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The Civilizational Memory of Place in Tahar Ben Aicha's Travel Narrative: Days with the Soviet Muslims as a Case Study

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***Abstract*—**This study examines the presence and representation of place in Tahar Ben Aicha's travel narrative Days with the Soviet Muslims from the perspective of cultural memory. It proceeds from the assumption that place in this text does not serve a merely geographical function; rather, it becomes a repository of historical traces, symbols, and practices that evoke a multilayered Islamic history. The study draws primarily on the travel narrative corpus compiled by Dr. Ayoub Assali, while also making use of previous studies insofar as they contribute to the analysis.

Tracing the course of the journey reveals that Ben Aicha moves from direct field observation towards reconstructing the significance of place through historical monuments, mosques, cemeteries, educational institutions, and social practices. The analysis also demonstrates that his journalistic background contributed to shaping his way of perceiving place: he follows scenes closely, engages with individuals, seeks information, and combines description with testimony and dialogue.

The study concludes that Days with the Soviet Muslims constructs an image of place as a living memory in which architectural remains interact with people, institutions, and customs. Nevertheless, this construction remains closely tied to the traveller's selection of scenes and his civilizational and journalistic perspective, which calls for a critical examination of the limits of travel testimony and the relationship between direct observation and interpretation.

***Keywords*—**Tahar Ben Aicha; travel literature; place; cultural memory; Central Asia; Samarkand; travel discourse.

Introduction

Place in travel literature does not appear merely as a space through which the journey unfolds. Once incorporated into the narrative structure, it quickly becomes a field for assembling signs and traces and recovering interrupted connections with memory. Thus, travel writing goes beyond describing roads and cities to reconstructing place through language, whereby historical monuments, streets, mosques, cemeteries, houses, universities, and even clothing and customs become elements within a network of meanings connected to people's perceptions of their past and present.

The significance of place in this type of writing does not derive solely from its status as an object of description, but also from its capacity to generate meaning. The traveller does not enter a place with an empty memory; rather, he arrives carrying previous perceptions and information that he has read or heard, which he subsequently re-examines in light of what his eyes observe and what the inhabitants of the place recount. Place thus becomes a meeting point between prior knowledge and new experience, and between individual and collective memory.

It is precisely at this level that Tahar Ben Aicha's journey to the republics of Central Asia acquires particular significance. The journey was not simply an individual and passing movement from one place to another; rather, it

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took place within the framework of a media project aimed at directly investigating the conditions of Muslims in the Soviet Union. This context gave direct observation, dialogue, and documentation a prominent position in its structure.

This study adopts Days with the Soviet Muslims as its primary corpus. The material was compiled by Dr. Ayoub Assali from a series of instalments published in Al-Wahda Magazine during 1988 and 1989. The legitimacy of this study derives from the fact that the text itself reveals, from its earliest instalments, its author's awareness of the problem of indirect reception. He began by identifying discrepancies among the information circulating about Muslims in the Soviet republics, and subsequently made direct observation a means of verifying what he read and heard.[1]

Consequently, the question of place in the travel narrative is linked, from the outset, to the question of knowledge: How does the traveller perceive place? How does he select what deserves to be recorded? And how does observation become testimony, before developing into a discourse on civilization and identity?

This question becomes even more significant when we observe that the traveller does not limit himself to describing the places through which he passes. Rather, he constantly searches for traces of the past within the present. The old city evokes its history; the mosque recalls its religious and architectural function; the cemetery brings to mind figures from Islamic history; and the educational institution refers to the image of contemporary society. Meanwhile, social customs, clothing, and music become other forms through which memory is preserved.

Accordingly, this study proposes that place in the travel narrative should not be understood merely as a backdrop for events, but rather as a carrier of memory. This memory is not static; it is continually reconstructed through the traveller's perspective, language, and selection of details. When the traveller chooses to pause at a cemetery, a mosque, or an educational institution, he assigns that place a particular position within the structure of the narrative, transforming it into something more than a mere geographical stop.

The study does not seek to retell the journey according to its geographical sequence. Instead, it aims to examine the mechanisms through which place is transformed into civilizational memory. It therefore begins with a brief introduction to Ben Aicha's cultural and journalistic background, then moves to the travel project as an extension of his media experience, before examining historical monuments, architecture, cemeteries, educational institutions, and everyday life. A separate section discusses the limitations of travel discourse in terms of scene selection and the interplay between historical information and personal impressions, as well as between documentation and the desire to construct a civilizational discourse.

Methodologically, the study draws on textual and analytical reading, employing selected concepts from travel narrative studies, spatial studies, and memory studies without treating theoretical concepts as ends in themselves. Its primary objective is to test these concepts against the travel narrative itself and examine how spatial details are transformed into civilizational meanings. The study also maintains a distinction between three levels within the text: what the traveller presents as direct observation, what he conveys through his interlocutors and companions, and what he adds in the form of interpretation and personal impressions. This distinction is essential to prevent travel testimony from being confused with independently established historical information.

On this basis, the study does not seek to deliver an overall evaluative judgement of the travel narrative. Rather, it aims to uncover the mechanisms through which it operates: How does Ben Aicha move from perception to description, from description to interpretation, and from interpretation to the construction of a civilizational image of place?

First: Tahar Ben Aicha: Cultural and Journalistic Background and the Formation of the Traveller's Identity

Recalling Tahar Ben Aicha's biography in this study is not intended to transform the research into a biographical account of his personality. Rather, it aims to explain certain characteristics that subsequently emerge in the structure of the travel narrative. The travel text under consideration clearly bears the marks of journalistic and television experience. Its author approaches the journey as an investigative process involving the collection of information. He conducts numerous interviews, records detailed observations, engages with the individuals he encounters, and frequently connects his descriptions to information obtained from a companion, an official, or one of the inhabitants of the places he visits.

The beginning of the corpus clearly reveals this background. In 1983, following the broadcast of television episodes about Muslims in the Soviet Union by Algerian Television, Ben Aicha noticed discrepancies between

what the public had watched and what he had read in certain sources. This prompted him to consider revisiting the subject through direct observation.[2]

This starting point is methodologically significant because it makes the journey a response to a pre-existing question of knowledge. Ben Aicha does not travel to Central Asia merely in search of the unfamiliar; rather, he carries with him an issue that he wishes to investigate. This gives the journey a clearly investigative character from the outset.

This desire for direct observation does not appear to be disconnected from his previous professional trajectory. The traveller himself links an earlier experience in 1976 to his consideration of producing a more comprehensive television programme, before the project developed in 1982 into an organised journalistic journey accompanied by a television crew.[3]

This trajectory reveals the interconnection between media experience and travel experience. The journey here is not an alternative to journalism; rather, it constitutes one of journalism's own working methods. Ben Aicha moved from the question of television viewing to that of field observation, and from the mediated image to an image that he sought to produce himself.

The significance of this background lies in the fact that the traveller does not content himself with recording impressions. Instead, he frequently attempts to make the observed scene a gateway to further information. In Azerbaijan, for instance, the programme was not limited to touring the city; it also included visits to religious bodies, historical landmarks, cultural institutions, popular neighbourhoods, the university, and other sites. This sequence reveals a journalistic mindset that brings together place, individuals, and institutions.[4]

Consequently, the journey takes the form of a multifaceted field report. Place alone is insufficient, just as the individual alone is insufficient, and abstract information is equally inadequate. Rather, the overall picture emerges through the interaction of these elements.

In Tashkent and its surrounding areas, dialogue with individuals continues to serve as a means of broadening the scope of observation, allowing the narrative to move from what the eye sees to what the inhabitants of the place recount. Thus, the traveller's identity, as reflected in the corpus, appears to consist of three interrelated elements: a cultural memory that evokes Islamic history, a journalistic sensibility that searches for witnesses and information, and a narrative inclination that transforms visible details into scenes capable of being reconstructed in the reader's imagination.

These three elements largely explain the prominent presence of place throughout the travel narrative. Place is not described for its own sake, but rather for what it can reveal about people, history, and identity.

It can also be argued that Ben Aicha's journalistic background explains his inclination to construct scenes in a visual manner. He frequently begins with details that can be perceived by the eye: roads, architecture, people's clothing, the appearance of mosques, the location of cemeteries, and the movements of groups. He then moves from these details towards their underlying significance. Place, therefore, is not an abstract concept in his narrative, but rather a collection of tangible signs that are rearranged within the narrative structure.

Second: Days with the Soviet Muslims: From a Media Project to a Travel Experience

The travel narrative is built upon a project that preceded the journey itself, which distinguishes it from individual journeys arising from coincidence or a personal desire to discover places. Its declared objective was to investigate the conditions of Muslims in the Soviet republics with Islamic historical roots. Accordingly, in 1982, the team travelled to Moscow, followed by Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, in addition to visiting the Islamic Centre in Moscow.[5]

The predetermined selection of destinations reveals that place was not neutral in the conception of the journey. Rather, it was selected because it embodied layers of Islamic history that could be recovered through the present. Significantly, Ben Aicha does not approach these republics merely as political territories; instead, he searches within them for signs connecting them to their Islamic past. Thus, identifying a geographical destination simultaneously means identifying the field of memory that the traveller intends to investigate.

Direct observation plays a central role in this project. The traveller moves through places, observes, compares, asks questions, and subsequently reformulates the information he obtains in written discourse. This mechanism is evident in scenes that combine what he has directly witnessed with information conveyed to him by his companions.

During one flight, for example, Ben Aicha records his observations about a passenger before interpreting the situation following the intervention of his companion, Ali Yako, who explains the man's identity and background.[6] These seemingly minor details are methodologically significant because they reveal that the journey does not rely on a single observer, but rather on a network of perspectives and experiences that mediate the production of knowledge.

Here, the issue of mediation in travel discourse becomes particularly evident. The place perceived by the traveller does not reach the reader exactly as it is; rather, it passes through translation, dialogue, information provided by local inhabitants, and ultimately the writer's memory and language. Consequently, travel truth is a composite form of truth, consisting of direct observation and knowledge produced within the travel situation itself.

Accordingly, the journey takes the form of an extended field investigation. The traveller does not simply state that a city is ancient or that a mosque is historically significant; instead, he investigates the reasons for its antiquity, the function of the monument, and its position in the lives of the inhabitants.

In Shamakhi, for instance, he moves from the modern road to the memory of the caravans that once crossed the area, making the road itself a meeting point between two periods: the age of caravans and the age of automobiles.[7] Thus, the place is no longer merely a road connecting two cities; rather, it becomes a witness to societal transformation and changing means of transportation, while preserving the memory associated with that geographical space. It can be observed that temporal comparison here is not merely a description of movement, but also a technique for illustrating historical transformation. The road that once served as a route for caravans has become a route for automobiles, yet travelling along it remains connected to the memory of the place. In this way, the past is present in the text through the present, rather than as a period entirely separate from it.

Third: Place as Civilizational Memory

Place reaches the height of its semantic significance when Ben Aicha recalls landmarks associated with the history of Islam in Central Asia. In Samarkand, he does not limit himself to describing the city or mentioning its fame. Rather, he pauses at the ancient cemetery situated on the southern slope of the Afrasiab Plateau, describing its domes and mausoleums and attributing to them a commemorative function associated with figures from Islamic history.[8]

Here, place is transformed from a space of observation into a repository of memory. A tomb is not merely a physical remnant; it is a sign that evokes the biographies of individuals whom the traveller connects to the history of Islam in the region.

Significantly, the description of the cemetery also incorporates a physical experience. Reaching the mausoleums requires climbing numerous steps, and the traveller describes both the difficulty of the ascent and the relief he experiences upon reaching his destination. This detail transforms civilizational memory into a lived experience rather than abstract information; the body itself participates in discovering the place. The physical effort preceding arrival gives the monument additional emotional significance and transforms the visit into an act of remembrance rather than mere sightseeing.

Elsewhere in his description of Samarkand, the traveller pauses at the Khwaja Ubayd Allah Ahrar Mosque, then visits the mausoleum and examines the local memories, names, and personalities associated with it. He reports that the inhabitants of Central Asia continue to commemorate the man's name, even by naming their children after him.[9] Here, another dimension of memory becomes apparent: it does not remain confined to the tomb or mausoleum but is transmitted through personal names, that is, into social life itself.

Consequently, place in these passages does not function independently. The cemetery evokes the historical figure, the figure evokes the story, and the story continues through names and customs. In this way, a network of signs emerges, allowing civilizational memory to extend across the different layers of place, human presence, and language.

The same mechanism is repeated in Khiva, where the traveller is particularly impressed by the Friday Mosque and its numerous wooden columns, some of which are ancient and elaborately decorated. He connects these architectural materials to the city's history and artistic traditions.[10] The column here is not merely a structural element; its decoration and the antiquity of some examples transform it into a visual document testifying to the continuity of an architectural tradition.

The mosque thus becomes a silent archive whose physical structure preserves aspects of the memory of the place.

This point is particularly significant because architecture, in Ben Aicha's narrative, serves not merely an aesthetic function but also becomes a documentary record. He interprets the mosque's physical characteristics as remnants of an earlier period and attributes to them the capacity to communicate the city's architectural traditions. Accordingly, describing architecture in the text simultaneously constitutes an act of interpreting memory.

In Bukhara, historical monuments operate in a similar manner. The city is evoked through the domes of its madrasas, the minarets of its mosques, and its old neighbourhoods, before its name becomes associated with Imam al-Bukhari.[11] The overlapping of these signs transforms the city into a second text within the travel narrative: a city that can be read through its architecture, through the personalities preserved in Islamic memory, and through the traces of its past that have survived into the present.

This trajectory confirms that historical place in the travel narrative is not static. Its vitality derives from the process of recollection undertaken by the traveller and from its relationship with inhabitants who continue to attribute meaning to it in the present.

Fourth: Civilizational Memory Between Historical Monuments and Everyday Life

In Days with the Soviet Muslims, memory does not remain confined to stones, domes, and cemeteries. It extends to people, customs, clothing, and institutions. This transition is important because civilization, in the traveller's conception, is not limited to the monuments of the past; rather, it continues through people's everyday practices.

In Uzbekistan, a wedding scene provides the traveller with an opportunity to observe traditional clothing, particularly silk garments and head coverings.[12] Significantly, the description is not presented as an entirely neutral ethnographic account. The traveller expresses his admiration for the colours, details, and local character of the clothing. However, the significance of the scene in the context of this research does not lie in its aesthetic evaluation, but rather in the way clothing is presented as a carrier of identity. Culture is thus perceived through the body and manifested in people's clothing choices, just as it is reflected in social rituals.

Furthermore, the wedding itself becomes a space in which individual and collective memory intersect. When the traveller describes the guests' clothing, he is not merely documenting an external appearance; rather, he is capturing a sign of cultural continuity, namely, the preservation of local distinctiveness within modern society.

This conception expands when the traveller turns his attention to educational institutions. In Tajikistan, he reports figures concerning schools, universities, doctors, and technical institutions, thereby incorporating education into his representation of modern society.[13] From a narrative perspective, this information serves a different function from the description of domes and mosques. Whereas historical monuments refer to the memory of the past, educational institutions represent memory as it reproduces itself in the present. Consequently, the past and the future converge within the same place.

This transition is significant in constructing an image of society because the traveller does not seek to present Central Asia merely as a space associated with the Islamic past. Rather, he attempts to bring together the remnants of that past and the manifestations of modern society. This explains why schools, universities, and scientific institutions appear in the travel narrative alongside mosques and cemeteries.

The cultural dimension also emerges in his discussion of the Academy of Sciences and its associated studies of folklore and heritage, as well as the presence of literary and intellectual figures from the history of Persian and Islamic culture. This material enables the traveller to present Tajikistan as a geographical space in which geography intersects with language, literature, and memory.

In this context, the text conveys information about the study of national culture as a phenomenon extending across a long historical period and about its connection to the Persian language and Iranian and Afghan cultures. It also recalls the names of Rudaki, Hafez Shirazi, Nasir Khusraw, Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam, and Jalal al-Din Rumi.[14] This material demonstrates that the concept of civilizational memory transcends the boundaries of the modern state, as it is constructed in the text through a broader cultural and linguistic space.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that much of this information appears in the form of knowledge obtained from the traveller's interlocutors. It therefore constitutes part of the transmitted knowledge within the travel narrative rather than necessarily representing direct observation.

This distinction is essential to scholarly analysis. The traveller does not necessarily present the findings of independent historical research; rather, he conveys discourse originating from a local personality, official, or

intellectual. Consequently, the value of the text is twofold: on the one hand, it provides the content of the information; on the other, it reveals how the inhabitants of a place present themselves and their culture to visitors.

In the final instalments, the concept of place expands to encompass spaces of social life, including what the text calls Sheikhna, where weddings, music, poetry, theatre, and recreational activities take place.[15] Here, civilizational memory becomes a renewed social practice. Heritage does not survive exclusively in old buildings; it also lives through collective activities that reproduce it. According to the traveller's description, the Sheikhna is not merely a place for eating; rather, it is a social and cultural space in which hospitality coexists with music, weddings with poetry, theatrical performances with social gatherings. In this way, an everyday place is transformed into a small institution for preserving and reproducing memory.

Fifth: From the Memory of Place to Civilizational Discourse

As these scenes accumulate, the text moves beyond the function of description towards constructing a civilizational discourse. Cemeteries, mosques, old cities, education, clothing, and celebrations do not remain isolated elements; instead, they become part of an overall conception of the continuity of Islamic culture in Central Asia. Ben Aicha frequently moves from the particular to the general. He begins with a wooden column, an item of clothing worn at a wedding, or a scene outside a mosque, and then assigns that particular detail a broader significance connected to civilization or cultural unity.

In one of his instalments devoted to music, for example, he compares certain melodies and musical forms he heard in Uzbekistan with what he knows of muwashshahat, samaiyat, and Eastern music, drawing from these similarities the conclusion that a civilizational affinity exists between them.[16] This transition is one of the keys to understanding the civilizational discourse of the travel narrative: sensory details become narrative evidence of broader connections.

However, this transition requires critical examination, because the similarity between one cultural practice and another is not, in itself, sufficient to establish comprehensive historical or civilizational unity. What can be established from the text is that the traveller perceived these similarities as signs of cultural affinity and employed them in constructing his discourse. Establishing the historical origins of these connections, however, requires independent sources extending beyond the travel narrative.

This makes the distinction between travel information and the interpretation constructed by the traveller particularly clear. The former may consist of a description of a scene, whereas the latter represents a conclusion that the writer adds to that scene. This distinction is precisely what critical analysis should take into consideration.

Nevertheless, this discourse should not be interpreted independently of the context in which it was produced. The journey was undertaken within a specific media and cultural framework, and the text itself occasionally employs political terminology and perspectives reflecting the language of its time.

Therefore, the traveller's judgements should not be transformed into abstract historical facts. Instead, they should be approached as part of his own perspective on place and civilizational relationships. The scholarly value of the text does not depend exclusively on whether every judgement it contains corresponds to an external reality; it also lies in revealing how an Algerian journalist in the late twentieth century imagined the relationship between place, memory, and civilization.

It can also be observed that the civilizational discourse of the journey is based on bringing together the past and the present. The past provides place with its symbolic depth, while the present offers evidence of the continuity of life. Accordingly, the traveller does not seek to argue that civilization exists only in monuments; rather, he attempts to identify it in institutions, people, customs, music, and clothing. This explains why place in the travel narrative has a composite nature: it is simultaneously geography, history, memory, and practice.

Sixth: Critiquing Travel Discourse and the Construction of Civilizational Memory

The documentary value of Ben Aicha's journey requires critical examination. The traveller is a witness, but he is not a neutral recording instrument. What reaches the reader is the outcome of a process of selection: the selection of cities, individuals, scenes, conversations, and the elements considered worthy of narration.

The first manifestation of this selectivity is the journey's clear emphasis on sites that serve its central subject: Islam and civilizational memory. Even when the narrative describes roads, food, or weddings, these details ultimately contribute to constructing a broader image of society and its culture. This does not diminish the value of the text; rather, it reveals its underlying structure. The places selected by the traveller for observation form part of his implicit thesis.

The second manifestation is the intermingling of direct observation and transmitted information. The traveller employs the language of observation when describing roads and architecture, but elsewhere relies on statements made by officials or companions. This duality is particularly evident in the material concerning education in Tajikistan, where he reports detailed figures during an account of his conversation with a local official.[17] Methodologically, these figures should remain attributed to their source within the travel narrative rather than being reformulated in contemporary research as independently verified data.

This principle does not apply to numerical information alone, but also to every historical or social fact presented through the words of another person. In such instances, the traveller acts as a transmitter, while the local personality is responsible for producing the information. Consequently, expressions such as "he tells us", "he informed us", or "he mentioned to us" perform an important methodological function because they identify the source of knowledge within the text.

The third manifestation is the intermingling of history and personal impressions. The traveller mentions the history of a city or monument and then adds his personal feelings or aesthetic evaluation. In Samarkand, for example, visiting the cemetery becomes an emotional experience, while in Khiva, the wooden columns become an object of admiration because of their artistic and historical value. This combination is part of the nature of travel writing, which is founded on the interaction between knowledge and experience.

Fourth, the text repeatedly moves from particular scenes to general meanings. This transition gives the journey its civilizational dimension, but at the same time represents an aspect that requires critical scrutiny, since broad civilizational conclusions may exceed the limits of the evidence from which they originate. When the traveller connects musical similarities to civilizational unity, or associates a social practice with the continuity of a cultural tradition, he is not merely reporting reality; he is interpreting it. Accordingly, researchers must distinguish between what the text states and what can legitimately be inferred from it.

Fifth, it can be observed that place itself is subject to the logic of selection. Ben Aicha does not present an entire city with all its contradictions; rather, he selects elements that correspond to the subject of the journey. Samarkand appears through the perspective of its Islamic monuments, Khiva through its mosque and architecture, Tajikistan through education, culture, and social institutions, and Uzbekistan through clothing, weddings, and music.

This does not mean that the image he presents is false; rather, it means that it is an image constructed from a particular perspective. Like any other form of discourse, the travel narrative cannot say everything about a place. Instead, it constructs a narrative representation of it according to its purpose and the position of its author.

Sixth, comparison plays an important role in shaping the traveller's perspective. He constantly compares what he observes in Central Asia with what he knows about Algeria and the Arab and Islamic worlds. This comparison helps readers approach an unfamiliar place through familiar reference points. At the same time, however, it means that the place is interpreted through the traveller's own frame of reference.

Consequently, the spatial Other is not presented in the text entirely independently of the Self that observes it. This makes the study of place equally connected to the study of the travelling subject, since every description of place carries within it an element of the describer's identity.

The seventh manifestation lies in the presence of evaluative language. The traveller employs expressions of admiration, fascination, astonishment, and emotional response rather than limiting himself to detached description. This language is not marginal; it reveals the degree of interaction between the subject and the place. A place that inspires admiration occupies a different position in the narrative from one through which the traveller merely passes.

The limits of objectivity in the text can therefore be identified. The problem does not lie in the presence of subjectivity, since the subjective dimension is an essential component of travel literature. Rather, the necessity lies in distinguishing between what the traveller saw, what he heard, and what he inferred.

The more consistently researchers maintain this distinction, the more effectively they can use the travel narrative as a rich source for studying representations of place, the Other, and memory without transforming it into a supposedly neutral historical record.

Seventh: Place and Memory Between Stone and Human Presence

A careful reading of the corpus reveals that the binary opposition between past and present does not operate through a simple relationship of contradiction. The past does not appear as a period that has entirely ended, nor does the present appear as a complete break with it. Instead, the two continuously intersect through place.

The cemetery preserves the names of historical figures; the mosque preserves architectural traditions; the old city retains its network of alleys and landmarks; the educational institution recovers knowledge and reproduces it; and the Sheikhna continues to function as a space for music, poetry, and social interaction. In each case, an element of the past is transmitted into the present through a material or social medium.

Accordingly, place in the travel narrative can be understood as a medium of memory. It does not preserve the past mechanically; rather, it enables its recollection in the present. This process of recollection does not occur in the same way in every place. A historical monument requires prior knowledge to decipher its symbols, whereas an everyday social practice can reactivate memory through collective participation.

This idea explains the journey's transition from stone to human presence. When the traveller stands before a tomb, what matters to him is not merely the tomb itself, but also the individual buried there, the story associated with that person, and the continued presence of that figure in local consciousness. Similarly, when he describes clothing or a wedding, his concern is not merely the outward appearance, but what it reveals about cultural continuity.

On this basis, civilizational memory in the text is not a memory oriented exclusively towards the past; rather, it is an active and dynamic form of memory. It operates in the present through names, customs, clothing, institutions, and music.

This aspect of the text is particularly important because it prevents the concept of civilization from being reduced to historical monuments. At one level of Ben Aicha's discourse, civilization exists in everyday life just as it exists in mosques and cemeteries.

Eighth: From Travel Testimony to Cultural Knowledge

The journalistic background of the journey enables it to produce a particular form of cultural knowledge. The traveller does not present an academic study in the strict sense of the term, nor does he offer purely personal diary entries. Instead, he combines journalistic reporting, literary description, and personal testimony.

This combination is one of the reasons for the richness of the corpus, but it also requires methodological caution on the part of the researcher. Journalistic material naturally seeks scenes, events, and personalities, whereas academic research seeks verification, documentation, and interpretation. The travel narrative occupies an intermediate position between these two domains.

This intermediary position has made it possible to incorporate details that are not always readily available in conventional historical writings: the manner in which guests are received, the appearance of food, people's clothing, the movements of worshippers, the physical characteristics of places, the nature of conversations, reactions, music, and other aspects of everyday life.

However, these details cannot become complete historical documents unless they are situated within their appropriate context and compared with other sources. Therefore, the primary value of the corpus for researchers does not lie in its ability to provide the ultimate truth about the societies visited by the traveller. Rather, it provides rich testimony about how these societies appeared through the eyes of an Algerian traveller within a specific historical and cultural context.

This explains the importance of studying the discourse itself alongside its subject matter. Researchers should not ask only: What did Ben Aicha see? They should also ask: Why did he select this particular scene? Why did he describe it in this way? And why did he associate it with this particular meaning?

These questions make the travel narrative a valuable source for studying representations, rather than merely a source of geographical and historical information.

Conclusion

An examination of Days with the Soviet Muslims reveals that place constitutes one of the fundamental components shaping Tahar Ben Aicha's travel experience and that its significance extends beyond geography to encompass civilizational memory. Cities, monuments, mosques, and cemeteries are transformed into signs that evoke Islamic history, while everyday life, clothing, education, and social institutions introduce another dimension through which memory extends into the present.

The study demonstrates that the traveller's journalistic background played an important role in shaping his representation of place. The journey originates from a question of knowledge and is based on direct observation, interviews, and information gathering, before reorganising these elements into a discourse combining reporting, description, and personal impressions. This explains the abundance of field details and the author's

attention to individuals, institutions, and events.

Furthermore, civilizational memory in the text is not exclusively archaeological in nature. It is distributed across historical monuments and social practices, between tombs, mosques, schools, weddings, and music. Civilization therefore emerges as a form of cultural continuity rather than merely the remnants of a bygone past.

The journey also reveals that place does not produce meaning independently. Human beings are the ones who recover place and attribute value to it; institutions preserve knowledge; social rituals reproduce customs; and historical monuments connect the present with the past.

At the same time, the nature of the travel narrative requires a critical approach to its content. Direct observation is not equivalent to transmitted information, and subjective judgements cannot be separated from their authors and the contexts in which they are produced. Consequently, the value of the journey is twofold: on the one hand, it constitutes a rich narrative document reflecting an Algerian traveller's perspective on Central Asia; on the other, it represents a discourse embodying its author's identity, historical period, and media project.

Accordingly, the most significant findings can be summarised as follows:

1. Place in the travel narrative constitutes a semantic structure that transcends its geographical function and contributes to the production of memory.

2. Islamic monuments play a central role in recalling the civilizational past.

3. Human presence, institutions, and everyday practices complement the role of historical monuments in preserving memory.

4. Tahar Ben Aicha's journalistic background is reflected in his reliance on direct observation, dialogue, and information gathering.

5. The civilizational discourse of the journey emerges from the accumulation of particular scenes that are reinterpreted within a broader framework.

6. The corpus requires a methodological distinction between direct observation, transmitted information, and personal impressions.

7. The significance of the journey for contemporary research lies in its potential to facilitate the study of place not merely as geography, but also as a representation of identity and memory.

8. The journey reveals that civilizational memory is not confined to historical monuments, but continues through everyday social and cultural practices.

9. Place in the corpus functions as a medium connecting the past and the present rather than merely as a static space in which events unfold.

10. The traveller's journalistic background provides important insights into the mechanisms through which travel knowledge is produced, particularly through direct observation, dialogue, and selective representation.

11. Travel testimony remains a source that requires critical examination and a distinction between observation, transmission, and interpretation.

12. The representation of place in Days with the Soviet Muslims is founded on the interaction of geography, history, memory, and identity, which gives the text literary and cultural significance extending beyond the mere description of places for tourism.

Footnotes

1. Tahar Ben Aicha, “Days with the Soviet Muslims,” Episode One, Al-Wahda Magazine, Issue 368, Algeria, 14–20 July 1988, p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 39.

3. Tahar Ben Aicha, “Days with the Soviet Muslims,” Episode Two, Al-Wahda Magazine, Issue 369, Algeria, 21–27 July 1988, p. 39.

4. Tahar Ben Aicha, “Days with the Soviet Muslims,” Episode Three, Al-Wahda Magazine, Issue 370, Algeria, 28 July–3 August 1988, p. 39.

5. Tahar Ben Aicha, “Days with the Soviet Muslims,” Episode Two, Al-Wahda Magazine, Issue 369, Algeria, 21–27 July 1988, p. 39.

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Second: Previous Studies

Assali, Ayoub, and Yousfi, Youcef. “The Image of the Self and the Other in Tahar Ben Aicha’s Journey to Central Asia.” Al-Kalim Journal, Vol. 9, No. 1, June 2024, pp. 402–421.

Third: Methodological Notes on Documenting the Corpus

This study relied on the instalments published in Al-Wahda Magazine as the primary source of the text. Accordingly, the footnotes provide the original issue numbers, publication dates, and page numbers of the magazine, rather than the page numbers of the electronic compilation file or PDF document.

The analysis also maintains a distinction between information presented by the traveller as direct observation, information conveyed through individuals he met or who accompanied him during the journey, and the conclusions and impressions he adds to the scenes. This distinction is essential when approaching the travel narrative as a literary and media-based testimony rather than as a neutral historical record.