

## Uzbeks

**U**zbeks are a mainly Turkic people, with elements of Iranian and Mongolian descent, who trace their origin as a distinct ethnic group to the period following the Mongol invasions of Central Asia in the thirteenth century.

From the first millennium BC, the whole of Western Central Asia was subject to many invasions. Particularly significant to the development of the Uzbeks were those of the Eastern Turks, who swept into the area in the sixth century AD, and of the Arab Muslims in the following century. Following the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, Central Asia was divided into Khanates ruled by Khans. These Mongol leaders became Turkic in language and culture, and the Turks they led began to form into distinct ethnic groups. The word 'Uzbek' is derived from two Uzbek words, 'uz' meaning self, and 'bek' meaning master. So the literal translation is 'master of oneself'. It was adopted as a tribal name about the middle of the fourteenth century. The Uzbeks eventually became settled in an area known as Transoxania (across the Oxus or Amu Darya). 'Uzbek' became the term used for the whole population, including the previous inhabitants as well as the Kazakhs. For a while Uzbeks, along with Tajiks and other sedentary people of the area, were known as 'Sarts'. In the 19th century Tsarist Russia conquered much of the area and in the twentieth the Soviet Union brought Communism. In 1924 the Soviet Union formed the Uzbekistan Republic for the Uzbeks, where they now comprise about 80% of the population. Uzbeks are also found in the adjoining CIS states, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, also in Afghanistan and China.



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### Culture

**The Arts and Recreation:** The Uzbeks value hospitality highly and celebrate with lavish parties. They are very fond of music and play many different local instruments. They love poetry, have a poetic thinking pattern, and learn to recite poems by heart. Many ancient crafts are practised including ornamental wall painting, coin making, decorative metal work, word carving and fabric painting and rug making.

**Language:** Uzbek is a language which was formed out of Chagatai, used in the eastern Turkic world as a literary language at the same time as Turkish was developing in the west. It is closely related to Uyghur. Within the language are many dialects. The vocabulary is mainly Turkic, with many Russian and Persian loan words. The original Arabic script was replaced under the Soviets first by the Latin and then in 1935 by the Cyrillic scripts. Recently a modified Latin alphabet has been adopted. This is now being taught in schools and many public signs are in the new script however most adults find it difficult to read.

**Food:** The national dish, 'osh', consisting of rice, carrots, onions and lots of oil and served with lamb, is usually eaten from a shared dish. Most Uzbek homes would have osh on Thursdays and it is served at most celebrations. There are many other dishes that Uzbeks consider traditional. Fruit is important and in the summer is very plentiful and cheap to buy. Different varieties of very large melons are sold in large quantities. Most houses have vines and other fruit trees in their courtyards. These also provide shade in the summer. Bread and tea are always served. Both have many traditions connected with them and bread is highly valued.

**Dress:** Traditional Uzbek women wear a colourful dress, which drops from a yoke, with trousers (which are considered as underwear and never worn alone) underneath. The national dress is made of 'atlas silk' in a traditional many-coloured pattern. Young girls may wear a colourful skullcap and many younger Uzbek women wear western dress.

In winter, traditional Uzbek men wear the 'chapon' a long, loose coat without buttons, which is sometimes tied with a cloth belt or scarf over trousers and a shirt. They also wear a skullcap, often black with white embroidered motifs which designate which region of the country they are from. More modern men wear a white shirt and jacket, often still with the traditional skullcap.

## Economy

Uzbekistan was one of the poorest areas of the former Soviet Union with more than 60% of its population living in densely populated rural communities. It is now the world's third largest cotton exporter. Cotton plays an important part of life from the design on teapots to the name of the national football team, but has also been the cause of many deaths due to the measures taken to ensure that a good crop of cotton is produced to export - cotton material is not produced in the country. Uzbekistan is also a major producer of gold and natural gas, and a regionally significant producer of chemicals and machinery.

Many Uzbeks are involved in selling on a small scale. Some have market stalls; others sit on the roadside with a handful of wares beside them.

## Society

**Family:** Family is extremely important to Uzbeks, providing the core of community life. It is very rare to see a single adult in traditional Uzbek society. It is normal for parents to arrange marriages often with little consultation with the son or daughter however it is, now, not uncommon for a boy and girl who have already met to ask their parents to arrange a marriage for them. Daughters must marry in order of age. Young marrieds do not usually set up their own home, instead the bride will move in with her parents-in-law where she will often be treated as the servant of the household (especially until the next son brings his new wife into the home). Children, especially sons, are important and a girl is expected to have her first baby within a year of marriage.



**Age:** Age is always accorded respect. Respect for and fear of parents is much greater than in the west. The oldest person says the prayer at meals and breaks the bread, and also sits the furthest from the door. It is important to know the age of the person you are talking to, as there are different forms of address for those older and younger than you.

## Religious life and Islam

Since the 7th century invasion of Arab Muslims, the people who became known as the Uzbeks have been identified with Islam. They are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. During Soviet times mosques and madrassahs (Muslim schools) were closed, Arabic was not taught, and any festivals that were considered religious were banned. As a result, Islam went underground and the traditions associated with festivals were practised behind locked doors. Now, although all Uzbeks themselves as Muslim, this is more of a cultural identity rather than a religious one, and most Uzbeks do not know or practice the basic tenets of Islam. Folk Islam is widely practised with many rituals, traditions and superstitions. Many of these arise from the Zoroastrian influence of Persian times. However, mosques and other Islamic institutions are now being restored and new ones built, often funded by Middle Eastern countries. They are also sponsoring the training of new mullahs and have brought Arabic teachers into the country. The Ramadan fast is kept quite widely but with differing motives. Fear of Muslim extremists (who have carried out terrorists attacks) by the government has led to harsh laws restricting all religious practices, especially those not already accepted and in existence. Currently men are not allowed to have beards in universities, nor are women allowed to be veiled.

## Contact with Christianity

**History:** Uzbeks came into contact with Christianity through their oppressors, the Russians, mainly in the Orthodox Church. As a result Christianity is seen as the religion of the Russians.

**Today:** There are very few Uzbeks who have been Christians for more than 10 years. There are a growing number of Christian Uzbeks but most meet with Christians of other languages and worship in Russian. Some established Russian and Pentecostal churches welcome Uzbeks among them and a few have tried to set up Uzbek groups within them. Some Uzbek Christians meet in small fellowships, as to date it has been impossible to get an Uzbek-speaking group legally registered as a church so they have to meet in secret.

**Bible Translation:** The New Testament together with Genesis and Psalms has been translated into Uzbek and is published in one volume. The rest of the Old Testament is in various stages of translation. Proverbs has been translated and published. Other materials have been published outside Uzbekistan, but if found in the country are considered contraband and can cause problems for those in possession of such literature.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

People International is an Interdenominational Christian mission which has been in existence since 1979. Our vision is to bring the Love of Jesus Christ to the Muslim People of Central Asia. For more information:

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