Religiosity and the international presence in the Kyrgyz Republic: Diversification or normalization?

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My research concerned the impact of international and national institutions on indigenous religious practice. Drawing on textual sources in local languages, such as books and newspapers, as well as interviews with officials, development workers, and private individuals, I studied the changing face of official Islam as well as shifts in indigenous spirituality. I discovered that religious practice remains vibrant and diverse in the country, with strong regional and ethnic variation. The impact of international and national institutions, however, is conspicuous and growing in intensity.
RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

The past seventeen years has witnessed an astonishing expansion of religious choice in the former Soviet republics. Missionaries of all persuasions have flooded to the region, bringing new faiths and giving local citizens much-needed choice in their spiritual lives. Meanwhile, “secular” international organizations pursue their own faith agendas, working to establish religious tolerance and curb Islamic extremism. I do not contest the idea that the region is host to a vibrant, new spiritual “marketplace.” I argue, instead, that while spiritual choice is clearly expanding, increased national and international involvement contributes to a decrease in the diversity and vitality of indigenous religious traditions. Overlooked by international groups in their rush to support religious minorities and curb extremist Islam is the impact of these efforts, especially those which cooperate with local regimes, on indigenous practices.

This project grows out of my engagement with theoretical and ethnographic scholarship on Islam and Central Asia. Accounting theoretically for the diversity of Islam, one of my projects here, has long occupied scholars of the Middle East (e.g., Eickelman 2002, 243-245). Talal Asad (1986) suggests anthropologists of Islam should study Islam not as a collection of beliefs and practices, but as a “tradition,” understood as a field of contesting discourses. Nazif Shahrani (1991) and Adeeb Khalid (2007) question the standard rubrics (high, literate, urban, low, illiterate, rural) used to describe Islamic societies and show why striving for a more sensitive description of Islamic diversity is particularly urgent for scholars of Central Asia.

Building on these theoretical insights, many ethnographers have evoked the vibrant diversity and contradictions visible in Central Asian Islam. Bruce Privratsky’s study of Kazakh Islam (2001) describes traditions, such as shrine worship and household rituals, which are central to Kazakh spirituality and helped preserve Islam in the face of Soviet atheism. David Montgomery (2006) ponders the contradictions inherent to religious diversity among Muslims and Christians in southern Kyrgyzstan. Gillian Tett (1994) examines differences between women’s and men’s practices in a Tajik village. Habiba Fathi (1997) considers the unique contribution of the most unofficial of Uzbek Muslim leaders: female otinchalar.

These accounts are important sources on religious life in Central Asia but leave under-explored the impact of state and international actors on religious diversity and vitality. In my research this summer, I considered the contemporary practice of Islam, looking at both popular and institutional practice. I was particularly interested in the impact of international interests—whether ideological, political, economic, religious or secular—on local religious life.

Two international constituencies interested me in particular. The first, global Islam, is as yet little theorized but is becoming increasingly visible in Central Asia, especially with the advent of powerful forms of communication and expanded educational opportunities. Global Islam and the transnational Islamic groups which bring it to Central Asia contribute to national and international projects which are changing the way individuals relate to their faith. The second constituency, the western development sector, promotes explicitly secular goals, but is often allied with western religious organizations and also engages in projects which, like those of global Islam, change the relationship between individuals and their faith. Ultimately, these projects bring international interests deeper into private life.
RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

My research revealed that despite national and international pressure on local religious life, local people maintain a lively connection with their indigenous faith, adapting to outside influence but not relinquishing their core values and practices. My research included about ten interviews with representatives from local NGOs and governmental organizations (including both American and Kyrgyz citizens), dozens of informal interviews, two trips to holy sites, and the monitoring of local and international news sources. I was also able to collect Kyrgyz language newspapers, including rare publications by local Islamic publishing houses. In this summary, I discuss the highlights of my fieldwork and draw connections between these experiences and my research agenda.

First, I what my research revealed about the relationship among state actors, official Islam, and international organizations. Conversations with Kyrgyz and American officials provided new information about cooperative projects involving American interests and local, mostly official religious organizations. American officials told me about a U.S.-funded project which promotes the incorporation of civics and secular subjects into the curricula of Kyrgyz madrasas, the private religious secondary schools which have become extremely popular in Kyrgyzstan since independence. Despite the inherently religious nature of this project, American officials view it as one component in a larger, secular agenda: fostering development through education.

I also learned about shifts in the influence of transnational Islamic organizations in Kyrgyzstan. In my research proposal, I suggested that Islamic organizations are becoming more popular and are changing local religious practice. Officials I talked to offered an alternative point of view: within the country, many transnational Islamic movements do not attract popular support. Many Kyrgyz citizens are put off by foreign forms of dress or behavior and often perceive these individuals as not well-educated. (This confirmed recent reports in the international press about the disruptive influence these groups can have and the negative reaction among citizens.) The officials believe that the government is treating illegal, political Islamic groups (such as Hizb ut-Tahrir) more leniently, and this lessens citizens’ interest in Islamic groups in general (but see ICG 2009).

International Islamic groups have a greater impact on the populace when they attract men to religious institutions abroad, my informants suggested. The most visible impact of these exchanges is one of public security: with men gone, women are more vulnerable and they put added pressure on already taxed local resources, such as local government officials and security apparatus. As useful as it is to acknowledge the impact of international Islam on local governance, this information does not address questions about what happens when men return. What knowledge do they bring back? What impact does this knowledge have in their home communities? Are these men successful representatives of transnational Islamic agendas?

These conversations about transnational Islamic influences revealed the importance of looking at the kinds of mobility which bring religious knowledge into Kyrgyzstan. The way knowledge is brought into the country and especially the identity of its representatives may have more bearing on its success than its content does. In other words, it is important to distinguish foreign ideas represented by foreigners (often not well-received) from foreign ideas brought by locals, who have more authority in local communities.

A final theme I discussed in my interviews is the funding of development projects that address religious issues. Earlier fieldwork revealed that religious tolerance is a development goal that has attracted considerable support among the American policy community. Elsewhere, I have described the U.S. embassy’s support for projects explicitly designed to address issues of religious tolerance (Borbiéva 2007, 109-115). These projects were funded by the Democracy

Next to the waterfall in Arslanbob, caves are a site of prayer and sacrifice. Vendors sit at tables in front of the caves, offering religious trinkets and cheap Chinese toys.
Commission, a small allocation that gives money to several short-term projects a year. American officials I talked to this summer argued that the DC program is popular among local citizens because of its flexibility; only a few months elapse between the call for proposals and the actual funding of projects, making the program more responsive to local needs. The DC can shift resources to and from different issues as deemed immediately necessary. Like the DC, USAID promotes freedom and democracy, but it does so by funding more ambitious and long-term projects. Because USAID has more intensive goals and less flexibility, it is less responsive to local concerns and thus is less popular. These revelations were interesting for what they suggested about the impact of institutional structure on the flexibility and perceived popularity of particular development projects and for revealing the way development officials themselves assess the popularity and relative success of particular programs.

While in Bishkek, I visited the main mosque and collected Kyrgyz-language publications which contained information about religious debates I had read about in the international press and which I considered relevant to my research. One high-profile debate concerns the right of school children to wear Islamic dress. A series of cases, mostly in the south, have revealed differences of opinion between families and school officials regarding the right of Kyrgyz school children to wear styles of dress prescribed in Islam. Local school officials claim the school system has the right to dictate a dress code, and students who violate the dress code cannot attend school. In several widely-reported cases, devout families chose to withdraw their children from public school rather than let the children attend without wearing Islamic dress. The discussions of the debate I found this summer were published by local NGOs and the Muftiyat, and revealed a side of the debate not apparent in the international press. These publications reveal the way state and local actors negotiate their relationships with each other and their relationships with their constituencies. These groups represent different interests, but in their official dialogues, they are surprisingly unwilling to engage in any overt conflict. The debates also revealed the difficult job the government has balancing its professed dedication to the ideals of liberalism, such as freedom of religion, and its duty to citizens, a majority of whom reject disruptive and divisive expressions of religious faith. Government actors handle such tensions by saying one thing and doing another: government and Muftiyat representatives agree that young people should have the right to attend school and dress the way they want, but have not yet taken legal action to protect school childrens’ rights.

Moving from the relationship between state and local Islam to the vitality of indigenous Kyrgyz religion, I describe the work of a Kyrgyz NGO I studied this summer, an organization which promotes ancient and new forms of Kyrgyz spirituality and lobbies for the legal preservation of Kyrgyz sacred sites. The NGO recently sponsored a festival to explore the cross-cultural significance of sacred bonfires. The international event included spiritual leaders from many cultures, giving Kyrgyz people and visitors the opportunity to explore the shared and unique wisdom of their respective cultures.

My discussions with people from the NGO revealed a vibrant counter narrative in the story of Kyrgyz Islamization. It also illustrates the importance of and difficulty inherent to the renewal and reconstruction of faith practices. It is ironic but admirable that efforts to strengthen indigenous traditions and make them more competitive in the local “religious marketplace” turn to international sources for spiritual guidance and support. The encounter between Kyrgyz individuals interested in rebuilding indigenous spiritual traditions and their guests was not always peaceful: problems of communication sometimes resulted in tension or conflict. For the Kyrgyz participants I talked to, however, this friction confirmed rather than undermined the importance of their work.

The NGO’s efforts to explore Kyrgyz spirituality through the sacred bonfire observance as well as its continued effort to

Outside the Bishkek main mosque, a sign advertises a service by which prayer times are delivered by SMS to a worshipper’s cell phone. This is just one example of the way new forms of religiosity are promoted by and promote modern technology and forms of consumption.
preserve Kyrgyz sacred sites are examples of a tradition actively renewing and reconstructing itself. The urgency with which the NGO and its supporters engage in these projects indexes the vitality of competing spiritual discourses. The success of this particular organization, measured in terms of publications, funding, and international profile, is testament to the skill of its organizers, who must make historical spiritual traditions relevant not only to a disaffected populace but also to a fickle international sector preoccupied with its own agenda.

In addition to my research in Bishkek, I went on several field trips, visiting sacred sites and shrine complexes. The veneration of nature and saints at holy sites is an enduring form of local spirituality. At these sites, political and ideological distinctions among correct Islamic practice, incorrect Islamic practice, and indigenous spirituality are suspended, leaving people to worship, conduct business, and enjoy their leisure time in ways that seem appropriate to them and are dictated by family history and personal proclivities, rather than international interests or textual traditions.

The first site I visited, “Kamirtash,” is a shrine complex in southern Kyrgyzstan, in the Nooken region of the Jalalabat oblast. It comprises a holy spring, a shrine structure, and a unique rock formation. Visitors to the site read Qur’an outside the shrine (the shrine cannot be entered) and make a wish at the stone formation. Kamirtash means “dough stones,” and calls attention to the way the stones resemble lumps of dough. People touch the stones to make a wish or leave burning offerings of issirik (rue). Before leaving the site, visitors wash in the spring and drink its water. Some visitors ask the moldos (holy men) who sit on benches above the spring to recite the Qur’an (for which the visitors give a small monetary donation).

The second holy site I visited was a waterfall in Arslanbob, the famous Uzbek mountain village in the Bazarkorgon region of the Jalalabat oblast. If Kamirtash is a local site, not well-known beyond its closest environs, Arslanbob is known throughout Central Asia as a destination for vacationers and pilgrims. The blurring between the business of tourism and the holiness of a sacred site is particularly evident here. Just before the final stairway down to the waterfall, a cave complex attracts pilgrims and profit-seekers. A moldo sits outside the café and recite the Qur’an for a few soms. Inside the caves, pilgrims leave burnt offerings or money. Outside, rows of stalls sell sweets, cheap Chinese toys, and Islamic trinkets.

At the waterfall itself, the tourist impulse in most visitors takes over. The site attracts individuals of all ages. Men and women interact freely here. Groups of school-aged Uzbeks frolic in the pool under the waterfall or play in the waterfall’s spume. The young people tend towards loud, rambunctious play. In their presence, it is easy to forget that this is a holy site. One is reminded on the way back up, by the religious trinkets for sale by vendors as well as the presence of trees tied with scraps of cloth; pilgrims in Central Asia often tie cloth scraps to trees at holy sites, hoping a wish will be fulfilled.

My research revealed stark contrasts between the vitality of local spiritual traditions and official representations of Islam and indigenous faith. If in Bishkek, official Islam and Kyrgyz spirituality are being actively and strategically constructed by actors engaged in international networks of money, ideas, and people, the holy sites I visited and my informal conversations with Kyrgyz citizens revealed an alternative, more relaxed relationship between the sacred and profane, tradition and modernity, and religion and practical activity.
CONTINUING RESEARCH

If future fieldwork is possible, I would like to conduct interviews with Kyrgyz individuals who have studied at religious institutions abroad and ask them about the religious knowledge they received and its authority and reception in their home communities. I would also like to meet more NGO leaders who address spiritual and religious needs.

In future research, I would like to explore the relationship among place, movement, and religiosity. I remain puzzled and impressed by the disconnect between the spirituality I observed in the north and that which I observed in the south. The differences I observed (some of which I reported above) may reflect ethnic, regional, and practical differences. They may also reflect the varying degrees to which transnational flows of money, knowledge, and people impact spiritual tendencies. In Bishkek, spiritual activity is a major concern of officials and community leaders, especially those with positions of power and influence in local and international communities. These leaders are concerned with the practical aspects of renewal and reconstruction: ensuring legal support for their causes, securing financial resources, and attracting publicity. In the south, spirituality was similarly inseparable from practical concerns and had clear links to international networks, but these concerns and links were muted, leaving more space for personal experience and spiritual communion.

Until I am able to return to Kyrgyzstan, I will continue to monitor the activity of writers and NGO leaders involved in defining and “preserving” indigenous tradition. I will also monitor the activities of international actors, namely development organizations and transnational Islamic groups in Kyrgyzstan. I will monitor state activity, especially legislation. The state periodically issues laws on religion, by which it reconstructs its relations with various religious communities. Finally, I will monitor shifts in the state’s attitude to political Islam.

My fieldwork this summer revealed the important connection between indigenous spirituality and place. In future research and writing, I hope to explore the unique way physical sites preserve indigenous spirituality and mediate the disruptive influences of global mobility.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

I want to acknowledge the importance of American and other development organizations in Kyrgyzstan. Democracy assistance, economic investment, and other forms of support are crucial to the well-being of people in this vulnerable nation. I share the development community’s concern about the Kyrgyz government’s repressive policies vis-à-vis foreign religious groups. It is important for the Kyrgyz state and populace to cultivate tolerance and grant freedom of association to religious groups that are not violent. That said, tolerance will not develop as a response to foreign propaganda but must grow organically out of local discourses and value systems. Rather than pursuing a specific agenda of religious tolerance and freedom, the development community should find ways to support tolerance and freedom more generally, by supporting economic equality and educational opportunities. Some ideas I can suggest include forms of support already familiar to the development community: funding micro-loan projects, sending students to study abroad, building schools, securing a living wage for teachers, etc. The development community should encourage a healthier balance of power between the state and its citizens. Providing monitors for free elections, demanding more transparency in government, and advising law makers as they design legislation are some ways to do this. These projects, if successful, will foster freedom in many domains (including religious life), allowing citizens to engage more actively in their communities through dialogue, association, and activism.

One specific recommendation I can offer, following a recent ICG report (2009), is to give more support to local religious NGOs and community leaders. The American government often cooperates with official religious bodies. Aside from the gender implications of this pattern of support (official religious bodies tend to have male leaders, while many leaders at the local level are women), it favors groups that already have considerable foreign support. In the case of official Islam, Arab, Turkish, and Persian support for Kyrgyz institutions of Islam is well-documented. Could American support give opportunities for alternative voices within the Islamic community, voices that promote indigenous interpretations of Islam or women’s concerns?
REFERENCES


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