

Uyghur Meshrep Culture and Its Social Function

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ABSTRACT

The Uyghur Meshrep, as a specific cultural symbol, possesses great ethnocultural significance and it serves an important social function complementary to Uyghur people's customs of production, livelihoods, beliefs, rituals, and festival celebrations. The Uyghur Meshrep is referred to as the "Moral School" or "Art School" by Uyghur people. Knowledge of the Uyghur Meshrep culture is helpful for further understanding the unique culture of the Uyghur people.

Key Words: Uyghur; Meshrep; social function

Uyghur Autonomous Region

The majority of Uyghur people in China live in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (abbrev: Xinjiang), which is also named after the biggest minority of this region. With a territory of over 1,664,897 sq. km, Xinjiang is the largest Chinese administrative division. Located in the northwestern border of China, Xinjiang borders the countries of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The extremely rugged Karakoram, Kunlun, and Tenggirtagh mountain ranges (Chinese: Tian Shan) occupy much of Xinjiang's borders, as well as its western and southern regions. Xinjiang also borders the Tibet Autonomous Region and the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai. Urumqi is the capital city of Xinjiang, Uyghur Autonomous Region. Taklimakan Desert, which is the largest desert in China, and Turpan Basin, which is the lowest land below sea level in China, are all in the Xinjiang Region. Xinjiang has a typical temperate continental climate which is dry in the southern part of the region and rainy in the northern region – with an average annual temperature of 10.4 C° (50.72 °F) and average annual rainfall of 190mm. Wheat, corn, cotton, and silkworm cocoon are



Figure 1: The location of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

its main crops. It abounds in long staple cotton and fruits such as grape, melon, apple, pear, and licorice root. The most well-known route of the historical Silk Road ran through the territory from the east to its northwestern border. In recent decades, abundant oil and mineral reserves have been found in Xinjiang, and it is currently China's largest natural gas-producing region.¹

1. Starr, Frederick (ed.) 2003. Xinjiang: China's Muslim Frontier. (Central Asia- CaucasusInstitute Monograph Series, I.) New York, London: M.I. Sharpe.

Although Xinjiang has a vast territory—more than 4.6 times that of Germany—only about 4.3% of Xinjiang's land area is fit for human habitation. With a population of 22.64 million (2013), it is home to a number of ethnic groups including Uyghurs (47.45%)¹, Han (37.99%), Kazakhs (7%), Hui (4.6%), Kirgiz (0.9%), Mongols (0.8%), and a small percentage of Russian and other nationalities.² These ethnic groups have lived harmoniously in this region and each have distinct cultures. The Uyghur Meshrep culture is one of the most popular of these cultures.

Uyghur Meshrep Culture

A Meshrep (Uyghur: **مەشرەپ**) is a traditional male Uyghur gathering that typically includes “poetry, music, dance, and conversation within a structural context”, and unique to its own social group depends on the participants' age group such as young adults or a mixed group of all ages and genders. Uyghur Meshrep is supplemented by a variety of comedy performances in the form of mass entertainment. It combines singing, music, dance, games and is widely spread among the Uyghur people in the north and south of Xinjiang as an integral part of Uyghur traditional folk entertainment. Meshrep typically include music of the “Muqam”³ variety and ad-hoc tribunals on moral questions. Traditionally, Meshrep were only held on the harvest, weddings, circumcisions, and girls' comings of age ceremonies.

Each Meshrep consists of a leader (yigit bashi, an older man), a disciplinarian (passhap begi), and 30 younger men (ottuz oghul), who sit on a carpet according to seniority. As the Meshrep is primarily a male bonding event, the women and children of the host's family are to stay inside the house and only interact with the men to bring them food or to otherwise serve them. Music is an essential component of the Meshrep, and during the Meshrep, men play progressively faster Muqam melodies on the dutar (two string pear-shaped long-necked lute), while others compete to see who can perform whirling circle dances for the longest period of time. Some Meshreps also feature songs, skits, and lectures from religious leaders.

Meshrep is very popular among the Uyghur peoples' holidays, festivals, weddings, and friendly gatherings. As Meshrep is rooted in strong local characteristics, it has many forms. Despite these variations, they share an intimate relatedness. The famous local Meshreps are “Qatar Chay” (rotate tea) and “Seyle” (tour) in Kashgar, “Barawet” (Dinner Party) in Atush, “Kok” (Green Seedling) in Qomul, “Dadur” (Soybean) in Turpan, “Qarliq” (First Snow) in Ili, “Kachung” (Place name) in Yarkend, “Chipan” (Place name) in Qarghiliq, and “Dolan” (Place name) in Mekit. Uyghur people say that “life without Meshrep is no vitality” (Dawut 2003). Thus, Uyghur people have to organize Meshrep when an occasion is regarded as worth celebrating. Though Meshrep might be regarded by outsiders as sheer entertainment, it holds strong social and cultural functions among the Uyghur people.

Meshrep and Mood Regulation

Dance serves an important function for human beings. As people cannot engage in never-ending work; they have created recreational activities (at the appropriate time) that mediate mind and body. Given that humans are often

1. This percentage indicates the portion of whole population in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

2. Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (2014). China Statistics Press, 2014.

3. The Uyghur Muqam is the general term for a variety of Muqam practices widespread among the Uyghur communities in Xinjiang. It has developed four main regional styles, namely the Twelve Muqam, Dolan Muqam, Turpan Muqam and Qomul Muqam. The Muqam includes songs, dances, folk and classical music and is characterized by diversity of content, choreography, musical styles and instruments used.



Figure 2:
The comic
performance on
the Meshrep.

under physical and spiritual oppression in daily life, accumulated repression can become a destructive force that attacks the body and mind. During the Meshrep activities all people sing, dance, and/or play—as performers or audience members. In this way they can eliminate fatigue and emotional catharsis, make friends, and achieve the purpose of regulating mood and body.

In the countryside of Kucha region, there is a version of Meshrep called “cockfighting game Meshrep” which has been handed down from generation to generation. It is generally held in the period of planting and harvest season when peasants are tired of farm work. They gather in a large courtyard or an orchard to watch the cockfight and then perform the Meshrep. The peasants sometimes perform Meshrep frankly in the farmland in order to relieve the fatigue via entertainment. Typically, the Dolan people organize Meshreps during the idle time of winter, as well as in the busy

farming season. With the Meshrep, they believe that they can alleviate fatigue and reduce stress in their lives.

Kok Meshrep in Qomul is also intended to add variety to boring, long winter days. As winter days approach, every family in the hamlet will bring a green seedling of wheat, barley or garlic. Whichever family has grown the best seedling has the right to invite neighbours, relatives, and friends to organize “Kok Meshrep” at their home. The people usually play drums and the Ghijek (local music instrument) to perform Qomul Muqam and dance. During the Meshrep, people like to tell jokes, sing songs, and dancing. The dancing skills involve unique steps, rhythms, and formations as well as figures such as flower-picking by mouth, bowl-carrying on head and imitation of animals in solo dances. At the end of the Meshrep, the host dances two circulations with a plate of green seedling on their hand, and then gives it to someone who will prepare the

Figure 3:
Men singing
songs on the
“Dolan Meshrep”



next Meshrep.

Uyghur Meshreps enable farmers to endure amidst the hardships of stressful labor. This is why Uyghur people hold Meshreps in such high regard, whether they are older or younger, man or woman. In addition to various forms of Meshreps, there are folk Muqam which is also very suitable for performances in special environments. For example, Dolan people who live in the desert or swamp area are away from home for a long time when they need to gather firewood or to herd. During the long and lonely journey, they mostly like to sing at the top of their voice, so as to disperse the bitter loneliness. People usually like to sing the “Chol Bayawan (Desert) Muqam” of the “Dolan Muqam.” Similar to the Meshrep, Muqams are rooted in folk like and have rich contents and diverse forms. The performing style is also lively and flexible; it combines singing, walking and dancing. Its relaxed, lively, and humorous characters that are expressed by the

artistic forms are handed down from generation to generation, and it becomes not only the primary means of adjusting the pace of life but also the essential spiritual nourishment in the oasis society.

Meshrep as Education

Meshrep serves as the carrier of culture and occupies an important position in an individual's socialization process. The Meshrep is regarded by the Uyghur people as “folk art school”; it not only carries various folk arts from generation to generation, it also produces new kinds. These folk arts have been verified in public activities, and continue to be improved upon and perfected. Through Meshrep activities, people are educated in art, morality, and social norms early in life. Children grow up listening to Meshrep music, attend dance venues, and understand the social relationships and various social etiquette via various



Figure 4:
The "Green seedling
Meshrep" in
Qomul Region

games in the Meshrep. Therefore, the Meshrep is a school where people - especially young people - learn traditional morals, folk customs, and ethnic indigenous knowledge. In addition, community members receive education in self-temperament concentrated in the expression of Uyghur kindness, modesty, sincerity, friendliness, modesty and other characteristics.

The process of giving a Meshrep has many moral rules: go to Meshrep with a gift when one is invited; warmly welcome guests; men and women are courteous to each other; show respect and etiquette for new customers; consciously give way to the elderly; guests ask the current situation of one another; obey seating and diet rules; do service; do not speak dirty words and taboo language; avoid verbal abuse, self-praise and loud noises; salute each other during the dance; politely invite a dance-partner (man, woman, young or old); keep a proper distance from the dance-partner; dance one-to-one; give thanks by bowing each other

at the beginning and at the end of dance; do not ballroom dance or play bizarre games; do not smoke; do not make trouble... and so on. Having a cheerful and pleasant Meshrep is the core moral norms of Uyghur Meshrep. These moral norms lead people to be honest, sincere, fair, and noble. Therefore, the moral norms of Meshrep are the best and most vivid classroom for educating the young people.

Every Meshrep has its own strict and mature rules and disciplines, and they are established on the basis of the social laws and regulations. The community has accepted and followed them in deference to the moral norms and traditional customs. The rules of the Meshrep ensure every Meshrep is held in accordance with the requirements and certain procedures on the one hand, and maintain social moral norms and restrict social deviance on the other hand. Therefore, the rules and disciplines of the Meshrep are an effective method for maintaining social order, and edu-

Figure 5:
Comic
punishment
of those who
violate Meshrep
rules.



cating the young on local customs and ethnic culture. If someone violates the rules and disciplines of the Meshrep by doing any kind of impolite behavior, he will be “punished” severely. The impolite behaviors are: be late; destroy the dancing order; make in violation of morality; unexcused leave; absence in turn of the Meshrep...and so on. The various games and theatrical performances, which combine punishment and education, teach young people how to behave, how to live with others, and how to deal with the problem. In this way, Uyghur young people are educated to obey the rules and the discipline; not do things against the customs; distinguish right from wrong; be conscious about justice, fairness, and equality before the law; and be able to recognize lack of self. Thus, they can complete the basic knowledge for future socialization and becoming a real member of the ethnic group.

The Meshrep produces various new songs that are full of entertainment and a sense of life. Songs narrate the difficulties of life, praise the labor and harvest, and express the longing and desire to love. In all, they express the people’s feelings and love for life. The Muqam texts also include important elements on moral education and dissuasion. For example, the

preface of the “Dolan Muqam” indicates such dissuasions:

*Even if you have a position like Solomon,
do not be proud,
The modesty should stay with you, give
respect to others.
The people never forget the one who
throws his bread to the water,
Evil person and wicked things are always
cursed by the people.*

There are abundant elements that involve such enlightenment and ethics. Meanwhile, Meshrep disciplinary rules are in accord with the social norms and morality, and play an active role in improving the young people’s character and emphasizing their ethnic or group identity.

Meshrep and Group Solidarity

The folk Meshrep has the social function to strengthen the solidarity of ethnic groups or local communities, and moderate the relationship between individuals and between individuals and the group. Aside from Meshreps in wedding ceremonies, people spontaneously gather



Figure 6:
Collective dancing
on the Meshrep
in the field.

at nights to organize parties as Meshrep. This kind of Meshrep not only plays an important role in exchanging useful experiences of life, strengthening mutual understanding and awareness in a joyful and peaceful atmosphere, and increasing the friendship among group members, but also provide a good place for young men and women to meet and to find a partner for love. The merit-based principles of Meshrep encourage members to follow in everyday life. The major virtues included respect for parents and elders, maintaining strong family ties, being good to neighbors, caring for children, being well-mannered, offering hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, being patient and sincere, and greeting people correctly (Campo 2009). For example, in the “Chillaq Meshrep” (Kucha region), the “Chillaq” means “invite guests” in Uyghur. The hospitable people in Kucha have a Meshrep tradition that the dwellers of a village invite the dwellers of a neighboring village to hold a Meshrep—a tradition that still continues. At the beginning of the Meshrep, the hosts will stand up to dance and invite the guests to dance,

then sing and dance together. The guests will also find a suitable time to invite the host villagers to hold a Meshrep in return. In this way, the villagers foster the friendship and mutual cooperation among the villages and create a harmonic atmosphere.

The “apologizing Meshrep” is a special form of Uyghur Meshrep that eliminates misunderstandings, begs forgiveness, releases grudges and mediates the relationship between two people. If there is a divide between group members because of mistakes or misunderstanding, they will hold an apologizing Meshrep to rehabilitate the former good relationship after they find a mediator. At the beginning of the Meshrep, the one who made the mistake publicly offers an apology to the other, using the traditional way of handing over a cup of tea in a saucer. Taking the teacup means accepting the apology. He also hands over a cup of tea in a saucer to express his apology in order to end up the unpleasant time and to enjoy harmonious relationship. The guests of the Meshrep will express their wishes to them to keep the friendship

permanent. Normally, the costs and fees of the apologizing Meshrep are paid by the punished person who violated moral norms of the group. The people do not welcome and even do not tolerate people who still have not rehabilitated their relationship after the apologizing Meshrep.

Chipan is a remote township of Qarghiliq county which is located in Kunlun Mountain. The Chipan Meshrep has a unique character as it has eight different types, and the most distinctive one is “Meshrep to exorcise trauma”. Various unpleasant and frictions among neighbors, relatives, or among friends is inevitable in daily life. If these frictions are not erased immediately, it will reduce solidarity, and play a passive role in keeping the group’s harmonious relationships. Therefore, the Chipan people organize a Meshrep to eliminate the friction as soon as they come across it. People offer each other tobacco or tea and invite each other to dance during the Meshrep. In the end, a dinner is prepared for the guests, one of the local elites will give a speech on the importance of solidarity; reminding guests that without unity and harmony, the hometown will not flourish and there will be no peace or joy in life. Then, people at the Meshrep persuade the individuals in conflict to forget the unpleasant issues and create a good friendship as soon as possible. Both sides of friction give their acknowledgements to the people who organize the Meshrep and express their forgiveness to each other. This kind of activity plays a crucial role in exorcising trauma.

Conclusion

The question about how societies are held together has long been discussed in sociology and cultural anthropology. Durkheim used the term “mechanical solidarity” to refer to preindustrial societies that are held together by strong traditions and by the members’ shared moral beliefs and values (Kendall 2006). Social solidarity is the glue that binds individuals together,

whether by mutually identifying and sharing certain norms and values, or by contributing to some common good, or both (Komter 2005). Elements that create solidarity within a community are homogeneity (Sievers 2002), power relations, shared values, and economic reciprocity (Turner and Rojek 2001). While the act of hosting Meshrep is often viewed by outsiders as a celebration or entertainment, Meshrep serves as an important vehicle for making and maintaining community, and occasions for reciprocal exchange. Moreover, it implants in the group members a desire to obtain an education in community identity and increase the solidarity of the community through various ways of reciprocity encompassed in the Meshrep.

The community of Meshrep is based on notions of shared culture and territorial concentration. This shared identity contains a normative appeal to potential respondents and provides them with the means of understanding themselves, or being understood, as members of the community. This identity “tells” the people not only how they are related to one another, but also how they should behave if they were to achieve this particular form of interrelation (Donahoe et al. 2009). Participating in a Meshrep reminds participants of their culture, belonging, and even their locality, so as to form a community that comprises elements such as “(1) structure—interaction patterned in terms of statuses and roles, (2) history—some frequency and regularity of interaction over time, (3) interdependence—some degree of members’ mutual reliance on each other for needed or valued material and nonmaterial resources, and (4) common identity—grounded in shared meanings, values, experiences, and goals” (Shotola, 2000).

The gift and the emotional exchange performed by the Meshrep contribute to cementing social relations among the group members. As Mary Douglas argues, the theory of the gift



Figure 7: Neighbors baking bread for Meshrep.

is a theory of human solidarity (Komter 2005). The exchange of gifts and support between members during Meshrep manifests the community, proves its existence and effectiveness, and contributes to the existence and duration of this social structure and its institutions (Kolm & Ythier 2006).

All in all, the Uyghur Meshrep is an important complement to the folk society. It encompasses social functions such as entertainment, psychological modification, emotional exchange, educating new group or community members, enhancing friendship among members, strengthening the community's solidarity, and forming group or ethnic identity.

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A peasant market in the southern part of the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region

