mamedov 2008). The new importance accorded to the Aryan heritage in official identity discourse played a decisive role in this signification: now, this Muslim religious object was celebrated as a masterpiece of pre-Islamic, Aryan culture. According to Georgii Mamedov, director of the restoration project,

The 'Iskodar Mihrab' is officially dated to the 9th–10th centuries AD, the time of the rule of the Samanid dynasty and official conversion of people of Central Asia to Islam, a religion that prohibits depicting people and animals and also categorically rejects pagan worship of fire and nature symbolised by the swastika as the unity of the four natural elements: fire, water, air and earth. It is surprising that the central part of a Muslim mosque – the mihrab – the niche that indicates the direction of Mecca, is artfully decorated with swastikas, trefoils and fish. (Mamedov 2008: 2)

While the text acknowledges the contradiction between the Islamic discourse that could have been expected to permeate Samanid art and pre-Islamic religious practices, it reflects the widespread pro-Aryan enthusiasm among cultural workers in Tajikistan at the time and the search for material evidence that could represent this heritage.

Finally, we note a third instance of signification for the Iskodar Mihrab: the recent placement of this object in the hall dedicated to the Samanid state in the new National Museum, where it is accompanied by the following text:

What can be said about the historical significance of the mihrab? First and foremost, it is undeniable proof of the great *culture of the Tajik people*. In it we can observe a continuation of the pre-Islamic art of the great masters of wood carving. The master, despite the restrictions of Islamic law on visual arts, carved the mihrab with elements of the pre-Islamic *worldview of the Tajiks*. The Iskodar Mihrab is evidence of the period of Samanid rule being an epoch of *cultural renaissance of the Tajik people*. (National Museum of Tajikistan wall texts, emphasis added)

In his speech on the occasion of the opening of the National Museum, President Rahmon highlighted the Iskodar Mihrab as ‘a supreme example of the art of wood carving of the Samanid epoch’ (Rakhmon 2013). Aside from Rahmon’s claim, however, no historical proof is provided – neither in wall texts nor in any of the museum catalogues – of the Iskodar Mihrab as actually being representative of Samanid arts and culture. The celebration of this mihrab is probably rather a reflection of the dearth of material representations of Samanid culture in present-day Tajikistan. As the only authentic, noteworthy object among a series of mock-ups of buildings, reconstructions, maps and photographs in the hall devoted to the Samanid state, the Iskodar Mihrab plays an important role as ‘material evidence’ of the alleged link between the Samanid state and the contemporary Tajik nation.

From the texts and language used about the Iskodar Mihrab, we can see how its meaning and significance for discourse on the ‘Tajik nation’ change in line with the ideological trends dominating the nation-building project. This illustrates the malleability of museum objects: in response to shifting ideological demands, the meaning of an object can be modified or transformed through being recontextualised to satisfy new needs. Artefacts initially collected and catalogued by Soviet museum workers may take on new life and meaning in the context of post-independence Tajik nation-building.

Concluding discussion

Our analysis reveals that the new National Museum of Tajikistan is in no way a neutral ‘cathedral of science’ or objective collector and chronicler of the past, but an active contributor to the discourse on the ‘national’ in post-independence Tajikistan. In his case study of museums, memory and representation, Tappe has pointed out how, in a post-colonial context and in the face of internal frictions and contested nation-building processes, leaders of newly independent states have to come up with strategies for presenting their putative ‘nation-state’ as legitimate and meaningful. Here, he argues, control over museum exhibitions is essential, as this allows national entrepreneurs to project a ‘correct’ representation of the nation (Tappe 2011: 606). By taking administrative control over the new National Museum of Tajikistan and subordinating it directly to the

Presidential Administration, President Rahmon has strengthened his power to define the essence of Tajikness and the country's history. Pivotal periods of this history, such as the Soviet modernisation project and the post-independence civil war, are conspicuously absent in the historical collection, as are regional differences and the existence of ethnic minorities, while references to Rahmon's grand narrative permeates the museum halls – all in the interest of presenting a coherent, consolidated national history.

However, we have also observed how Rahmon's (shifting) version(s) of Tajik history have encountered some resistance in the meeting with the museum. When national identity is understood as discursively constructed, we accept that this identity emerges through a continuous process of articulation and re-articulation – and of contestation in the form of rival attempts at defining what the nation is *really* like. For national entrepreneurs, there is a constant struggle for hegemony, for fixing a given representation of 'the nation'. There will always be an element of contestation as various actors seek to change or challenge the existing discourse. This is also the case when it comes to pinning down the meaning of being 'Tajik'.

This article has explored how the 'Tajik nation' has been discursively represented in the halls of the National Museum of Tajikistan. We have argued that, in order to (re)construct post-independence Tajik national identity, the museum has mobilised a series of discursive techniques that all produce a nationalisation effect: a linear exposition, a claim about site-specificity and meaning-creation whereby lifeless objects are imbued with 'national' meaning. At first glance, the resultant museum discourse would appear to resonate well with key propositions of President Rahmon's nation-building project. However, a closer examination of texts and displays reveals a certain ambiguity, if not outright contestation, at play in the way in which the 'national' heritage featured in the museum is discussed and presented.

The official discourse framed and fronted by Rahmon has been rather emotional and somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent in its attempts at connecting the contemporary nation with various historical epochs and artefacts. The museum-promoted discourse, as reflected in the wall texts, on the other hand, is generally kept more ethnically neutral and emotionally detached. That being said, the museum discourse is not entirely consistent: although the National Museum appears to be striving to maintain a scientific tone, we also find traces of discursive contamination in the way it (re)presents the collection. Occasionally, it lapses into more primordially inspired references like the claim about the founders of the ninth century Saffarid dynasty/state being 'Tajik'.

We have also seen how the National Museum of Tajikistan has engaged in re-signification of museum artefacts in order to satisfy the political and ideological needs of the day. The case of the Iskodar Mihrab illustrates how a museum object may acquire and change meaning depending on the ideological context shaped by museum professionals. It also illustrates the broader convulsions of post-independence Tajik nation-building, with its various and not always consistent projects of 'Tajikness'.

Through its deliberate selection of what memories/histories to remember and what to forget, which artefacts to display and within what context, the museum contributes to reinforcing and fixing a hegemonic discourse about the Tajik nation. It offers the 'national' a nodal point where the grand narrative of the nation's deep historic roots is supported by material 'evidence', downplaying the relative recency of Tajik statehood in order to celebrate the alleged ancientness of the Tajik nation. Thus, with its repertoire of representations of nationness, the National Museum of Tajikistan plays a crucial role in the ongoing 're-writing of the nation'.

Notes

1 President Emomali Rahmon's involvement in the development of the new museum project is acknowledged in a separate exhibition room which also displays gifts that the president has received, his portrait, photographs and various historical artefacts.

2 See, for example, Abashin (2010), Adams (2002), Khazanov (2000), Kuutma and Kroon (2012), and Sharifzoda (2014).

3 We understand 'discourse' in a Foucauldian sense, as 'practices that systemically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). In line with Dunn and Neumann, we see discourses as 'systems of meaning-production that fix meaning, however temporarily, and enable actors to make sense of the world and to act within it' (Dunn and Neumann 2016: 4).

4 The process of national delimitation of Central Asia holds an important place in both Tajik national historiography and the post-independence nation-building process. While prominent Tajik historians Bobojon Gafurov and Rahim Masov have put the blame for the outcome of this process on pan-Turkists and Uzbek nationalists (Gafurov 1972; Masov 2008), Western observers have frequently argued that it was a result of the Kremlin's 'divide and rule' approach to Central Asia (see, e.g., Carrère d'Encausse 1993; Sabol 1995). More recent scholarship, however, also points to the lack of Tajik self-identification when trying to explain why the Persian-speaking population failed to be united within the borders of the new Tajik SSR (see, e.g., Khalid 2015).

5 The concept of Roghun as a 'national idea' was coined by President Rahmon in a 2010 address to the people of Tajikistan (*CA-News.Info* 2010). Projected by Soviet engineers already in the 1960s, the dam, when finished, will be the world's highest (335 metres) and will contribute significantly to the energy-strapped economy of Tajikistan. The project has exacerbated the Tajik-Uzbek controversy over water management (Menga 2015).

6 Hughes (2017) has studied the museum as part of the newly developed capitol complex from the perspective of national identity building but limits her discussion to the architectural exterior and its interplay with other newly erected 'national' structures.

7 Conversation with Sharipov by one of the authors during fieldwork.

8 Personal observation by one of the authors.

9 All translations have been made by the present authors.

10 Personal observation by one of the authors. Basically, the layout of the exhibition in the new museum building copies the one in the old premises of the National Museum of Tajikistan named after K. Bekhzod, a three-storey former technical college that housed the collection from 1959 up to the opening of the new National Museum of Tajikistan in 2013 (*OrexCa.com*. n.d.).

11 The founder of the dynasty, Ya'qub ibn al-Layth al-Saffar, was originally a coppersmith (*saffar*).

12 The National Museum's charter is not a public document. Still, it is relevant for the present study as it reflects how the museum leadership's use of such concepts as 'nation', 'culture' and 'heritage' is congruent with the way these terms are used by the political leadership of Tajikistan.

13 While representing Islam *qua* cultural heritage is uncontroversial, the position towards *political* Islam in post-independence nation-building has been more ambivalent, not least because of the role of the Islamic Renaissance Party in the civil war (see, e.g., Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010; Karagiannis 2006; Nourzhanov 2015).

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