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Islamic Revival in the Former Soviet Union: Diversification or Normalization?

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Central Asia has always been a site of religious diversity and mixture. When Islam arrived in the
ninth century, it encountered Buddhists, Jews, Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrians, and adherents
of even more ancient systems of practices and beliefs Soviet scientists called shamanism,
animism, and ancestor worship, and some Central Asians have taken to calling Tengirchilik, the
religion of the sky god Tengir.

Central Asian Islam was spread by Arab armies and later Sufi missionaries, and was gradually
adopted by settled and nomadic groups in the course of a thousand years. Wherever it went, it
was adapted to local ways. To this day, Central Asians maintain an eclectic array of religious
observances, from formal prayer and fasting, to household observances, saint worship, and
veneration at tombs and other holy sites; beliefs and observances which may differ from region
to region, city to city, even family to family.

Seventy years of socialist propaganda dampened religious fervor among many classes in the fSU,
and affected, particularly, institutional infrastructure, religious literacy, and public practice.
Nevertheless, Central Asians maintained a collective sense of Islamic identity and an
appreciation for Islam’s core doctrines. Seemingly from the moment of independence, Central
Asia has been experiencing a religious revival. Religious observance has moved back into public spaces and public discourse. Islam remains the dominant faith in all of the republics, but now more than ever manifests in startlingly diverse ways.

In addition to showing renewed interest in indigenous faiths, Central Asians are receptive to the messages of foreign missionaries who represent every faith and cult imaginable, from Hari Krishnas and Moonies, to fundamentalist Christian and Muslim groups. Even observers who sympathize with widespread local frustrations about aggressive converting churches acknowledge that the influx of new religious ideas has added vitality to the religious culture, giving citizens much needed spiritual choice. Often left out of these appraisals are the implications of these new confessions on indigenous traditions. In this paper, I focus on transnational Islamic movements and their impact on local Islam, arguing that they exert a normalizing pressure on Central Asian Islam.

Today, transnational Islamic traditions move easily across the globe and attract support in many localities. The transnational Islamic discourses which find their way to Central Asia come as books translated from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. They come as Southasian da’is (missionaries) and Turkish educators, as degrees from Arab Islamic institutions, as leaflets with radical ideology, as information off websites and discussion boards accessible at any corner internet café. Presenting themselves as representatives of the faith of Central Asians’ ancestors, these groups bring approaches to Islam that differ in significant ways from the practices Central Asians have adhered to for generations.
The representatives of these movements in Central Asia themselves may disagree on many points of doctrine and practice, but compared to the diversity of Central Asian Islam, these groups preach markedly similar forms of Islam. While it is difficult to provide a rigorous analytical account of a phenomenon as heterogeneous as transnational Islam, the international Islamic movements I have had contact with in Central Asia share many assumptions about Islamic identity, practice, and knowledge. These global Islamic discourses favor certain forms of religious authority (usually texts) over others (local consensus, *adat*, collective memory, oral traditions). They emphasize external observances such as prayer, study of the Qur’an, fasting, proper dress, etc., to a greater degree than Central Asian Islam, which has traditionally also recognized the importance of internal states, such as humility, honesty, and faithfulness. And they question traditional assumptions about the link between religion and ethnic identity.

This dynamic is not new or unusual; ethnographers working in many regions of the Muslim world have described similar encounters between transnational and local Islam. Suzanne Brenner writes of young Indonesian women who choose to veil and adopt stricter Islamic practice based on increased knowledge of scripture, gained through contact with Middle Eastern Islamic groups (1996: 674). Janice Boddy describes how increased interest in scriptural Islam among men in a Sudanese community has sparked a growth in “counterhegemonic” spiritual discourses such as the Zar cult (1989). In Central Asia, Manja Stephan recounts interviews with a young Tajik man named Anushehr, who studied Islam in Egypt and criticizes Tajik understandings of Islam based on the Qur’an and *sunna* (the teachings and sayings of the prophet) (2006).

ETHNOGRAPHY

This ethnography is based on time I spent in Kyrgyzstan, which lies on the eastern edge of the
region, sharing a border with China. A small, mountainous nation with 5.3 million people and a GDP of $2200 per capita, it is the second poorest of the republics, after Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan is often described as the republic which is the most religiously tolerant. This is not saying a lot, but it does tolerate a wider spectrum of public religious practice and discourse than the other republics.

I present the encounter between transnational Islamic organizations and Kyrgyz faithful as discursive contests in which local beliefs and practices as well as local assumptions about identity and religious authority are challenged. Who can speak for Islam? Does Islam accommodate the idea of “Muslim by birth”? Does participation in political Islamic groups make one Muslim? Can one be Muslim and participate in a secular state? These are just some of the questions that transnational Islam is forcing Central Asians to ask. These are not Muslims engaging in constructive debate about the nature of their faith, but individuals vying for a privileged right to speak an Islamic discourse and to deny that right to others.

I will describe two encounters that reveal how these different traditions think about religious authority and Muslim identity. The first vignette finds the ethnographer sitting at tea with a Kyrgyz family. Salamat-eje and Akilbek-baike have several children, including Aigerim, who is seventeen. Aigerim is an observant Muslim. For many years, she studied at a private high school sponsored by an influential transnational Islamic group led by the Turkish intellectual and mystic Fethullah Gülen. Aigerim prays five times a day and observes certain strictures regarding dress, among other Islamic practices. She learns about Islam from her Turkish friends, many of them former teachers, as well as from books, most of them Turkish commentaries on the Qur’an and
Hadith. She is outspokenly critical of her parents’ lax attitude toward Islam. I have heard her say that a person, even if Kyrgyz, cannot be “Muslim” unless he/she prays and observes certain obligatory practices of Islam.

Salamat and Akilbek, like many ethnic Kyrgyz who came of age in the USSR, consider themselves Muslim not by virtue of practice or belief, but by virtue of ethnicity; anyone born Kyrgyz, they would argue, is Muslim. Being Muslim inclines Kyrgyz to observe certain rituals, such as reciting the Qur’an on Thursday night in remembrance of deceased relatives, or burying deceased relatives in Islamic graveyards. It may even mean praying five times a day or not drinking alcohol. But for many Kyrgyz, public action is not what makes one Muslim, but rather an internal sense of being Muslim, of being descended from generations of Muslim ancestors.

On the afternoon in question, Salamat was talking about the family’s years living in a region of Kyrgyzstan with a large population of ethnic Uzbeks, who are known for being “better” Muslims, meaning more literate and more observant. Salamat described her distrust of her devout Uzbek neighbors. These women prayed and veiled and avoided alcohol, but in Salamat’s opinion, belied their spiritual bankruptcy in small gestures which revealed a lack of compassion and generosity. Kyrgyz people usually were not so strict in their observance, Salamat said, but their inner world was pure (ichi diünüyösü taza). Her own father, for example, lived and died in the USSR. He never prayed or fasted, but he was the model of the generosity and morality Islam teaches. Certainly, Salamat concluded, Aigerim’s belief that the human being had to follow all the strictures of Islam to be a good Muslim and achieve salvation was nonsense.
Aigerim responded passionately: How could her mother know the inner world of her Uzbek neighbors? It is impossible to generalize, as her mother wanted to, that those who are observant tend to have moral defects while those who do not are morally superior. Some people who are observant are good and some are not, just as some people who are not observant are bad and some are not. Second, God forgives those who live in societies that give them no access to Islam, for they cannot be held accountable for the problems of their time. If individuals, however, have the opportunity to learn about Islam and do not, if they know there are things they should do but neglect them, they commit sin and endanger their souls. The rebuke was clear: Aigerim’s grandfather was absolved, but her mother was not.

Aigerim went on to relate the scandalous practices her mother observed, and had involved her in. “When I was younger, before I started praying, when the new moon appeared, Mom made us put scarves on our heads and worship the moon. We bowed to the moon and made a wish.” This practice, according to Aigerim, was “shirk,” idolatry, one of the gravest sins in Islam. Salamat defended her actions: the ritual was not about worshipping the moon (bash iüüü) but showing respect to the moon (silynoon). Aigerim was not convinced. “If you bow to the moon, if you ask it for something, it becomes a god for you.” Salamat responded, “This practice is an expression of Kyrgyz respect for nature. Kyrgyz have always respected the natural world as created by God (Kudai jaratkan dep jaratylshty syilap kelgen).” “Worshipping anything but Allah is shirk,” Aigerim retorted. “What about the Ka’aba [the stone in Mecca, which orients Muslims when they pray]?” Salamat asked, “Don’t you bow to the rock in the Ka’aba?” The Ka’aba is an exception because God commands it, Aigerim suggested, but her mother was not convinced.
The second vignette comes from *Islam Madaniyaty (Islamic Culture)*, a newspaper published by the Muftiyat, the official Muslim leadership in Kyrgyzstan. It illustrates the Muftiyat’s project to promote a normalized, moderate form of Islam unique to the Kyrgyz Republic, but profoundly influenced by transnational Islamic traditions.

The article describes the visit of a group of Muftiyat officials to a village to attend a funerary observance. The writer is happy to report that the group observes less drunkenness than they did during earlier visits, but other aspects of the funeral did not conform to shariah, Islamic law. For example, the grieving family had killed several animals to provide food for a large number of guests. The Muftiyat visitors point out to their hosts that these excessive expenditures “do not conform to shariah [*shari'atta mynda jokko*].” The villagers are surprised. The visitors explain, the practice goes against the spirit of the Qur’an, as it creates excessive hardship for the mourning family. Therefore, it is *bidayat*, innovation.

In another exchange, the villagers ask the visitors why in some places people recite the Qur’an once over the body of the deceased, and in other places more than once. According to Muslim Kyrgyz belief, the soul will suffer for its sins after death, but intercessions on the part of living relatives, especially in the form of recitations of the Qur’an or parts of the Qur’an, can mitigate this suffering. Thus, reciting the Qur’an for ancestors is considered one of the most important duties of living Muslims. The Muftiyat representatives respond: the Qur’an should be recited only once over the body of the deceased. “The Mufti issued a fatwa that the Qur’an should be recited only once at the grave, and the Mufti’s fatwa has to be obeyed.”
These negotiations illustrate two discursive approaches to Islam. The first approach, represented by Salamat-eje and the villagers, depends on collective memory for information about practice and belief. Proper practices and beliefs are taught within communities and passed down from generation to generation. The sources of this knowledge are not always identifiable, but the authority of this knowledge is established through conscious awareness of the generations of Kyrgyz Muslims who have lived and died according to its dictates. In other words, Kyrgyz Muslim learn about Islam primarily from collective memory and group practice, rather than scripture. This is not to say Islamic scripture is not important. It has an important role. Scripture is the basis for oral performances which are not communicative, but affective, in that they aid living or deceased souls. When written down, scripture has important protective powers. Written prayers or surahs are often worn underneath clothing or displayed in the home as protective objects. Both in its oral intonation, as well as its physical presence in familiar places, scripture serves as a symbol of shared identity.

A second aspect of this discourse that is relevant here is the importance of ethnic identity. Among Kyrgyz, as among most Central Asian ethnic groups, ethnicity and religion have long been ontologically linked: if you are born Kyrgyz, you and what you do are Muslim. This logic accommodates diversity; different Kyrgyz communities may draw on different histories and collective memory to define Islamic practice and belief, but this does not mean one is more correct and thus Muslim than others. This link between ethnicity and religion has the curious implication of making whatever Kyrgyz do compatible with Islam. Kyrgyz have always shown their respect for the natural world in ritual observances. Since these practices are Kyrgyz, and Kyrgyz are Muslim, these practices can be considered Muslim, especially since Kyrgyz respect
for the natural world reflects fundamental Islamic values.

The second discursive approach, articulated by Guljan and the Muftiyat representatives, challenges these assumptions about scripture, authority, and identity. Transnational Islamic discourses demand that Kyrgyz Muslims turn to scripture not as a symbol but as a container of authoritative knowledge. Scripture, or those who are experts in scripture, are the proper sources of authoritative knowledge.

Second, transnational discourses question the assumed link between ethnic identity and religious identity. Although Guljan (and others) say that only those who pray and observe other precepts of Islam are Muslim, I do not think this is the message transnational discourses want to send. Such talk opens a space for other converting faiths. Those who question whether Kyrgyz are really Muslim are echoed by missionaries of other faiths and their Kyrgyz converts, for whom this discourse is quite useful. The more learned among these transnational groups propose more sophisticated theories of religious identity based on complex Islamic anthropologies. The challenge is not so much whether Kyrgyz individuals are Muslim, but whether Kyrgyz practices are Muslim just because Kyrgyz are Muslim. At stake here is who has the right to speak for Islam. In traditional Kyrgyz culture, any Kyrgyz person, but especially elders, speak for Islam. Transnational Islam challenges the notion of Muslim-by-ethnicity in order to force people to reappraise the sources of their information, and seek out more “authoritative” sources, by which they mean scriptural sources of knowledge.

To conclude, Islam is often viewed as existing in tension with liberalism. The experiences of
Muslims in Central Asia, however, may reveal that transnational Islam shares common concerns and orientations with liberalism. Dale Eickelman has argued that global shifts in literacy, notably rising literacy rates and increased book production, affect the way Muslims approach their faith (1992). Eickelman believes mass education in Arab countries has led the faithful to depend less on communal, oral forms of religious knowledge, and more on textual practices of reading, questioning, and citation. In Oman, he discovered, these trends lead the faithful to prefer texts to other forms of religious authority. The same dynamic may be at work in Central Asia, where the Soviet era resulted in astounding gains in literacy among all groups at the same time that it undermined local traditions of religious knowledge. Today scriptural approaches to Islam are rapidly gaining adherents.

More recently, Saba Mahmood has described US collaboration with moderate Muslim clerics who promote forms of spiritual engagement that conform to liberal models of the ideal citizen (2006). These clerics encourage the faithful to pursue individual, critical engagement with religious scripture rather than reliance on communal habit or practice, and to separate issues of religious belief from those of ethnic belonging or political affiliation. In Central Asia, transnational Muslim groups may find their message has a receptive audience among those who have been taught these liberal orientations to personhood and knowledge.

In Central Asia, the combination of expanded opportunities for education, aggressive attempts by foreign interests to change political subjectivities, and the influx of transnational, scriptural Islamic discourses, lead Kyrgyz citizens to approach identity, politics, faith, and many other domains of life, in radically new ways.