Parallel Worlds: Male and Female Islam in the Central Asian Republics

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Parallel worlds: Male and female Islam in the Central Asian republics

In Central Asia, independent religious activity has always existed parallel to and separate from state power and the institutions of shariat Islam. In the pre-Soviet era, Central Asian Muslims attended mosques where they listened to clerics interpret Islamic scripture. They turned to religious judges to settle personal disputes. They also took initiation from charismatic Sufi teachers who attracted small circles of followers, and maintained customary practices and domestic rituals, called urf-odat, within the context of their homes and communities.

During the Soviet era, Sufism and other forms of independent religious engagement became illegal. Independent groups and their leaders either went underground or ceased to exist. Many ritual and customary practices could no longer be practiced openly. The only legal religious activity was performed under the supervision of Religious Boards, groups of conservative scholars appointed and supervised by the Soviet regime.

Today, these restrictions have been lifted and Central Asia is experiencing a religious revival. Since independence, the region has been host to an influx of foreign religious workers, bringing every imaginable converting denomination in the world. Interest in the indigenous traditions is also increasing. The most visible revival movement is that of Islam. In Kyrgyzstan, where I did fieldwork, a rapid and broad expansion of Islamic infrastructure and education is being overseen by the Spiritual Leadership of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, or Muftiyat, the modern successor to the Soviet-era Religious Boards. The Muftiyat supervises all public Islamic observance and instruction. It registers congregations, designs the curricula of Islamic educational institutions,
licenses davaachylar (Islamic educators), approves religious books for publication, issues fatvalar, decrees, and appoints and supervises imamdar (leaders of local congregations) and kazylar (provincial leaders). Muslims of many generations and ethnic backgrounds attend a growing number of mosques, go to davaat (educational) workshops, and send their children to local medrasas. Many young people get scholarships to study at Islamic institutions abroad. All these activities occur under the supervision of the Muftiyat.

Arguably a greater number of Central Asians find religious knowledge and inspiration most effectively transmitted outside the jurisdiction of the Muftiyat, in informal fellowships or within families and tight-knit communities. Informal study circles are particularly popular. Headed by one or two individuals with formal training, these are friendly sites for discussion, instruction, and debate. Male groups are often supervised by imams and thus have close ties to the official Islamic leadership. Because women are formally excluded from the official leadership, their religious fellowships are more independent from authoritarian institutions such as the state and the state-aligned Muftiyat. In these spaces, the dominant Islamic interpretation is asserted as a hegemonic discourse, but the context is such that debate and negotiation are possible.

The study circle I describe here comprised between 12 and 15 Uzbek women who live in an urban region in southern Kyrgyzstan. When I knew them, in 2004 and 2005, the women were middle-aged with school-aged children, old enough to be somewhat independent from mothers-in-law, but few of them had married children of their own.
The women met to share knowledge and deepen their commitment to Islam, but gatherings were also an opportunity to trade neighborhood gossip, bazaar prices, business ideas, and reflections on the latest political scandals. The women reflected on the challenges they faced as women, members of an ethnic minority, and citizens of a nation in crisis. The women shared stories of the harassment they suffered because of the way they dressed, aired their frustrations with husbands who were not sufficiently “Islami” (pious), and helped each other resist the temptation to engage in activities the group agreed were haram (forbidden). In the first section of the paper, I describe the group as an educational fellowship, and discuss how Islam inspired in them a love of learning, a reason to engage with a complex textual tradition. In the second section of the paper, I describe the group as a site of discursive contest, a site where authoritarian islam, promoted by the Muftiyat and foreign groups, encountered competing discourses of distinctively Central Asian Islam.

I. Education

All of the members of the group observed namoz (prayer), fasting (Roza), and veiling in public. Beyond these observances, their levels of knowledge and commitment varied. Some women had formal training, such as from davaat workshops. Others could barely read Arabic. Rabia-aia, to whom all the others deferred, was not a regular member, but a senior woman in the community who visited the group as a form of “savob,” meaning a generous act committed without the expectation of anything but spiritual reward. She did not prepare assignments and attended only about half the meetings. When she was there, she maintained strict control of the meeting, interrupting the women when conversation strayed off topic, and giving harsh censure when it was due.
In Rabiya-aya’s absence, the meetings were supervised by Lola-opa or Nodira-opa. Lola-opa had been studying for a long time and her eldest son, who was sixteen, studied at a madrassa in town. She was unafraid to voice strong opinions or express intense emotions, and she had uncompromisingly high expectations of herself. Nodira-opa was one of a few women whose husbands were devout, and she had attended davaat workshops. She was quiet and soft spoken, but the intensity of her conviction was evident when she lectured on prayer or faith, two of her favorite topics, and in her ascetic tendencies; she was seemingly always observing extra fasts or prayers.

The group met once a week, at a different woman’s house, between the morning and noon prayers. They gathered around a tablecloth or low table, holding books and notebooks. Each woman presented an individualized assignment, a recitation or reading of a passage from the Qur’an. The other members of the group corrected her as she read, assessed her progress, and assigned her a new passage if she was ready. When Rabiya-aya was there, she dominated the session, quick to criticize or even shame. At one meeting, Lola-opa was reciting, by memory, the relatively lengthy Sura Ya Sin, and Rabiya-aya scolded her. “You stretch vowels that should be short and cut off vowels that should be long. You add wow’s [و] where they don’t belong. I’m surprised. Usually you don’t have so many mistakes. Probably you didn’t study as much this week.” Lola-opa valiantly maintained her composure. “No, compared to how much I usually study, I studied 2 or 3 times as much.”
Lola-opa and Nodira-opa, in contrast, were more gentle. They corrected the reader with neutral voices often adding words of encouragement. Perhaps it was because they were members of the group. The women were neighbors and depended on each other in a number of contexts, that they were more dedicated to maintaining a positive spirit.

When I first began attending the women only studied the Qur’an. As time passed, however, the themes of study expanded to include dowas, hadith, the 99 names of Allah, and ultimately an Uzbek interpretation of Qur’anic suras. These elements were added gradually, in response to various pressures. One week, Rabiya-aya mentioned that in the Arab world, “children learn hadith before they learn to walk. Two and three year olds who play in the street know at least twenty hadith. People here don’t know any.” Soon after, one of the women who owned a book of hadith brought the book to the study circle. At every meeting thereafter, the women passed the book around, each woman copying out an assigned hadith and at the following meeting, recited the passage.

As the women became more familiar with the Qur’an, they grew interested in the significance of the suras. One week, Lola-opa announced, “I heard that if you don’t understand what the Qur’an means, it doesn’t matter how much you study Qur’an, how much you read and memorize, you are still not any better than someone who just knows the letters.” They all agreed and expressed the intention to learn more, but it was only Lola who actually took on the project. She brought the book to a meeting and announced, “From now on, my goal is that at every meeting I will present one or two suras and their meaning. I’m making the intention [niyet] to do that, and the rest of you will check up on me.” And she did, beginning back with the shortest suras, reciting
the Arabic and then the Uzbek. Although none of the other women took on this daunting project, the very fact that Lola did added to all of their education.

Why this emphasis on study? First, because the women held scripture to be the authoritative source of knowledge about how to deepen their project. Second, because study would help them avoid sin, in the form of bidayat (innovation) and shirk (idolatry), which they held to be two of the gravest sins in Islam. Consider the following lecture, offered by Nodira-opa in response to a discussion of music and television.

We don’t know what is bidayat and what is sunnat, and it all gets mixed together. That’s why we study. By reading Qur’an and hadith, we learn to distinguish bidayat from sunnat. Bidayat is increasing now. But if we study, we will find ourselves on the true path, and we will never get lost or confused. Rather than putting music on, better to listen to the Qur’an or an imam’s talk. Rather than watching bad television programs, watch religious programs.

II. Negotiations

Women in Kyrgyzstan have limited access to the male-dominated domain of official Islam, and I was no exception. My research into official Islam amounts to a few painfully formal interviews with clerics and an archive I collected of their publications, including newspapers, translated texts, and original tracts. This admittedly limited material confirmed my expectation that official Islam would look very similar to the Islam the women were learning in the study group—at least in terms of theology and doctrine.
Like the women in the study group, official Islam emphasizes scripture—specifically, the Qur’an and hadith. It also is trying to discourage bidayat and shirk. Consider the following passage, taken from the Muftiyat’s newspaper. [I should mention that the official religious leadership is largely ethnic Kyrgyz, and the women of course were Uzbek. The complexity of political and religious inclusion and exclusion are relevant to my topic, but I do not have time to discuss them today.]

These days, it is important to be able to differentiate “kyrgyzchlyk” and “musulmanchilik.” There are still many superstitions in Kyrgyzchilik that go against Islam and are sinful. In the Qur’an it says Allah will gather all mushriktun [those who commit shirk] and ask the angels if these people worshipped them... the angels will say to Allah, you are our friend, not them. These people worshipped jinn... Shirk is the one sin God will not forgive. The Qur’an says, “if you commit shirk, all your good work will dissolve.” The one who commits shirk certainly can expect to be thrown into the fires of hell.

The resonances between these two groups are no coincidence. Although women do not go to mosque and cannot participate in the religious leadership, the official leadership supervises the publication of the books the women read, the sermon recordings they listen to on cassette, and the schools, mosques, or workshops to which they, their husbands, or children go to learn about Islam, and from which they bring knowledge back to the group.

Despite these resonances, the forms of transmission are strikingly different. Consider an issue the two groups agree about—life cycle observances such as nikyoh toi, sunnat toi, and various
funerary observances. Muslim households mark these events by organizing large feasts. These events play an important social and economic role in communities, but many devout Muslims have begun to avoid them because they often involve elements that are bidayat, such as excessive expenditures on food, or haram, such as alcohol and the mixing of the sexes.

Funeral rituals, in particular, have come under scrutiny. The Mufti has issued several fatvalar regarding the proper way to observe a funeral. Although fatvalar have no legal force, the following ethnographic vignette describes a visit to a village in which Muftiyat officials apply their own methods of informal enforcement. I take this story from the Muftiyat’s newspaper, *Islam Madaniyatı (Islamic Culture)* (2003). The writer, a Muftiyat official, visits relatives in a village to attend a funerary observance. He is accompanied by other colleagues from the Muftiyat. He reports that since his last visit, much has improved in the village, notably the reduction of drunkenness, but many aspects of the funeral still did not conform to shariah. For example, the grieving family had killed several animals to provide food for a large number of guests, a practice that the devout regard as *bidayat* (innovation) because the Qur’an discourages putting a mourning family at such a disadvantage.

The officials tell their hosts that their observance of the funerary rights included practices that “are not in shariat” [*shari‘atta myndaï jokko*]. They explain that a funerary feast creates hardship for the suffering family, especially if the family has young children. No food should be prepared in the mourning household, but rather neighbors and friends should provide the food. In the course of more discussion, the villagers question the officials’ guidance. The officials respond, “The Mufti issued a fatwa…and the Mufti’s fatwa has to be obeyed.”
The officials remind the villagers that they should read Qur’an only once at the gravesite for the deceased relative, an elderly man responds, “But in the past, we recited the Qur’an more times, in honor of other dead relatives. Why can we not do this?” The officials respond, “There are prescribed ways of reciting the Qur’an for relatives. Why don’t you and your sons and grandsons learn to read the Qur’an for your own relatives and recite for them regularly, rather than bothering us about how you have to wait until the excuse of someone else’s death to have someone read for them as well?”

The authoritarian tone of religious authority, evident in this story and indeed throughout official writings differs significantly from negotiations over similar issues I witnessed at the study circle. Although the women were dedicated to Islam and to bettering their practice, they did not accept quickly or easily all the demands this new knowledge made on them. Consider a debate over attending life cycle ritual feasts. At one meeting, Lola-opa implored the women, “don’t go. It’s not in the Qur’an.” The other women turned to Rabiya-aya for a second opinion, she said they could go to tois… if they were [Islamii] toi. A few of the women looked suddenly deflated. The implications of Rabiya-aya’s words in their neighborhood was the end of any respectable social life. But others challenged these directives. They pointed out that they had accumulated debts by attending these events all their lives. Exchanges of food, money and other gifts at these feasts create patterns of debt that contribute to community solidarity and are a form of social security. The women couldn’t leave those debts unfulfilled by suddenly avoiding these gatherings. They would see their debts through and then stop.
One of the women turned to me to explain, “See, these other women have been doing this for a long time. They know a lot. The rest of us are just starting. We are still involved in practices that are bidayat because we don’t know any better. But we are trying, and someday we will stop. Right, girls? If it is not in the Qur’an to go to these gatherings then we will have to stop. But we aren’t stopping yet. We will keep going, even if it is a sin, until our debts are seen through.

The exchange is interesting for two reasons. First, for the way authority is asserted and challenged. Rather than immediately surrendering to the leaders’ authority, the women in the study group insisted on debate, countering the leaders’ directives with social, economic, and familial concerns. Second, it is interesting because of the women’s attitude to sin. Rather than obsessively and fearfully rid their lives of anything resembling sin, most of the women were willing to suffer in the afterlife for the sake of fulfilling their debts to their neighbors and relatives in this life.

Similar negotiations surrounded the topic of dress. All of the women covered the parts of their bodies deemed private (everything but face, hands, and feet) when outside of their houses, and yet the more devout women felt the others still needed to make changes. Although the women covered, few wore the hijab, by which they referred to a long, shapeless tunic. Instead, most of them wore high-waisted Uzbek dresses with long sleeves. Over the dress they wore a wool sweater or sweater-vest and underneath, colorful pantaloons. Nodira-opa addressed the issue one day:
Today I want to say something about religious action [amal]. For a long time, we have been talking about hijab. Many of you have said you want to wear hijab. You have made niyet. Now I don’t want to force anyone. It has to be true from your heart. Anyway, you yourselves will answer for it. But, I do want to say, if you have the niyet, why don’t you act on it? I know the problem for many of you is money. But now some of you have money. [She addressed one of the women.] I know your husband came back from Russia, so you have money now. Now is the time. The woman she addressed looked down and muttered an excuse. Nodira-opa was gentle but persistent. “We say we will, and then we don’t. And yet wearing hijab is farz [required]. It’s also a pleasure [rahot].”

Another woman agreed, “I heard women who wear hijab say it’s a pleasure, they wouldn’t go back.” Nodira-opa continued, “You don’t have to buy the expensive hijab for 1000 som [about $25]. You just need 3 meters of cloth. How much is that? Three hundred som [about $7]?” The women voiced enthusiasm, and yet when it came to individual women making the change, there were more excuses, like Halima-opa, who lamented that she had purchased a hijab tunic, but it was too warm to wear at the time, in the spring, and she had no more money to buy more material. Again, the women expressed a desire to change, but not an immediate willingness. They effectively kept change on their own terms and in their own time. They did not immediately surrender to the leaders of the group, even though they acknowledged the leaders represented the side of Allah and salvation.

In conclusion, private independent religious fellowships are a site of independent dialogue and contest, within the sphere of influence of official Islam and its supporters in the Kyrgyz state and
abroad, but distant enough that there is room for debate and resistance. I am not sure if meeting in the way they do is even legal, and it may be that the women are resisting authority on a number of fronts. Furthermore, recent research suggests study circles such as the ones I described have become a recruiting ground for Hizb ut-Tahrir and other branches of political Islam. Again, however, I expect these study groups are more sites for the negotiation of foreign ideologies and not indoctrination. But in this case again, Hizb ut-Tahrir and such radical groups also impose a new form of Islam in ways the women might similarly simultaneously accept and resist.

My conclusion, unfortunately, is ambivalent. I have described a process of religious normalization backed by powerful institutional interests, both domestic and foreign. Despite models of instruction that are authoritarian and theologies that are authoritarian, the group keeps the process on its own terms. I have illustrated how normalization is resisted in small ways on a daily basis and for a variety of reasons, but especially for reason that have to do with deeply rooted indigenous notions of obligation to family, community, and ancestors. I cannot tell you whether the Uzbek women I described today all wear imported hijab robes (or copies of them), but if they do, their orientation do so as the beginning of a shifted orientation from local Muslim community, bound by shared obligation and ritual observations, to global ummah, bound by shared text and tradition. But women are uniquely positioned to respond to and negotiate the state and international support for normalization.