



CEL 2

A Soviet Sultanate

Islam in Socialist Uzbekistan

1943–1991

Paolo Sartori



AUSTRIAN  
ACADEMY  
OF SCIENCES  
PRESS

Paolo Sartori

# A Soviet Sultanate

ÖSTERREICHISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN  
PHILOSOPHISCH-HISTORISCHE KLASSE  
SITZUNGSBERICHTE, 937. BAND

---

---

**CENTRAL EURASIAN LIBRARY**  
**Volume 2**

edited by Paolo Sartori

Paolo Sartori

# **A Soviet Sultanate**

Islam in Socialist Uzbekistan  
(1943–1991)



AUSTRIAN  
ACADEMY  
OF SCIENCES  
PRESS



---

Published with the support of the Open Access Fonds  
of the Austrian Academy of Sciences



Cover Image: Mullah Sadullah Rahmatullaev at the Sayyid Ata mosque, Khanqa, 1968.

Collection Gleb Snesarev, not inventoried.

© Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

All rights reserved.

Copyright © Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna 2024

ISBN 978-3-7001-9430-9

Proof Reading: Thomas Welsford, London

Layout: Auer Grafik Buch Web e.U. Gerhard Egger, Wien

Printed: Prime Rate Kft., Budapest

<https://epub.oeaw.ac.at/9430-9>

<https://verlag.oeaw.ac.at>

Made in Europe.

---

Accepted by the publication committee of the Division of Humanities  
and Social Sciences of the Austrian Academy of Sciences by:

Michael Alram, Rainer Bauböck, Andre Gingrich, Hermann Hunger,  
Sigrid Jalkotzy-Deger, Nina Mirnig, Renate Pillinger, Franz Rainer, Oliver Jens Schmitt,  
Danuta Shanzer, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz

This publication was subject to international and anonymous peer review.

Peer review is an essential part of the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press evaluation process. Before any book can be accepted for publication, it is assessed by international specialists and ultimately must be approved by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Publication Committee.

The paper used in this publication is DIN EN ISO 9706 certified  
and meets the requirements for permanent archiving of written cultural property.



## Contents

List of Illustrations . . . . .	ix
Acknowledgements . . . . .	xi
Note on Terminology . . . . .	xv
Introduction . . . . .	1
1. Sufis into Villains. . . . .	41
2. Soviet Muslim Authority Contested. . . . .	89
3. Shrines' Spacetime. . . . .	141
4. Living with the Spirits . . . . .	209
5. Bureaucratic Anxiety about Muslimness . . . . .	265
Epilogue . . . . .	313



## List of Illustrations

- Figure 0.1 *Zangi*, ladders that are used to carry the dead and are left at the burial ground, outskirts of the shrine of Ismamut Ata, 1959.
- Figure 0.2 A certificate of appointment in Arabic-script Uzbek to the position of imam at the Friday mosque in Chimbay, 1952.
- Figure 0.3 Funerary ritual (*sadr*), Afrosiyob, Samarqand, 1930s.
- Figure 1.1 *A qalandar* at the cemetery of Okhun Bobo, Urgench, 1946.
- Figure 1.2 Pilgrims at Solomon's Throne, Osh, 1940.
- Figure 1.3 The shrine of Uvays al-Qarani or Sulton Bobo, 1979.
- Figure 2.1 'They slaughter a bull close to a ditch,' outskirts of Khiva, 1966.
- Figure 2.2 Mullah Sadullah Rahmatullaev at the holy site of Sultan Hubbi, Khanqa, 1968.
- Figure 3.1 Women visiting the shrine of Okhun Bobo (Urgench) during the celebration of the end of the Ramadan, 1946.
- Figure 3.2 Preparing the fried dough (*boursak*), Khanqa, 1956.
- Figure 3.3 Pilgrims at the holy site of Murajag-Tau close to the shrine of Sulton Bobo, 1956.

- Figure 3.4 List of vehicles found at the shrine of Sulton Bobo on 10 March 1968.
- Figure 3.5 The shrine of Sulton Bobo, 1982.
- Figure 4.1 Prayer amulet against the evil spirits, n.d.
- Figure 4.2 The Mizdahqan hill, 2018.
- Figure 4.3 The house of the spirits (*arvoh o'yi*), Köneürgenç, 1955.
- Figure 5.1 Worshippers at a mosque in the province of Samarqand, 1979.
- Figure 5.2 The Kho'ja Ismoil mosque, Payariq, Samarqand, 1980.
- Figure 6.1 Ibrohim Makhsum and his manuscript library, October 2011.

## Acknowledgements

The seeds of this book were planted many years ago at a time when my interests in the history of Central Asia were far removed from the Cold-War period. In fact, *A Soviet Sultanate* is the outcome of various encounters I have made in Uzbekistan, which eventually have shaped the way I think today about things Muslim in Soviet history. Over the past twenty years, between boisterous urban teahouses and courtyards surrounded by the silence of cornfields, I have met people who have disclosed their family stories and explained the meaning of the supernatural in their life. I like to think that, if I could use cinematic trickery to zoom out of this book, I would find that all those encounters have come to constitute a sea of knowledge like the ocean surrounding Kelvin's island at the end of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

It would have been impossible to write this book without the unconditional support of many colleagues in Uzbekistan who have entrusted me with their knowledge and confidence: Aftondil Erkinov, Nizomiddin Gulboev, Abdusalim Idrisov, Sharifjon Islomov, the late Ghulomjon Karimov, Makset Karlybaev, Komiljon Khudoybergenov, Filipp Khusnutdinov, Nasriddin Mirzaev, and Nuryoghdi Toshev are just several in a long list of people who have helped me along the way. It is them that I want to thank first and foremost for enabling me to engage with the history of their country, chiefly at a time when the topic of Islam was a taboo. My gratitude goes especially to Bakhtiyor Bobojonov who has opened his house to me on many, in fact countless occasions. Over the years, Bakhtiyor has listened patiently to my rambling monologues, took provocative questions with puzzled countenance, and shared with me difficult-to-access sources and precious insights. I confess that many dinners in Tashkent have ended with either one of us raising his voice over bitter disagreement and intellectual exasperation. But Sanobar Bobojonova's caustic interventions and propitious jokes have ensured that our discussions can continue to this very day with



undiminished excitement. Every time I walk into my *hujra* at the Bobojonovs' in the Gospital'nyi neighbourhood, I can say I am at home.

Allen Frank, Devin DeWeese, and Eren Tasar were patient and diligent enough to read the whole manuscript and so generous as to share their comments, critique, and intellectual support. Conversations with them have contributed significantly to sharpening my thinking and pushed me to take religion more seriously than I might otherwise have done. As usual, Ulfat Abdurasulov and Tom Welsford have been sparring with me over the years, drawing my attention to things which I did not know, did not understand, or could not formulate clearly. More importantly, they queried my claims of originality with their sardonic sense of humour. I seize this occasion to thank them for their unfailing friendship.

The people who have either commented on select parts of the book or discussed specific arguments I wanted to make are simply too many to be listed here, but I would like to mention Sergey Abashin, Tanvir Ahmed, Evrim Binbaş, Alfrid Bustanov, Jeff Eden, Rozaliya Garipova, Daniele Guizzo, Svetlana Jacquesson, Agnès Kefeli, Michael Kemper, Isabelle Ohayon, Niccolò Pianciola, James Pickett, Danielle Ross, and Charles Shaw. Mike Laffan deserves special mention for workshopping the title between Australia and the Alps. I also would like to thank the two readers who have reviewed the manuscript for the publisher for their careful reading and honest assessment.

Several academic institutions have enabled me to test ideas that eventually morphed into the chapters of this book. In 2017 an invitation to Princeton to deliver the Poullada Lectures afforded me the opportunity to consider in earnest my engagement with Soviet history. In the same year, I was invited to give a keynote address to open the joint ESCAS-CESS conference at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, where I was able to run my ideas past a large audience of regional experts. It was not until a visiting fellowship at Leiden University in 2018, however, that I came to realise that this book was waiting to be written. Subsequent invitations by the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Uzbek

Academy of Sciences, the Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, and the Central European University served as timely reminders that this book needed to be completed. I want to thank all my hosts for their intellectual generosity and warm hospitality.

Parts of this books have already appeared in the *Journal of Islamic Studies*, the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, and in the collected volume *Islamic Religious Authority in Central Eurasia*. I thank Oxford University Press and Brill Publishers for allowing me to reproduce parts of them, albeit in expanded and revised form.

Finally, lurking ominously behind this book are all the *jinns* and the spirits inhabiting my soul. Barbara and Caterina alone can summon them and rescue me.



## **Note on Terminology**

This is a book addressing Muslim religiosity in Socialist Uzbekistan after the Second World War. Its operative thesis is that Islam outlived Sovietization and its violent secularist policies through a process which may be termed as resilience, recomposition, and reinforcement. Such a process is today encapsulated in the documentary detritus of the Soviet past, and its movement can be followed by examining the vocabularies of Muslimness. In turn, tracing and understanding semantic changes which occurred in the Soviet era requires familiarity with records produced in earlier periods.

Prior to Sovietization, writing practices in Central Asia were conveyed by three linguistic vessels: Arabic, Persian, and Turkic (otherwise known as Chaghatay in Western scholarship), all written in the Arabic script. In this book, I have made extensive use of sources produced in these languages, mostly for comparative purposes, and I have followed a system of transliteration designed to facilitate the recognition of a shared terminological repertoire, in spite of linguistic differences. I have therefore proceeded by transliterating sources written in the Arabic script in such a way as to reproduce the presumed Perso-Turkic phonetic rendering. In this way, the reader should be able to recognise continuities across different scripts.

The making of the titular national cultures of the USSR reflected a multi-pronged process of socio-cultural engineering. In Central Asia, as well as in other regions inhabited by Muslim communities, the creation of national cultures was premised upon a project of linguistic refashioning which entailed the secularization of the vocabulary. In the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan, Turkic slowly morphed into Uzbek, restyled first in the Latin (1928-1940) and then the Cyrillic script (1940-1991). With Arabic and Persian declared 'foreign' languages and many of their loanwords weeded out, Uzbek became artificially affiliated with Russian: Russian and Uzbek shared not only a script, but also the new lexicons of

Marxism-Leninism and Communist propaganda. Furthermore, Russian was used as a template to stamp a new Soviet Uzbek bureaucrat. I have therefore transliterated expressions either in Russian or Uzbek to mirror the peculiar linguistic register of Soviet documentation.

Throughout the Soviet era in Uzbekistan, a robust cohort of scholars trained in the traditional curriculum of Islamic sciences (ulama) continued to write and correspond in the Arabic script. Most of them did so by following orthographic conventions introduced first in the 1920s, which sought to convey the phonetic rendering of Uzbek with additional letters for short vowels. While short-lived, the adoption of the reformed Arabic script in Uzbekistan had therefore long-lasting consequences. Unlike those written in the Cyrillic script, records crafted in the Arabic script after the Second World War eschew rules of consistency. In light of this, I have done my utmost to transliterate in such a way as to make them intelligible to readers who either know modern Uzbek or are familiar with Turkic.

This book is largely given over to exploring a range of stories that together reflect the cultural diversity of Socialist Uzbekistan. I have therefore made a point of including vignettes taken from the Western-most regions of Khorezm and Qaraqalpaqstan, which especially attest to the vitality of Muslimness in connection to shrine visitation, the cult of saints and practices of exorcism. I recognise that in doing so I may have inadvertently risked exoticising these far-flung locales, and thereby exacerbating the idea that there existed a vast gaping chasm between the Soviet metropolises and the provinces of the Uzbek Socialist Republic, distance that often morphed into Tashkent- or Moscow-centric notions of cultural remoteness when such provinces became the focus of attention of Party organs. Such a distance, however, is well attested by the linguistic specificity of the Oghuz and Qypchaq variants spoken in Khorezm and in Qaraqalpaqstan, a specificity which only seldom has been attested in the Soviet documentation which I have examined.

Finally, when transliterating from Uzbek sources originally written in the Cyrillic script, I have opted for a slightly modified version

of the Latin alphabet in use in Uzbekistan since 1992. Thus, instead of *g* and *x*, I have used *gh* and *kh*.



# **INTRODUCTION**



O you ignorant ones! Do you know that we survived the times when our mosques were places for unbelievers, when we could not recite our prayers? Even our dearly departed suffered because no one, not even an imam, could pray for them, and if someone did, he would be arrested that very day. Nowadays, the Most High God has made the situation different for our people: anyone can go to the mosque without fear, we can pray together openly. But you accuse us of saying “Praise be to Allah” for this! You did not live through those times, perhaps you were not even born into this world. But still, out of your shamelessness and ignorance, you say that we have only the government to thank for this. Do you think that this is not the mercy of God? Do you really not believe the saying: “Both fortune and misfortune come from the Most High Allah”? I have survived so much, and thus I can render gratitude [to God] to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

The author of these lines was one Muhammadjon Rustamov, otherwise known as Mavlaviy Hindustoniyy (1892-1989), an Uzbek scholar born in the village of Chorbogh close to the city of Khoqand in the Ferghana Valley. When he set out to commit his thoughts to writing, Hindustoniyy was 95 years old. He was living at the time in a single-storey house in Dushanbe. A thin and almost blind man, he appears in VHS video recordings dressed in modest attire, wrapped in a dark blue robe, sporting a black skullcap of industrial manufacture, with a pair of black-framed spectacles perching heavily on the end of his nose, and usually in the company of men sitting at

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtiyar Babadjanov and Muzaffar Kamilov, “Muhammadjân Hindûstânî (1892–1989) and the Beginning of the Great Schism among the Muslims of Uzbekistan,” in S.A. Dudoignon and H. Komatsu (eds.), *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), p. 212.

his table in monastic silence. Hindustoniyy lived long enough to see perestroika, but life in the USSR had been difficult for him. Raised in what then was the Governorship-General of Turkestan, a Muslim-majority colony of the Russian empire, after the Bolsheviks' takeover he fled to South Asia like many other fellow scholars who opted for self-exile (*hijra*).<sup>2</sup> Unlike most of his coreligionists who had turned their backs on the Communists, Hindustoniyy did not stay abroad, and instead returned to Soviet Uzbekistan. He arrived back in 1929, and thereafter spent the next few years hiding from the secret police (NKVD), until in 1937 he was arrested and exiled to Siberia for three years. Then came the Second World War. Drafted into the Red Army in 1943, he was repatriated to the home front after being wounded near Minsk in 1944. Things had just started to improve with an appointment in 1947 to the post of imam at the Ya'qub Charkhiy congregational mosque in Dushanbe, when he was once again arrested and thrown into jail, this time with a life sentence. His imprisonment proved short-lived, however: immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, Hindustoniyy was fully rehabilitated. With his status vindicated, he finally found employment at the Tajik Academy of Sciences, where he busied himself mostly with translating literary and religious works from Arabic and Urdu.

Hindustoniyy's reputation rested on his mastery of the canons of Perso-Islamic knowledge ranging from *belles-lettres* to jurisprudence and medicine. In the early 1970s he sought to create a new generation of scholars by teaching privately. To this effect, he organised his own underground study group, which he referred to as a 'madrasa cell' (*hujra*) – a forceful linguistic choice, and one which echoed the bygone world of Islamic institutions of higher learning

---

<sup>2</sup> Filipp Khusnutdinov, "From Soviet to Saudi: On Central Asian Ulama and the Hijra," SICE Blog, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/from-soviet-to-saudi-on-central-asian-ulama-and-their-hijra> accessed online on 2 April 2023; Roy Bar Sadeh, "Questioning Imperial Minority Rights: The General Islamic Conference of 1931 in Jerusalem and the Fate of Soviet Muslims," SICE Blog, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/questioning-imperial-minority-rights-the-general-islamic-conference-of-1931-in-jerusalem-and-the-fate-of-soviet-muslims> accessed online on 6 March 2023.

disbanded by the Soviets in the 1920s. Audio recordings now available on YouTube<sup>3</sup> indicate just how deeply concerned Hindustoniyy was with the quality of Islamic teaching offered by others. In a number of speeches circulating in the early 1980s, he reprimanded other mullahs for betraying the integrity of the curriculum in Islamic sciences, an edifice of knowledge built on the authority of specific writing traditions, for reading the Qur'an without referencing formal exegetic practices, and for failing to avoid disagreements (*ikhtiloflar*) in matters of ritual, which caused tensions among members of congregations.<sup>4</sup>

Among the people subjected to his denunciations were several among his own former students who had embraced a militant vision of Islam based upon the notion of holy war against the USSR. Most probably inspired by the role model of the Afghan *mujahideen*, they accused Hindustoniyy of political quietism and argued that the time had come to take up arms to free Uzbekistan from the yoke of Communism and establish an independent Islamic government. Hindustoniyy thought in a completely different way. He was adamant that under Soviet rule Islam in Central Asia had remained intact, for Muslims could cultivate their faith, perform rituals, and transmit their own culture. Proceeding from the idea that the USSR represented an abode of Islam, Hindustoniyy opted to prioritise the public good over political expediency.<sup>5</sup> His mode of thinking could be said to be 'traditional' in the sense that he upheld a conciliatory view

---

<sup>3</sup> Домла Хиндистоний Рахматиллох аллома ва Абдували қориларга қилган насихати. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA343jieT2I> YouTube

<sup>4</sup> See also, Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Sayyid Ahmad Qalandar, "'They Were All from the Country:' The Revival and Politicisation of Islam in the Lower Wakhsh River Valley of the Tajik SSR (1947-1997)," in Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Christian Noack (eds.), *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realms* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2011), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtiyor Babadzhonov and Michael Kemper, "Khindustani," in S. M. Prokhorov (ed.), *Islam na territorii byvsheï Rossiiskoi imperii. Èntsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, tom I (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura RAN, 2006), pp. 426-428.

towards the USSR, and one that was current among many scholars of Islam in Central Asia as early as the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

As we look back on him today, Hindustoniyy appears as a remarkable figure in the Muslim scholarly pantheon of Soviet Uzbekistan on account of both his erudition and his stoicism. At the same time, however, he can be regarded as just one among many other Soviet citizens who were committed to upholding a culture which they viewed as ‘Muslim,’ and who regarded the USSR as what can be termed a Soviet Sultanate, namely, a Socialist state led by a one-Party government which allowed Muslims to perform their religiosity while promoting atheism. Time and again we encounter life stories such as that of Hindustoniyy, which suggest that the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan after the Second World War became a space where Muslims felt at home. Furthermore, it is not rare to hear during casual conversations today Uzbeks refer to the General Secretary (or the Politburo, for that matter) as *podshoh*, a term of Persian origin which in Islamic Central Asia has been traditionally used in lieu of sultan, and carries the meaning of sovereign.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the expression ‘Soviet Sultanate’ is merely a way to alert readers that, while leafing through the pages of this book, they will be stepping onto the hallowed ground of Islam under Soviet rule.

---

<sup>6</sup> Paolo Sartori, “Towards a History of the Muslims’ Soviet Union: A View from Central Asia,” *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50 No. 3-4 (2010), p. 330, fn. 51. See also, Bakhtiyor M. Babadzhanov, Ashirbek K. Muminov, Anke von Kügelgen, *Disputy musul'manskikh avtoritetov v Tsentral'noi Azii* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Most probably this is a hangover of an earlier and widespread writing practice which was common in other parts of Central Asia too. Writing in 1943 to commit to the war cause, the qadi of the Kyrgyz SSR Olimkhon To'ra Shokirkho'jaev referred to Stalin as ‘our sovereign’ and ‘his Excellency’ (*Muhtaram 'ālī maqām pādshāhimiz [...] janāb-i Istalin hazratlarina*). In his letter, the qadi explained that supporting the Soviet Army was an obligatory duty for Muslims. Stalin replied to the qadi then residing in Tokmok to thank him for his support. I am grateful to Bakhtiyor Bobojonov for sharing these and other materials.

## Muslimness

In writing this book, my prime concern has been to explore the religious experience of Soviet citizens who fashioned themselves as ‘Muslims’ as evidenced in texts and artefacts. I speak of Muslimness rather than Islam because what I want to do is to historicise human beings, and to interrogate their views and reasons for acting *qua* Muslims. My interest, therefore, lies in processes of subject formation, not in the reification of Islam. I should note, however, that Muslimness is not an invention of my own. In fact, it translates the Uzbek *musulmonchilik*, an emic notion which encapsulates the embodiment of intellectual traditions, beliefs, and reflections on being Muslim as a religious and moral subject. While anthropologists have noted in the recent past how Uzbeks deploy this term to refer to their various forms of attachment to Islam,<sup>8</sup> it should be noted that *musulmonchilik* has in fact a longer historical pedigree, which can be traced back to earlier periods when Central Asia was ruled by the Uzbek khanates. In 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century records, the term *musulmonchilik* conveys the sense of ‘living Islam’, i.e., the episteme that informs Muslimness in practice, and it is with this meaning that it entered modern-day Uzbek vocabulary.<sup>9</sup> I speak of episteme here because during the Soviet century Uzbeks came to define specific cultural practices, which ranged from scholarly traditions to comportment in public, against the background of Islamic orthopraxy. As we shall see, the very meaning of orthopraxy could and did change. However, to know how one should behave in a

---

<sup>8</sup> Maria Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2; Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, “*Religion is not so strong here: Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), pp. 83-85, 88; Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 40, 166, 182.

<sup>9</sup> O’MA, f. I-125, op. 1, d. 190, l. 37; *Mushtum* no. 4 (1937), p. 4 [citing a speech of Uzbek Communist Party leader Akmal Ikromov]; *O’zbek tili izohli lughati, ikki tomli* (Moscow: Russkii Iazyk, 1981), vol. I, p. 484; Ahmadjon Salmonov, *O’zbekistonda Sovet hokimiyatining diniy siyosati: Uydirma va tarikh haqiqati (1917-1960 yillari)* (Tashkent: Tafakkur, 2015), pp. 12, 52.

suitable manner remained essential for anyone who adopted ‘Muslim’ as a self-ascription.

Atheism, indifference to religion, or else individual forms of private spirituality all represented possible choices for Soviet citizens confronted with state secularizing projects, and there is little doubt that many in Socialist Uzbekistan made such choices. To recognise this point, however, should not prevent us from historicising the trajectories of individuals who used the word ‘Muslim’ as a marker of self-ascription and understood Islam as a system of signification. I follow here Rian Thum who has reminded us that the self-ascription of Muslim represented ‘an engagement with a long, many ten-drilled historical process, and that this process, the reproduction and spread of ascription, is also a uniting focus of diverse Islamic historiographical traditions.’<sup>10</sup> In turn, to appreciate the depth of one’s own engagement with Islam as a capacious system of signification requires one to recognise that to live a life in company of the sacred, and especially in a secularist environment, is no trivial matter. In fact, to opt for labels of self-ascription such as ‘Muslim,’ ‘believer,’ and ‘religious’ is a rather remarkable move for people who were subject to a state preaching atheism from every outlet.

To speak of Muslimness does not merely reflect a concern for the importance of self-ascriptions, however. In fact, my preferring the term Muslimness over Islam is informed by several considerations. First, and broadly speaking, my interest lies less in the history of Islam as a civilization than in the historical experience of Muslims cultivating their religious self in an environment that was openly hostile to manifestations of belief in the transcendental. In examining Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan, I probe in fact the limits and the failure of the Soviet secularist project, a project that promoted atheism until the dissolution of the USSR. Secondly, by focusing as I do on Uzbeks who under Soviet rule fashioned themselves as believers and embodied certain aspects of Muslimness, I want to show that there is a lot to be gained from attuning ourselves to the

---

<sup>10</sup> Rian Thum, “What is Islamic History?” *History and Theory* 57 (2019), p. 9.

religious sensibilities of our historical subjects: this can help us to connect to individuals and communities who believed in the sacred, attached particular meaning to the otherworldly, and reproduced cultural practices which they defined as ‘Islamic.’ In other words, to examine Muslimness is key to trying to understand what informed the aspirations of many Soviet Central Asians, their moral and aesthetic judgments, and their ideals of conduct.

Equating Muslimness with religiosity bears, of course, the same risks of associating Islam with religion. One could say that to be a Muslim has always been and still is much more capacious an experience than to be a religious individual as understood in the Western commonplace meaning, which is to say one that locates religion ‘in the Church and in the private conscience of the modern individual.’<sup>11</sup> True, Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan manifested itself well beyond the cramped confines of domestic spaces and, in so doing, it preserved a distinctive communal character; and we shall encounter many such cases of public expression of religiosity throughout this book.<sup>12</sup> However, one should bear in mind that the ideology of Soviet secularism promoted precisely the notion that Islam was a religion (*religiia*) as much as, say, Orthodox Christianity or Judaism was. It did so by ‘understanding religion as a matter of belief’<sup>13</sup> and defining Muslimness in narrow terms, that is to say by applying metrics derived from Christian religiosity such as mosque attendance, knowledge of the scriptures, and rituals such as the profession of faith. We should therefore acknowledge that the Soviet discourse about religion and atheism percolated through the meanders of Uzbek society with the resulting effect that many absorbed the notion

---

<sup>11</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> I therefore differ from the historical interpretations and the argument developed in Julie McBrien, *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), pp. 3-32.

<sup>13</sup> Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro’i’s *Islam in the Soviet Union*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 13 No. 3 (2002), p. 305.

that to be a Muslim implied above all the cultivation of a relationship with the sacred, a relationship which placed emphasis on individual ‘belief’ (*e”tiqod*) and ‘worship’ (*ibodat*).<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, manifestations of Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan confirm what has been noted by anthropologist Catherine Wanner, i.e., that ‘religious practice in the USSR and efforts to secularise Soviet society were mutually constituting and shaped the ongoing possibilities for individual and collective self-definition throughout the Soviet period.’<sup>15</sup> This means that, as an emic term, ‘Muslimness’ captures the transformative process whereby to be Muslim in Soviet Uzbekistan could also mean to be a religious individual in the Western sense.

In attempting to historicise the meanings of Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan, I recognise that I am addressing in fact a broader set of problems which usually fall within the rubric of identity studies. The making of national identities in the history of Soviet Central Asia has been variously debated since the Cold War period. Over recent years, however, historians have reached a consensus around the notion that the Second World War was a major turning point in this process, for it spurred individuals belonging to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups to regard themselves as part and parcel of an imagined community called ‘the Soviet people’ (*sovetskii narod*).<sup>16</sup>

The articulation of an identity, either individual or communal, which comprised both a Soviet and a Muslim component poses a

---

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis on ritual observance is paramount today among Uzbeks when referring to Muslimness during the Soviet period, see Bakhtiyar Babadjanov, “The Economic and Religious History of a Kolkhoz Village: Khojawot from Soviet Modernisation to the Aftermath of the Islamic Revival,” in Dudoignon and Noack (eds.), *Allah’s Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realms*, p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Wanner, ‘Introduction,’ in Catherine Wanner (ed.), *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Shaw, “Soldiers’ Letters to Inobatxon and O’g’ulxon: Gender and Nationality in the Birth of a Soviet Romantic Culture,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* Vol. 17 No. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 517-552.



challenge to the historian, however. The challenge inheres in the fact that the USSR was governed according to a secularist vision of the state, a vision that conferred on the state alone the right to define what religion was and the place it ought to occupy. In addition, and more importantly, the Soviet Party-state propounded an ideology of progress, and atheism was one among the various instruments used to achieve this goal. Accordingly, Party members were expected to be fully devoted to the cause of atheism, and if they were caught in empathic relation with religion, they were publicly chastised, as we shall see.

In reality, things were much more complex and often confused. Starting from 1936 the USSR adopted a constitution which recognised the existence of believers and granted them the right of freedom of conscience. This represented a major change for Muslim communities. In 1938, for example, a classified memo of the Qaraqalpaq branch of the Communist Party reported that mullahs in the region were travelling from one collective farm to another to explain the meaning of the constitution and especially the fact that the latter made space for religion in the USSR and that Muslims were therefore free to teach Islam to their children.<sup>17</sup> Just a few years later, in 1943, the Soviet Party-state adopted measures to institutionalise Islam by creating Muslim Spiritual Boards. I shall come back to the institutionalisation of Islam and its unintended consequences in the course of the book. For now, however, it is important to bear in mind that the interplay of legislation allowing for religions to exist and policies leading to the institutionalisation of Islam brought about a socio-cultural phenomenon which is captured today by the expression ‘Soviet and Muslim.’<sup>18</sup> This synthesis is particularly interesting for it points to the fact that Central Asians did not find any opposition between the modifiers *Soviet* and *Muslim*. At the same time, it suggests that Central Asians were Muslims in a peculiar way because they lived in a Soviet context – a context which differed

---

<sup>17</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 4, f. 1998, ll. 3, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

widely from, say, Iran under the rule of the Pahlavis, or Afghanistan under Zahir Shah.



Figure 0.1 *Zangi*, ladders that are used to carry the dead and are left at the burial ground, outskirts of the shrine of Ismamut Ata, 1959. Collection Gleb Snesev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences

## Casting Our Net Wide

But what was so peculiar about being Soviet and Muslim? So far, scholars have attempted to answer this question by looking at the institutions designed to deal with religious affairs and they have done so by focusing particularly on the Muslim Spiritual Board of Central Asia known by the Russian acronym SADUM. Established in October 1943 during its inaugural plenary meeting (*qurultoy*),<sup>19</sup> SADUM was a centralized and hierarchical institution, a sort of church for Islam, designed to control religious personnel across the region. It was headed by a mufti who was flanked by a cohort of scholars who assisted him in various tasks ranging from the writing of fatwas to collecting sensitive data on religious communities. SADUM had national branches in each of the five Central Asian Soviet republics, which were headed by a qadi (Uzb. *qozi*, Rus. *ka-zi*),<sup>20</sup> and was at the centre of a web of officially-registered mosques, shrines, and two madrasas, one in Bukhara, the other in Tashkent.<sup>21</sup> It reported directly to the one and only institution that supervised its various activities, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults

---

<sup>19</sup> SADUM's first *qurultoy* was held between October 15 and 20, see O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 74, l. 1. It was, however, a directive of the Council of People's Commissars dating 3 October 1943 which officially allowed for the establishment of SADUM.

<sup>20</sup> While SADUM employed for administrative purposes a seemingly traditional Islamic terminology (*muftī*, *qāzī*, *muhtasib*, *mutavallī*) that served to foster an idea of indigeneity and institutional continuity with the pre-Soviet (and pre-colonial) past, at the same time most such terms underwent major semantic change and began to denote new institutions. In heading SADUM's national branches, for example, Soviet qadis did not operate as magistrates. Therefore, they did not adjudicate disputes, nor did their offices issue deeds in respect of the generic conventions of Islamic law. They could and did of course collaborate with the mufti in the crafting of a fatwa.

<sup>21</sup> In January 1947 SADUM oversaw the activities of 156 mosques and seven shrines. See the proceedings of the second plenary meeting, O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 1-3ob. SADUM acquired control over these shrines from the Architecture Directorate on 27 March 1945, see QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 49.

(established in 1944), an organ established under the Council of Ministers, and its successor, the Council for Religious Affairs (1965), to which I shall henceforth refer using the Anglicised acronym CARC.

SADUM and CARC feature prominently in the magisterial work of Eren Tasar, an essential reading for anyone who wants to understand why the Soviet transformative project of atheism and forced secularization encountered major obstacles in Central Asia. Tasar has looked insightfully at the ways in which SADUM's ulama (scholars of Islam) played a meaningful role as cultural brokers. On the one hand, they helped the Soviet state reach out to and influence life within the Muslim ecumene, and on the other they provided Muslims with a reliable and authoritative interlocutor when seeking spiritual guidance.

There is of course a good reason for historians to take SADUM and CARC as a starting point for their research, for the bureaucracies of these institutions have produced the largest body of sources relating to Muslimness in Soviet Central Asia which is today at our disposal. Seen from this point of view, to privilege the analysis of SADUM and CARC offers several advantages. First, delving into the records produced by these institutions can help scholars to explain how a network of state-sanctioned ulama, i.e., those who manned SADUM and its various regional offices, official mosques and shrines, developed (and often adjusted) complex strategies to connect to a broad constituency of Soviet citizens who regarded themselves as, aspired to be, or just wanted to be seen as pious Muslims. The same applies to atheists, of course, and it is important to keep in mind that CARC commissioners (*upolnomochennyi*) often faced with the challenge of balancing between diametrically opposite sensibilities. In mid-May 1959, for example, the head of the Uzbek CARC N. Inoghomov received a vitriolic letter from 'members of the Uzbek Communist Party' claiming that the imam of the Friday mosque of a neighbourhood in Tashkent required the performance of Islamic funerary rituals even for members of the Communist Party and the Komsomol. Such a behaviour, they reported, had annoyed many and stirred anti-religious feelings (*diniy*

*ishga qarshilik*). Interestingly, the anonymous petitioners requested that CARC should take action and replace the imam with someone more appropriate, otherwise in the future ‘we will not bring our dead to the mosque,’ they warned.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, by examining the documentary detritus left behind by SADUM and CARC one can appreciate how their members struck up a powerful alliance to defend the integrity of Muslim communities in post-Stalin Central Asia from the attacks of atheist zealots.<sup>23</sup> By defending the right of Soviet citizens to freedom of conscience, CARC especially sought to authorise individuals who otherwise would offer religious services only illegally and would have therefore violated Soviet legislation; and Uzbeks were of course aware of this opportunity. In December 1958, for example, the elders of the Qozi Ko’cha mahalla in Tashkent wrote a petition to SADUM asking for help, a missive which inevitably landed on the desk of Inoghomov. The letter opened with a remarkable display of loyalty to the Soviet Union and the law regulating worship:

Taking into consideration the religious freedom that the Soviet government has accorded [us], we, the Muslim believers (*dīndār musulmānlar*) living in this neighbourhood, worship in registered mosques (*ijāzatlik masjidlar*) or in our own houses and after worship we pray the Almighty for the well being of our own great homeland (*ulugh vaṭanimiz*) and the good health of the leaders of our government (*hukūmat arbāblarimiz*).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> O’MA, R-2456, op. 1, d. 249, l. 145ob.

<sup>23</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 134, l. 106. In a secret missive addressed to CARC offices in Moscow and to the Uzbek Council of Ministries, in 1951 CARC commissioner for Uzbekistan Khudoyor Iskanderov noted that Party organs could not expropriate nor sell mosques’s buildings at their will, for their property had been in fact nationalised by the state.

<sup>24</sup> O’MA, R-2456, op. 1, d. 249, l. 43ob. The record was crafted in Arabic-script Uzbek and I have transliterated some key terms accordingly.

After this original blending of Soviet patriotism and Muslimness, the elders swiftly proceeded to explain that most of them were unfit to travel through the booming car traffic of Tashkent, and that they preferred to pray at the Friday mosque of their neighbourhood. But there was a problem, they said. During the interwar period the building had been left unattended, and the cupola and the main portal of the mosque had collapsed. Once left abandoned, the mosque had turned into a garbage dump. With drunkards gathering at night, the site had also become rather dangerous, especially for women and girls coming back from school, the elders explained. To remedy the situation, the local community of believers had taken the matter into their own hands, collected money and brought the building back to life. Problems began, however, when the director of a nearby school and the neighbourhood committee resolved to lock the doors of the mosque thereby forbidding believers to pray there. At which point, the elders turned to the mufti with the request that he intercede to the authorities to allow access to the mosque. In addition, they asked for his assistance to secure officialisation according to the laws of the government (*davlatimiz qā'idasiga muvāfiq rasmīyat*).<sup>25</sup>

While it offered Muslim congregations a shelter from violent atheism, at the same time, SADUM often took courses of action that supported the specific policies of the Soviet Party-state.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, SADUM's fatwas sanctioned or chastised forms of behaviour that the Party felt particularly concerned about. SADUM's fatwas against fasting during working hours in the month of Ramadan are one example; its fatwas against suicide are another.<sup>27</sup> To sum up, it is by focusing on SADUM and CARC that one can best appreciate

---

<sup>25</sup> O'MA, R-2456, op. 1, d. 249, ll. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Famously, SADUM supported the conscription of Muslims into the army. For more information on this, see Jeff Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet and Muslims in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), chapter 2.

<sup>27</sup> On CARC requesting fatwas to declare suicides sinful from the point of view of sharia, see <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/20749>, accessed online on 10 March 2023.

how Stalin's normalization of state-church relations during the Second World War actually made space for an Islamic sphere, i.e., 'the constellation of Islamic practices, sites, figures, and institutions [...], [which] was an organic and evolving part of being Muslim under Communist rule,'<sup>28</sup> as eloquently explained by Eren Tasar.

Studying Muslimness in Soviet Central Asia from the perspective of SADUM poses a danger, however – namely, of imagining SADUM as coterminous with the Islamic sphere of Soviet Central Asia. In the past scholars have tended to historicise manifestations of Muslimness by referring to two institutional domains, 'official' and 'unofficial' respectively. SADUM represents the official domain of Islam because it *legally* could offer space only to the 'registered,' i.e., religious individuals and institutions operating with the sanction of the state. By contrast the unofficial domain consisted of the 'unregistered.'<sup>29</sup> Only recently, however, have scholars begun to acknowledge that the boundaries between these two domains were porous, for SADUM availed itself of the services offered by unregistered mullahs and it was not uncommon for the so-called 'illegal clergy' to be granted registration by taking advantage of their connections with SADUM, CARC and other state institutions. The legalization of a Muslim parish (be it a mosque or a shrine community) revolved around a bureaucratic process of 'registration,' and CARC alone could intercede to Party organs for a Muslim parish to be registered. At the same time, if a congregation of believers wanted to lobby for a specific mullah or scholar to become their imam, SADUM was the institution that could facilitate the employment process by means of registration.<sup>30</sup> Registration was thus a

---

<sup>28</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, p. 372.

<sup>29</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> This is what we learn, for example, from the autobiography of Saduaqas Ghylmany, the *qadi* of the Kazakh SSR between 1952 and 1972, whose appointment to the post of imam in Akmolinsk (today Astana) depended on the shrewdness of a delegation that tracked him down in a collective farm in 1946. The people of Akmolinsk first made him an imam; then followed SADUM's registration



key feature of the institutionalisation of Islam in the USSR, and its importance cannot be overstated. Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that the very act of registration rendered Islamic institutions dynamic and mutable (a non-registered mosque could become a registered one) and empowered SADUM to assert its own institutional agency. In doing so, SADUM could effectively expand its network of trusted affiliates and come to be regarded as a bastion for Muslimness against militant atheism.<sup>31</sup>

Regardless of the porosity of these two domains, however, most of the historians of Soviet Central Asia have so far avoided direct engagement with the unofficial domain and treated the unregistered as a residual category. The resulting outcome is one in which the space occupied by SADUM is treated as substantive, though self-contained, while the remaining field of the unregistered is rendered as a space of socio-cultural interaction almost deprived of historical agency, indeed an ethereal and self-effacing representation of things past. A recent iteration of this argument proclaims that:

SADUM existed in a vastly impoverished religious landscape. It controlled a small number of mosques [...] ran two madrasas (with a total enrolment of 120 in the early 1980s), and it was allowed to send a small delegation to the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It published a few religious texts over the decades, though most of them were for foreign consumption and seldom available in Central Asia. There may have been numerous unregistered mosques, but they existed on the sly, while the landscape was dotted [with] mosques and shrines turned into warehouses, clubs, shops, or those that sat forlorn in a state of utter disrepair.<sup>32</sup>

---

as *imam-khatib*, Ghylmany tells us. See Saduaqqas Ghylmani, *Zamanymyzda bolghan ghulamalarydyng ghunyr tarikhtary*, ed. and trans. A. Muminov and A. Frank (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2013), pp. 531-532.

<sup>31</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*.

<sup>32</sup> Adeeb Khalid, "Review of *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* by Eren Tasar," *Slavic Review* 77 (2018), p. 1036.



This idea is premised upon two assumptions that are subtly intertwined, but also profoundly problematic. I call the first assumption ‘black-box thinking,’ for it is empirically unsubstantiated and reflects in fact ‘the tendency to conflate processes of state-led modernization’ with ‘successful secularization.’<sup>33</sup> The idea that beyond SADUM Muslimness was barely visible, or even almost non-existent, works only if one *assumes* that Bolsheviks accomplished their iconoclastic mission during the interwar period. If one accepts this interpretation, then one is bound by necessity to see Muslims in the Soviet environment as profoundly alienated – indeed, as Islamically destitute – and to embrace the notion of religious minimalism. Employed first by anthropologist Bruce Privratsky who studied Muslimness among the Qazaqs in the 1990s,<sup>34</sup> the idea of religious minimalism has gained traction among scholars who have detected ‘low levels of knowledge of Islam’<sup>35</sup> among Muslims of the former USSR.<sup>36</sup> This contention, if true, obviously raises a major problem for the historian of religions in the USSR. If in the Soviet Union Muslimness survived merely in a battered and impoverished form, then the success of Communism and atheism hardly requires explanation. If, on the contrary, as I argue, Muslimness proved adaptable and vibrant, then we have much to discover about how Muslims lived their religiosity in the decades between 1945 and 1991. But before we proceed to review all the evidence in support of this argument, we should clarify that the notion of religious minimalism is premised upon a gross conceptual fallacy – namely, the idea that Muslim religiosity ought to be measured against an ideal standard of knowledge derived from madrasa-style education. Such a line of

---

<sup>33</sup> Wanner, “Introduction,” p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 122.

<sup>36</sup> For a recent iteration of this argument, see Rozaliya Garipova, “From the Kolkhoz to the Pulpit: Rashida Abistay and Female Religious Authority in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 33 No. 1 (2021), pp. 35-71.

thinking suggests in fact that only those Muslims who are conversant with the scriptures and the Islamic sciences or have developed a consciousness about their own knowledge of things Islamic can be regarded as *adequately* religious. But adequately for whom? This approach to Muslimness is ultimately unconvincing for, by promoting a maximalist understanding of religiosity which is based on education as its prime defining marker, it fails to appreciate the range of possible embodiments of Muslimness and the scope of ‘what being religious may encompass.’<sup>37</sup> While there is little doubt that the Soviet state did have a significant impact on select aspects of religious knowledge among the Muslims of the USSR, the time has come to recognise that, in spite of the various attacks brought against Islamic institutions and the violence of the Great Terror, Islam did not simply go underground or disappeared.<sup>38</sup> Claims that the 1920s and 1930s were a period of total religious destruction are grossly wide of the mark – and for simple reasons. Soviet anti-religious policies in the interwar period were marred by their fragmentariness, internal contradictions, and messiness. The proceedings of a Party meeting held in Nukus at the end of March 1938 are, in this respect, revealing. The head of the propaganda department of the Communist Party, one R. Mamaev, lamented that up until that point nothing had been done on the front of anti-religious agitation in Qaraqalpaqstan. In fact, the League of the Militant Godless (*Soiuz Voinstvuiushchikh Bezbozhnikov*) had never existed there, he warned his comrades.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Devin DeWeese, “The Soviet Union in Islamic Studies: Some Reflections on Envisioning the USSR as a Religious Space,” in Ron Sela, Paolo Sartori, and Devin DeWeese (eds.), *Muslim Religious Authority in Central Eurasia* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 60.

<sup>38</sup> For a prime example of what can be achieved by taking seriously the idea that Islamic knowledge morphed in unpredictable, yet socially significant ways, see Danielle Ross, “Copying Islam: Constructing a New Soviet Islam through the Re-production of Religious Texts in the South Urals,” *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 51-81.

<sup>39</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 4, f. 1998, l. 1. For more information on this anti-religious institution, see Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Another Party member joined the anathema by claiming that in fact no anti-religious work in the Qaraqalpaq republic was being undertaken.<sup>40</sup> But it was a certain Aykeev, who led the political education office (*partkabinet*) for the district of Takhta-Kupyr, who explained that anti-religious propaganda was a paper tiger. Aykeev stated that ‘we lack the basis to conduct propaganda [in our region]. But I would like to pause to reflect on [the case] of comrade Mamaev. As you know he leads the propaganda department, but in fact he does not operate as he ought to, as it is required. [...] To exemplify my critique, I want to state that between 9 and 12 February [1938] I was in To’rtqo’l. Discussing with comrade Mamaev, we mentioned [the significance of] anti-religious propaganda. At which point, he said: ‘Damn it, I completely forgot that today it is the ‘Feast of Sacrifice’ (*Qurbon hayit* / ‘*Eid al-Adha*’). If comrade Mamaev, who is in charge of propaganda, does not know when we have our religious holidays, then one wonders what anti-religious propaganda will be in practice. Clearly, nothing will come out of it.’<sup>41</sup> The degree of chaos surrounding atheist activities in the region is further exemplified by another Party official who stated rather blatantly that ‘today [i.e., end of March 1938], the question [as to how proceed to carry out] anti-religious propaganda is being posed in To’rtqo’l and in Qaraqalpaqstan for the first time [...] and Kulenev [head of the propaganda department of the Qaraqalpaq Communist Party]<sup>42</sup> reminded [the audience] that the situation of Central Asia should not be conflated [with the situation] of the central part of the Soviet Union.’<sup>43</sup> These voices echo a widespread bewilderment at the inefficiency of anti-religious policies in Central Asia in the inter-war period and offer a timely reminder that the true scope of the undoing of Islam at the hands of the Soviets is a topic that awaits

---

<sup>40</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 4, f. 1998, l. 1.

<sup>41</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 4, f. 1998, l. 21.

<sup>42</sup> S.K. Kamalov and V.V. Germanova, “Sovetskaia Rossiia i Karakalpakiiia: Internatsional’noe sotrudnichestvo i bratskaia vzaimopomoshch,” *Obschestvennie Nauki v Uzbekistane* (1983/1), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 4, f. 1998, l. 22.

further and sustained scrutiny. At any rate, to appreciate the limited effects of anti-religious policies one only needs to take stock of the fact that Soviet ethnographers doing fieldwork in Central Asia from the 1940s onwards produced a robust body of historical records detailing how Muslims' devotional practices were everywhere to be seen.<sup>44</sup> And we shall examine this body of ethnographic literature in great detail throughout the book, especially in Chapter Four.

The dominant approach to the study of Central Asia after the Second World War, which depicts Muslimness beyond the purview of SADUM as a religiously impoverished landscape, presents a second problem, which I call 'transactional thinking.' This interpretive approach consists of viewing the establishment of SADUM as a concession that Stalin made to Central Asian Muslims primarily *because* the anti-religious policies of the interwar period had done irreparable damage to the local Islamic sphere. But what kind of concession to the Muslims of Central Asia was Stalin ready to make? There are of course reasons to believe that after repeated assaults against Islam during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Terror, SADUM represented a political instrument that Stalin could deploy to achieve consensus and loyalty at home among Muslim constituencies. Indeed, one is reminded that starting from the second half of the 1920s, the Soviet state abolished all major Islamic institutions such as maktabas and madrasas, sharia courts, Sufi convents and the charitable endowments that economically supported said institutions. With this in mind, many have been led to think that, after the excesses of the so-called Bolshevik assault against Islam, Moscow must have felt impelled to extend an olive branch to Muslim congregations which were willing to come out in the open.<sup>45</sup> However,

---

<sup>44</sup> 'That [ethnographic] literature, while itself marred by the stunted development, in the Soviet academic world, of analytical strategies for understanding religion, is nevertheless an essential resource for examining what religious life looked like 'on the ground', beyond the governmental evaluations presented in the archival documents,' DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*," p. 303.

<sup>45</sup> Chiara Formichi, *Islam in Asia: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 159.

this view threatens to constitute a rather simplified and specious narrative. In fact, Jeff Eden has recently made a compelling case for discarding the thesis of ‘a coherent state strategy’, and instead regarding changes in the war period as ‘a *process* informed at different times and to different degrees’ by various factors.<sup>46</sup> Thanks to Eden, we now know that the powerplay between Moscow and SADUM could not and did not compensate for previous damage done to the Islamic religious sphere. While the documentary detritus surrounding SADUM’s creation speaks of negotiations between various ulama and Moscow, SADUM’s by-laws and activities clearly indicate that it was designed and indeed operated to contain and change the role that Islam played in Central Asian societies.<sup>47</sup> In other words, SADUM’s establishment reflected the recognition that in the 1940s Islam was socially pervasive in the region. In fact, that SADUM was designed to *contain* Islam emerges clearly from records assembled by Yaacov Ro’i more than twenty years ago. In his *Islam in the Soviet Union*, Ro’i notes that ‘by 1945, when CARC’s *upolnomochennye* [i.e., commissioners] began reporting on Islamic life in their areas of jurisdiction, they informed Moscow that most *raiony* [i.e., provincial districts], if not most settlements, boasted

---

<sup>46</sup> Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet and Muslims in the Second World War*, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> When Sharif Shirinbaev reported to Moscow as CARC head commissioner for Uzbekistan in 1957, he explained that with the establishment of SADUM, ‘the foundation was laid for the central organization (*byla polozhena osnova tsentral’noi organizatsii*) of all Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.’ He added, furthermore, that ‘under the leadership of the most prominent representatives of the Muslim clergy, it [SADUM] continued the great work [designed to] marshal (*po uporiadocheniiu*) religious rituals in accordance with the tenets of Islam.’ That is to say, under Khrushchev, CARC hardliners regarded SADUM as an instrument for the state to monopolise Islamic authority and ensure that Muslims would operate according to a narrow prescriptive understanding of Islam as religion based on scriptures (Qur’an and the Prophetic Sunnah). See O’MA, R-2574, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 3-4 (n.d). On Shirinbaev, see further, Paolo Sartori, “‘On the Importance of Having a Method:’ Reading Atheistic Documents on Islamic Revival in 1950s Central Asia,” in Eren Tasar, Jeff Eden, Allen J. Frank (eds.), *From the Khans’ Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 284-322.

unregistered groups of believers.’<sup>48</sup> Ro’i’s statement is no exaggeration, for starting from 1944, SADUM’s and CARC’s Qaraqalpaq representatives, for example, received requests to register existing mosque communities almost on a daily basis. In fact, ‘Muslim believers and worshippers’ (*dīndār namāzkhānlar*) did not fear retaliation and came out to apply for registration of mosques which had been functioning since 1943.<sup>49</sup> Coincidentally, the Tashkent office of CARC sent out a classified circular in early October of 1944 to explain that under no circumstances (*ni v koem sluchae*) should CARC commissioners in the provinces proceed to reply to parishes’ requests, especially when they addressed the opening and registration of mosques.<sup>50</sup> The situation did not improve much, at least not in Qaraqalpaqstan. By mid-1945, CARC commissioner Allaniyazov reported from Nukus that in many districts there were congregations operating without permission, and that these had opened their own houses of worship.<sup>51</sup>

By 1945 in Uzbekistan the situation with Muslimness was clearly so chaotic as to require close monitoring. This state of affairs is best reflected in a proposal crafted that year to establish a ‘Unified Consultative Centre of the Muslims of the USSR’. In the minds of its proponents, such an institution was essential to improve the situation, especially ‘in the Central Asian republics where a significant number of clergymen do not in fact defer to the [authority of the] Spiritual Administration, and operate anarchically and out of control, and cause serious harm.’<sup>52</sup> Once again this rather worrying statement dovetails with the situation as observed on the ground, namely in the provinces, for chaos reigned at least until the winter of 1947. On 1 March of that year the head of Uzbek CARC

---

<sup>48</sup> Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika*, p. 291.

<sup>49</sup> QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 26.

<sup>50</sup> QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 90.

<sup>51</sup> *Imeiutsia samovol’nye bez razresheniia otkryty molitvennye zdaniia*, QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Islam i sovetskoe gosudarstvo (1944-1990): Sbornik dokumentov. Vypusk 3*, ed. D. Iu. Arapov (Moscow: Mardzhani, 2011), 57.

Ibadov sent out a circular to all the CARC commissioners in the republic requesting them to list all the mosques operating in their areas and asking to submit lists of unregistered religious personnel, ranging from mullahs to exorcists, who offered religious services in exchange for money. Furthermore, Ibadov instructed CARC commissioners to explain to such clerics that they should stop ‘carrying out their religious practices.’ Ibadov’s soft approach changed only when SADUM’s ulama took matters into their hands and requested the closing of all the illegal mosques in the region.<sup>53</sup> SADUM’s doubling down on the implementation of restrictive measures responded to worrying signals coming from CARC officials such as the head Commissioner for Kyrgyzstan Akhtiamov who noted in early 1947 that ‘among Muslims there is the tendency to revive the rules of sharia.’<sup>54</sup>

Now we can appreciate, I hope conclusively, the fact that SADUM did not merely represent some kind of compensation for the damage sustained by Central Asian Muslims in the interwar period, nor a concession to the latter in recognition of their contribution to the war cause, but also functioned as an instrument designed to control, contain, and regulate Muslimness. In turn, this observation is key to appreciating something that has escaped the attention of historians of Central Asian Islam under Soviet rule, namely that beyond the official domain of SADUM there existed a vast landscape of Muslim religiosity. To adopt a metaphor, SADUM was not a cathedral in the desert, but a watchtower in a teeming forest full of life.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *Vse neregistrirrovannnye i ne zakonnodeistvuiushchie mazary, mecheti, sinagogi dolzhny byt' zakryty na osnovanii protokola dukhovnoi [sic!] upravlenii musul'man Sr-Azii i Kazakhstana, gde ukazano iasno i poniatno*, Ibadov to Qaraqalpaq CARC Commissioner Irmanov, 18 March 1947, QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 102.

<sup>54</sup> CARC Commissioner for Kyrgyzstan Akhtamov to Polianskii, <https://islam Perspectives.org/rpi/items/show/16988> accessed online on November 8 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Reporting in February 1947 to the secretary of CARC, in Moscow, I. Polianskii, the head commissioner of CARC in Tashkent, Iskanderov mentioned that SADUM representatives officially denounced the illegal opening of mosques and the mass participation of believers at religious rituals carried out in those

Proceeding from this premise, my main goal in this book is to illuminate manifestations of Muslimness across and beyond SADUM, i.e., what lay poorly controlled and understood, which was in fact the everyday experience of the pious and faithful among Muslims in Soviet Uzbekistan. I do so by capitalising on scholarship that has pointed to the intellectual vibrancy of the unofficial domain. Such studies are based on a wide range of compositional genres, from texts addressing aspects of Islamic dogmatics and jurisprudence to Islamic hagiography produced during and after Stalinism.<sup>56</sup>

## Sources

So far, I have spoken about Muslimness and the challenges that we face when we approach this subject from the perspective of current historiography and its conventional interpretations. Now I would like to address briefly the topic of sources, for two reasons. The first one is to signal that, contrary to what has been assumed by earlier scholarship for the last three decades, documentation about Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan exists and is in fact abundant and varied. It ranges from unpublished ethnography, to hagiography, poetry, correspondence between ulama, and memoirs. With regard to script and language I would like to introduce a caveat. The

---

houses of worship. In sum, he reported that the issue with unofficial mosques was very bad (*ochen' plokho obstoit delo ob otkrytii nelegal'nykh mechetei i molitvennykh zdaniy*), cf. <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/17146> accessed on October 6 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Allen J. Frank, *Gulag Miracles: Sufis and Stalinist Repression in Kazakhstan* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019); Stéphane A. Dudoignon, 'A Surrogate Aristocracy? Sufi Adab, Modernity, Rurality and Civilisation in Ex-Soviet Central Asia', in C. Mayeur-Jaouen, ed., *Adab and Modernity: A 'Civilising Process'?* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 527–551; Stéphane A. Dudoignon, 'Holy Virgin Lands? Demographic Engineering, Heritage Management, and the Sanctification of Territories in ex-Soviet Central Asia, since WWII', in *From the Khans' Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese*, pp. 358–408.



adversarial approach that Party organs promoted towards Islam reinforced a perception of cultural difference between the Soviet state and those citizens who regarded themselves as believers (*mo'min musulmonlar / dindorlar*), at least in certain circles. Indeed, one can observe how under Soviet rule, the term 'Muslim' came to be applied to certain cultural practices associated with the Islamic tradition. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to find that many Soviet ulama continued to write in the Arabic script in spite of the fact that the languages of all the Muslim nationalities of the USSR had adopted the Cyrillic script, which remained in use until the collapse of Soviet power. The ulama continued using Arabic script most probably because they identified this mode of writing with the language of the Qur'an, i.e., the quintessence of the sacred for a Muslim. Importantly, in Uzbekistan some scholars viewed Russian as the language of atheism and Uzbek as their own 'Muslim language' (an idea conveyed in the referring to Uzbek not as *o'zbekcha* but as *musulmoncha*).<sup>57</sup> It is important to keep in mind these nuances, for reflecting upon instances of preference for the Arabic-script over the Cyrillic can most usefully assist us to break down the dyad 'Soviet and Muslim.' On the one hand, such preference may attest to the fact that ulama recognised that they could operate freely *qua* Muslims within the official space created by the state, namely SAD-UM and its Islamic sphere. On the other hand, the use of the Arabic script may attest that the ulama situated themselves at a cultural remove from Soviet authorities. Furthermore, such a distinction invites us to contemplate the possibility that the world of Soviet Muslimness contained within itself scope for dissidence, ranging

---

<sup>57</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 20, l. 119. Incidentally, in 1954 the Soviet ethnographer Gleb Snesarev recorded the use of the expression 'Muslim language' (*musul'manskii iazyk*) among Uzbeks who worked in the 'Stalin' collective farm situated within the district of Khiva. Clearly, the ethnographer was struck by this terminology, for it was deployed in a kolkhoz regarded as 'modern' (*peredovoi*), in a space, that is, devoid of 'mosques, shrines and other clear religious manifestations.' See Sergei S. Alymov, "G.P. Snesarev i polevoe izuchenie "religiozno-bytovykh perezhitkov"," *Ėtnograficheskoe Obozrenie* Vol. 6 (2013), pp. 75.

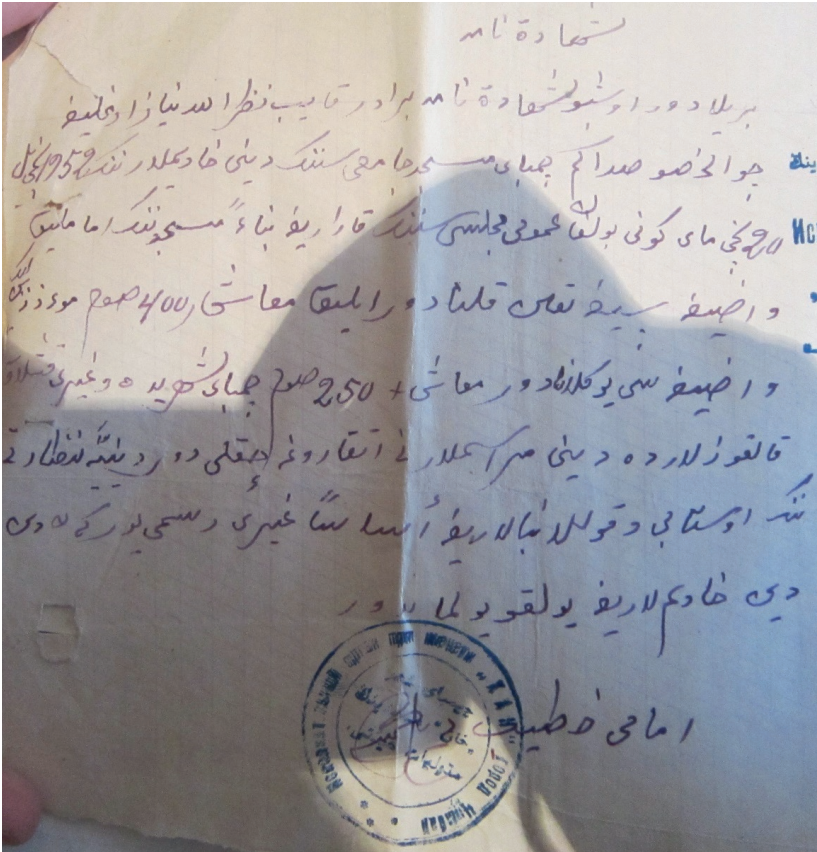


Figure 0.2 A certificate of appointment to the position of imam at the Friday mosque in Chimbay, which specified the salary that the beneficiary was entitled to receive in exchange of his services as imam and muezzin. The record was issued by the executive committee (*mutavalliyat*) of the ‘Khan’ mosque in 1952 and signed by Rahmatulloh Idrisov who served at the time as *imam-khatib*. Abdusalim Idrisov private collection.

© Paolo Sartori.

from the refusal to learn and speak Russian to active advocating for a jihad against Moscow.<sup>58</sup>

The second reason why it is important to reflect on our documentation is that most of what is today available to us in the archives of the successor countries to the USSR reflects the bureaucratic output of atheist institutions such as CARC or other Party organs. On account of this specific character, many have considered such documentation as intrinsically hostile to any hermeneutic engagement that may enable us to historicise the USSR as a religious space. To surrender to the opacity of sources is never a laudable thing for an historian, but to draw any substantive conclusions at all, after throwing out the baby along with the bathwater, puts any historian into a very precarious position.<sup>59</sup>

This book takes a diametrically opposite approach and builds on the ground-breaking work of Eren Tasar. Deeply researched, *Soviet and Muslim* has many merits, but there is one in particular that has spurred me to write this book. By taking Soviet records about religion seriously, Tasar has paved the way for a significant methodological shift premised upon the possibility that such documentation *is* hermeneutically productive. To put it another way, *Soviet and*

---

<sup>58</sup> On manifestations of dissidence among Muslim scholars in Soviet Central Asia under Late Socialism, see Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Gnosis as Dissent? In Soviet and Present-Day Tajikistan,” *Journal of Central Asian History* Vol. 1 No. 2 (2022), pp. 273-308. Calls for a jihad against Moscow were to be found also beyond the borders of the Soviet Union and prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, most notably among the community of Central Asian migrants. One of the latter’s most influential representatives was a Muslim scholar born in Aulie-Ata known as Sayyid Mahmud al-Tarazi al-Madani (1895-1991). After a stint in Bombay, al-Tarazi relocated to Saudi Arabia, first in Taif, then in Medina where he pursued a teaching career. Among many works which ranged from jurisprudence to dogmatics and Qur’anic exegesis, al-Tarazi penned also three tracts advocating for a holy war against the USSR. The last one was published in Karachi in 1971 in Arabic-script Uzbek under the title *Islām naz-arinda silāh*. See Filipp Khusnutdinov, “Altin-khan tura: biobibliograficheskii ocherk,” *Journal of Central Asian History* Vol. 1 No. 2 (2022), pp. 329-338.

<sup>59</sup> For an expanded critique of this approach, see Paolo Sartori, ““On the Importance of Having a Method,”” pp. 284-322.

*Muslim* invites us to reflect upon what the documentary output of SADUM and CARC can tell us about the quotidian and its religious dimension. For the purposes of this book, the major takeaway of Tasar's *Soviet and Muslim* is that the Party-state adopted religion 'as a category for understanding the population'<sup>60</sup> precisely because the state knew that Islam mattered to Central Asians. To put this aspect of Soviet Islam into relief is a monumental achievement, for it turns most previous scholarship on its head, and provides a simple, though persuasive framework with which to explain why Soviet archives are flooded with descriptions of Muslims' religiosity, which are more redolent of ethnographic tastes than of censorial concerns. Thanks to Tasar, we are finally able to recognize that the Party-state mobilized substantial resources to make sense of Muslimness rather than simply target it as an enemy.

While Tasar's work is unrivalled in its coverage of the Islamic religious sphere, it still leaves ample room to attempt to write a social history of Muslimness in Soviet Central Asia. Indeed, *Soviet and Muslim* is an institutional history that focuses on 'church-state' relations and offers a nuanced narrative of the failed policies of secularization and their unintended consequences. It also provides a plethora of snapshots of quotidian religious life, each one caught at the intersection of interactions between Muslims, Communists, CARC and SADUM. However, the work does not say much about how Soviet Central Asians performed and reflected upon their Muslimness, how their religiosity manifested itself, and how it adapted to changing circumstances. Tasar is not to be blamed, to be sure, for this: to pursue this line of inquiry on the basis of records coming from the Soviet archives poses inevitably a major hermeneutical challenge, for such documentation is informed by the ideology of secularization and it is steeped in a rigid vocabulary of radical modernization. My approach to this problem is rather straightforward. I assume that a text may include fragments of the past, which the

---

<sup>60</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, p. 4.

historian can recuperate and comprehend. This means that, in principle, the historian can activate past realities encapsulated in a text by asking questions that eschew the concerns of its author. To better understand this proposition, we may imagine that a text includes shards of the past that vibrate according to a frequency different from that of the record into which they were included. Following this approach, my task in this book has been to attune myself to that hidden frequency.

Most of the sources that I have used for this book either directly or indirectly point to manifestations of Muslimness in rural places. I believe there are two ways to explain why there are so many more vignettes coming from the countryside than there are urban stories of Muslims' religiosity. First, after World War II and until the 1990s, Uzbekistan was and remained a rural country, for the USSR and its economic planners regarded the region as a large reservoir for agricultural exploitation. It is of course true that the Uzbek landscape was dotted by several industrial complexes of various size such as the chemical plant in Chirchiq or the metallurgical complex in Angren. However, collective farms remained a dominant, indeed a ubiquitous presence in Uzbekistan and there is ample evidence pointing to the fact that kolkhozes served as safe havens for a rich cast of characters ranging from scholars of Islam who were rehabilitated after 1953 to exorcists, itinerant preachers, and people of piety more generally.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see, collective farms facilitated not only the resilience, but also the recomposition and reinforcement of Muslimness under Soviet rule, a process of sociocultural transformation and religious change which was fuelled by secularisation.<sup>62</sup> In such a pervasive rural environment, one could observe how religious practices were deeply intertwined with agricultural cycles

---

<sup>61</sup> Dudoignon and Christian Noack (eds.), *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realms, passim*.

<sup>62</sup> Wanner, "Introduction," p. 2.





Figure 0.3 Funeral ritual (*sadr*), Afrosiyob, Samarqand, 1930s. Collection Gleb Snesarev, not inventoried.  
© Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences

such as the harvesting of a crop or the ploughing of the fields.<sup>63</sup> It is therefore natural that such practices drew the sustained attention of observers (ethnographers, CARC members, and agitators) who were foreign to the local rural communities.

Secondly, a developmental bias seems to have informed Soviet officials' as well as ethnographers' understanding of religion and where the latter was to be found. We know that ethnographers understood Islam in particular as an aggregate of survivals of past cultures, which lingered on among traditional communities and individuals (especially women) living in the countryside and who had therefore received less exposure to education.<sup>64</sup> As we shall see, this applies equally to CARC representatives who until the dissolution of the USSR lamented the intrinsic inadequacy of atheist propaganda to affect life among rural communities and dent their religiosity. Furthermore, it stands to reason that in urban settings both ethnographers and CARC commissioners would have had a hard time to follow religious practices, for the only place where the latter manifested themselves were the few registered mosques or in private apartments. It is hardly imaginable that Uzbeks who secretly practised Islam would have opened the doors of their flats (or cellars, for that matter) to strangers thereby running the risk of denunciations. Notwithstanding the inherent bias of our sources, one may well imagine that religious practices similar to those which were recorded in the countryside took place also in urban environments. In fact, ethnographers may have sought out rural areas, but holy places such as shrines are and were a fixture of the urban landscape as well, and quite a few 'rural' practices were visible in Soviet cities in the 1980s.<sup>65</sup> To historicise such practices, one would need to turn

---

<sup>63</sup> Jeanine Dağyeli, 'Wheat the Magnificent,' *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* Vol. 64 (2018), pp. 203-226.

<sup>64</sup> S. Abashin, *Sovetskii kishlak: Mezhdru kolonializmom i modernizatsiei* (Moscow: NLO: 2015), pp. 14-16.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Vladimir N. Basilov, "Toshmat-Bola," *Sovetskaia Étnografiia* (1975/5), pp. 112-124; I. Achil'diev, "Kak zhivesh, makhallia?" *Nauka i religiia* (1980/2), pp. 34-39.

one's attention to other types of records, which differ from the documentary sediments of Soviet ethnography and CARC bureaucracy. I hope this book will provide encouragement for others to pursue this unbeaten track.

A final note of caution is here in order. In the past both remote and recent, observers of things Central Asian have proceeded to factor the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan into narratives about the so-called 'revival' of Islam.<sup>66</sup> On the face of it, this sounds like a commonsensical suggestion, for Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation was enmeshed within an Islamist ideology which, as we have seen in the vignette opening this introduction, did enjoy some traction in certain corners in Uzbekistan. There is little doubt, furthermore, that the war in Afghanistan was a matter of concern for the CARC offices in Moscow and that, in light of said concern, one can indeed discern specific bureaucratic impulses informing administrative practices in Uzbekistan at a local level. I review such impulses in Chapter Five. One could take a step further and contemplate the possibility as I do that the war in Afghanistan was among the historical forces that unleashed a new wave of mosque registrations throughout the country, which manifested itself at the beginning of the 1980s. Such an interpretive move is premised upon the assumption that Party organs decided to temper and deflect anti-government sensibilities informed by the experience of the Afghan mujahideen. To register dozens of mosques as the state did in Uzbekistan in the 1980s represented therefore some kind of conciliatory policy.

---

<sup>66</sup> For a very recent attempt to do so, see Cathleen Collins, *Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023). An excellent review of Cold-War scholarship (the so-called Bennigsen school) predicting an Islamic insurgency in Central Asia in the 1980s because of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan can be found in Eren Tasar, "Sufism on the Soviet Stage: Holy People and Places in Central Asia's Socio-Political Landscape After World War II," in Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (ed.), *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 267-270.



There is little doubt that the consolidation of Khomeini's power in Iran and the failures of the reformist programme of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan did affect policies towards Islam in the USSR.<sup>67</sup> However, at the same time I have strong reservations regarding the idea that the war in Afghanistan directly affected how Uzbeks viewed their Muslimness, changed the public discourse about Islam, and eventually brought Islamism to Uzbekistan. In reviewing the body of material that I have collected over the last two decades on the manifestations of Muslim religiosity in Socialist Uzbekistan after the Second World War, I have not come across any significant records which could alert us to a direct cause-effect relationship between the disastrous involvement of the USSR in Afghanistan and how things developed north of the Amu Darya in Soviet Central Asia. In fact, while Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan had been on the authorities' radar since the 1970s, Party records, including KGB classified correspondence, do not suggest that there was a nexus between Islamic counterinsurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the so-called revival of Islam in Socialist Uzbekistan.

I understand of course the risks posed by an argument *ex silentio*. I would suggest, however, that such a silence from within my corpus of materials is in fact quite telling, constituting as it were a 'curious incident of the dog in the night-time,' as Conan Doyle would have it. I therefore want to defer to the expert judgment of Artemy Kalinovsky who has argued that 'young people in Central Asia generally accepted official Soviet explanations for the military involvement. In the war's early years, some even volunteered or thought of volunteering, identifying the "internationalist" action there with the legends of heroism...'<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Vassily Klimentov, *A Slow Reckoning: The USSR, the Afghan Communists, and Islam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024).

<sup>68</sup> Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 51.

## **Outlook**

Chapter One ('Sufis into Villains') traces how the establishment of SADUM brought about major unintended consequences for the Islamic public sphere in Uzbekistan. SADUM was a Janus-faced institution: it represented a network of state-sanctioned ulama who defended the integrity of Muslim communities in post-Stalin Central Asia from the attacks of radical atheists. By offering spiritual guidance on matters of Islamic ethics, those who manned SADUM and its various regional offices, official mosques and shrines developed complex strategies to connect to a broad constituency of Soviet citizens who regarded themselves as pious Muslims in a socialist secularist environment. At the same time, however, SADUM often took courses of action that supported the specific policies of the Soviet Party-state. More specifically, the privileged means of influencing behaviour was to issue fatwas which were distributed and discussed at the mosque. Chapter One shows that one of SADUM's missions was to regiment Muslimness, by promoting a modern understanding of religiosity, and especially discrediting Sufi masters in the eyes of the public. Interestingly, SADUM embraced this mission, for it was staffed by scholars of puritanical and fundamentalist sensibilities who saw in Sufism the worst manifestations of polytheism.

Chapter Two ('Soviet Muslim Authority Contested') explores how beyond SADUM there existed a galaxy of voices among Muslims which expressed frustration, dissatisfaction, and resentment towards the state, and especially the mufti and the religious nomenklatura that coalesced around the muftiate. More specifically, it builds on dozens of petitions that individuals of all walks of life ranging from female mullahs to farmers sent to the offices of SADUM in Tashkent in the hope of eliciting responses from the mufti. Not only did such petitions present questions addressing matters of ritual worship, but they also criticised SADUM for having developed specific policies (attacking Sufism, for example) or for being lenient with regard to political Islam and the nascent network of Islamist groups. Chapter Two delves into the lives of individuals who

were directly affected by SADUM's hyper-normative reading of the Islamic scriptures. At the same time, it brings into relief the stories of how Soviet Uzbeks expressed their own Muslimness in ways which more often than not were critical of the state. They did so not only by affirming their own individual understanding of things Muslim, but also by situating themselves in a broader cultural field of communal belonging. Indeed, they often referred to a shared cultural apparatus consisting of rituals, morals, and convictions which they shared with their ancestors, families and neighbours. Building on letters found in the private archive of a former member of SADUM, this chapter clearly shows that Muslims filtered Soviet reality through an Islamic cosmogony that served as a powerful resource to confer meaning on their lives.

Chapter Three ('Shrines' Spacetime') provides an alternative narrative to the dominant view about Islam in Central Asia, the latter positing that seventy years of Soviet dominance not only deracinated the people from the literate traditions of their Islamic past but also caused an interruption in the hagiographical tradition at the level of oral transmission. It shows how Sufi narratives embedded in the life of shrines were key to the constitution of a Muslim historical consciousness in Soviet Uzbekistan after the Second World War. In particular, this chapter emphasizes that without Sufi narratives and, particularly, the oral traditions transmitted and reproduced in the Soviet period, wider stretches of the Muslim population would ultimately have been deprived of their Islamic history. Even though at school they were taught little about the Islamic history of their region, and what little they learned reflected a highly distorted vision, Uzbeks were still able to access the past through the surviving architectural presence of Islam. Monumental sites, however, were not enough for Muslims to understand the past and use it to construct their present identity. Such artifacts acquired meaning only through an interpretive framework. And this framework was provided by Sufi narratives, i.e., stories about saints and their miracles. By offering a contrapunctal reading of an unpublished shrine catalogue crafted in Arabic-script Uzbek in the year 1960, unpublished ethnographic records, and hagiographical sources copied until the early

1980s, this chapter argues that Sufi narratives were reproduced and transmitted by shrine communities, and shows how shrines represented for Uzbeks a collective ‘memory space,’ – that is, a place in which the past was mobilized in the present by means of narration.

Chapter Four (‘Living with the Spirits’) is mostly based on unpublished fieldnotes crafted by Soviet ethnographers who did fieldwork in various parts of Uzbekistan between the 1940s and the 1980s, and it tackles the following question: how can we explain the fact that spirits and the knowledge of magic remained significant in Central Asia in the period following the Second World War, a time which is usually associated with the great exploits of progress and modernization? Indeed, in Soviet Uzbekistan people of all stripes showed concern about the pervasive presence of the supernatural and practices of exorcism were part and parcel of Uzbeks’ everyday life. Private archives show how the ordinary pious took various courses of action and made emotional investments to deflect the obtrusive presence of spirits, for they regarded spirits as every bit as real as the world in which they lived. As we sift through Soviet ethnography, we find disquieting stories about Soviet Uzbeks afflicted by evil spirits and demons which were conceived of as God’s creatures on a moral par with angels. This chapter is built around fine-grained first-hand accounts of practices of exorcism. To make sense of the enduring Islamic character of such practices recorded throughout the Soviet history of Uzbekistan, I have availed myself of various genres which I have read contrastively together with Soviet ethnographic records: fatwas, hagiographical literature, and prayerbooks.

Chapter Five (‘Bureaucratic Anxiety about Muslimness’) explores another dimension of how Islam was lived in Soviet Uzbekistan. It shows the degree to which the persistence of manifestations of public religiosity produced a situation of bureaucratic anxiety – namely, a phenomenon whereby state officials at different levels gave vent to their dismay at the failure of the Soviet secularist project. This chapter argues that bureaucratic anxiety was the signature feature of the output of Party organs until the end of the USSR, for more often than not such organs pretended not to know realities on

the ground. In fact, at least starting from the 1970s, many Soviet officials purposefully ignored the fact that Muslimness had been hiding in plain sight for decades. Indeed, Party cadres at all levels turned a blind eye to the fact that unregistered mosque communities submitted reiterated applications for registration, and that this had been going on since the 1940s; that underground Islamic schools recruited hundreds of students; that Islamic literature circulated without much difficulty; and that unregistered mullahs paid taxes on the money they received in return for their religious services. Drawing on previously untapped records emerging from the archives in Samarqand, Urgench, and Nukus, Chapter Five depicts a situation of anxiety over Islam, which reached a tipping point in the early 1980s. The 26<sup>th</sup> congress of the Communist Party held between 23 February and 3 March 1981 brought about significant changes in state policies towards Muslims at home and abroad. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and then the invasion of Afghanistan had become major concerns in Moscow, for political Islam could, at least in principle, destabilise the situation in the Muslim-majority republics of the USSR. The softening of the approach towards Islam produced a trickle-down domino effect in Uzbekistan which led to the registration of many mosque communities which up until that point had been operating illegally.

*A Soviet Sultanate* concludes by reflecting upon the transformation and durability of Soviet-era Islam through the lens of a family of Muslim scholars who opened the doors of their house to me in 2011, at the height of the repressive policies unleashed by the regime of Islam Karimov. The epilogue is designed to close the book's narrative arc which brings together cases of resilience and recomposition of Muslims' religiosity. It follows rural men and women who did not genuflect before the aggressive policies of forced secularization and did not abandon their sense of commitment to the otherworldly. By triangulating the bureaucratic output of atheist institutions with unpublished ethnography, Arabic-script codices, and petitions addressed by Uzbeks to the Soviet muftis in Tashkent, *A Soviet Sultanate* offers an aggregate of vignettes portraying lives lived in the company of God and its prophet, together with many saints, angels,

and evil spirits. By giving space to primary sources, *A Soviet Sultanate* seeks to show that there are ways to elicit meaning from records produced by atheist institutions and Party organs, which have been for long considered hostile to a creative hermeneutic engagement. It offers intertextual readings of records which under a thick crust of bureaucratise embody past realities of lived religiosity. More specifically, this book focuses in on the Soviet Muslims' experience without necessarily reifying Islam as a civilization and superimposing on Soviet subjects preconceived notions derived from either Sovietological literature or carved out from other regions of the Muslim world. It does so by examining lived Islam – that is, the embodiment of intellectual traditions, beliefs, and reflections on being Muslim as a religious and moral subject.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

*Sufis into Villains*



## Introduction

In mid-December 1960, during the Khrushchevian anti-religious recrudescence, mufti Ziyouddin Bobokhonov's first deputy, Ismoil Makhdum Sottiev (1893-1976), left his office in Tashkent and headed to Khorezm, the westernmost region of Uzbekistan. Born into a family of scholars from Namangan in the Ferghana Valley and with an immaculate Islamic intellectual pedigree, Sottiev was an old hand at the power play that went behind the scenes of SAD-UM.<sup>1</sup> The goal of his mission in setting off for far-flung Urgench reflected the turbulent atmosphere of this strange moment in Soviet history. Sottiev had been tasked with a special outreach activity: his target was the community of Muslim believers coalescing around the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoni (1048-1140), and his assignment was to persuade them that they all had been led astray by mendacious Sufis. Located within the territory of the 'Leningrad' collective farm in the district of Shovot, 30 km north-west of Urgench on the road leading to the border with Turkmenistan, the shrine had been a destination of mass pilgrimage for centuries. Things evidently did not change much with the Sovietization of the region in the interwar period, and thus in 1959 SADUM issued a fatwa declaring shrine visitation sinful (*harom*) and included the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoni among a special list of sites (across Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) which pilgrims were prohibited to travel to.<sup>2</sup> In sum, the mausoleum was thriving, and when escorted to its courtyard, Sottiev bumped into a wall of Sufi flags waving in the wind, which alerted visitors like him that they were stepping into a sacred ground of living Islam. He walked into the shrine and there he met the man in charge: Sheikh Ishmuhammed Dusov, aged 35, an ethnic Uzbek from Daşoguz. Our SADUM official clearly had little

---

<sup>1</sup> Haydarkhon Yo'ldoshkho'jaev and Irodakhon Qayumova, *O'zbekiston ulamolari* (Tashkent: Movarounnahr, 2015), pp. 102-103.

<sup>2</sup> *SADUM schitaet poseshchenie mazarov kharamom – grekhom i zapreshchaet poseshchat' sleduiushchie sviatye mazary*, O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 477, l. 135.

sympathy for this individual. ‘Although illiterate,’ wrote Sottiev, ‘Dusov goes around [blithely] spreading all sorts of nonsense in the name of the holy spirit and preaches [a new credo:] his connection to the saint. He encourages the sick and those who wish to have a child to bring offerings to the holy spirit; [in return,] he will intercede with the saint for the bestowal of the desired child, as well as for the recovery of the sick.’<sup>3</sup>

Trained in the slanderous congeries of anti-Sufi rhetoric, Sottiev conjured an image of Dusov as a hardened criminal: the sheikh had exploited Muslims’ sincere belief – and had furthermore done so exclusively for his own personal gain. By offering treatments, the sheikh-cum-predator had lured young women who wished to have children into his trap, thereby turning the shrine into a hotbed of debauchery.<sup>4</sup> Details were gruesome. When approached by patients, Dusov would call them ‘insane,’ tie their hands and feet, and take them to the neighbouring weedy wasteland where he beat them up. Some had died, people said.<sup>5</sup> ‘These are the deeds which he carried

---

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried, typewritten in Russian.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried, typewritten in Russian.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the information collected by Sottiev was cooked up in 1964 by the head of the Uzbek CARC Sharif Shirinbaev. In a classified memo on the religious situation in Uzbekistan, Shirinbaev wrote that ‘During the inspection of the territory of the shrine of Kho’ja Yusuf Hamadoniy, 12 men and women with mental and other illnesses who had come to the sheikh for treatment were found. Among them was Pirman Muratov, born in 1942 and a member of the Komsomol, who was tied by his hands and feet with chains. For some time, he was in a regional hospital where he was treated for mental illness and was discharged after being brought back to normal. However, his fanatical parents brought Muratov to sheikh Dusmatov [sic!] for a conclusive cure. [The sheikh] tied his hands and feet with chains and beat him daily at night, referring to this as one of the methods of healing patients. During such treatment, Pirman Muratov suffered severe injuries to his hands, back and head. It has also been established that Madaminjon Kho’jaev, a resident of Urgench, brought his sick wife to sheikh Dusmatov for treatment. In the presence of the husband, the sheikh started to beat her severely, as a result of which she died. Sheikh Ishmuhammed Dusmatov was arrested and sentenced in 1962.’ Cf. O’MA, f. R-2574, op. 1, d. 92, ll. 16-17.

out while claiming to be a saint,' Sottiev unequivocally concluded.<sup>6</sup> Our official then proceeded to travel to various mosques in the region to tell the story of Dusov's 'dirty affairs,' and hammer home the idea that what had happened at the shrine was morally unacceptable, for it reflected false beliefs (aside from the fact that, as the report goes, it entailed physical assaults and cases of possible rapes). They were manifestations of superstition, he said, which were easily exploited by mendacious sheikhs who had departed from the basic tenets of Islam. Nor, furthermore, did Sottiev stop here. He staged a vitriolic tirade against shrine visitation and Sufi practices connected with the cult of the saints on December 24, after the Friday prayer at the Okhunboboev mosque in Urgench, and again on December 25, at the house of one Jomboy Eshon close to the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoni. Attendees heard him explain at length that the true location of the grave of the saint in question was Baýramaly, in Turkmenistan. By pointing to the existence of another shrine, he claimed that the one located in Uzbekistan in the district of Shovot represented in fact an improbable concoction by local Sufi masters. He could prove it, he said. He obliged a mullah from Khiva to read an excerpt from the *Nafahāt al-Uns*, a work of the 15th-century polymath 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, indicating that the corpse of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoni was indeed buried in Baýramaly.<sup>7</sup> How did the congregation react? 'The believers attending the meeting were deeply astonished and looked disappointed,' reads the report. Gloating over this result, Sottiev resolved to issue a muscular recommendation deploying Marxist rhetoric: all those charlatans disguised as sheikhs 'who intoxicate (*odurmanivanie*) men and women with their nonsense' should be evicted from the shrine. He furthermore stated that the shrine should be closed and

---

<sup>6</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried, typewritten in Russian.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously Jāmī could not have used the toponym Baýramaly. In fact, *Nafahāt al-Uns* gives the historical Hamadani's burial as in Merv, see H. Algar, "Abu Ya'qub Hamadāni," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/4, pp. 395-396.

all its properties transferred to local mosques, i.e., to SADUM.<sup>8</sup> The Tashkent elite of the Muslim Spiritual Board had reared its aggressive face and shown it could prevail over Sufism, its infrastructure, and its acolytes.



Figure 1.1 A *qalandar* at the cemetery of Okhun Bobo, Urgench, 1946. Album of Yuri Knorozov, not inventoried © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

---

<sup>8</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried, typewritten in Russian.

## The Roots of Anti-Sufi Sentiments

As we shall see more in detail later in this chapter, SADUM was home to ulama who, like Sottiev, waged a protracted, indeed multi-decade war against Sufis, shrine communities, and devotional practices associated with the cult of saints. They did so by producing a discursive edifice centered on a simple binary: a contrast, that is, between good and bad Muslims, with Sufism representing the quintessence of impiety.

Let us take a step back and look at the role which Sufism played in Central Asia prior to Sovietization. At the turn of the 20th century, Sufism was a mainstream phenomenon throughout the region. One reason why it was mainstream was because a significant demographic claimed descent from Sufi masters by dint of their genealogies (*shajara / nasab-nāma*). Usually referred to by the term *īshān*<sup>9</sup> (Uzb. *eshon*) a Persian word denoting the personal pronoun ‘they’, descendants of the saints were effectively Sufis by blood. From their sacred genealogy, however, *eshons* derived a privileged status in their society: not only they were entitled to manage shrines and live off their religious endowments, but they were also widely revered as holy men endowed with charismatic powers. Enjoying an influential position before local communities, including ruling parties, *eshons* operated in various environments and in different capacities, including as shrine trustees, conflict mediators, community leaders and guild patrons.<sup>10</sup>

In close association with *eshons* there were Sufi agnatic groups (Ar.-Per. *avlād*, Uzb. *avlod*) which coalesced around shrine complexes. They formed communities that financially supported institutions connected to a particular Sufi shrine. Particularly notable for

---

<sup>9</sup> On the history of the term, see Vasilii V. Bartol’d, ‘Ishan,’ in Akademik V.V. Bartol’d, *Sochineniia*, vol. VI: *Raboty po istorii islama i arabskogo khalifata* (ed. A.V. Khalidov) (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), p. 675.

<sup>10</sup> Ulfat Abdurasulov, “Advice from a Holy Man: Īshāns in Nineteenth-Century Khorezm,” in Sela, Sartori, and DeWeese (eds.), *Muslim Religious Authority in Central Eurasia*, pp. 180-207.

our purposes were families that established endowments variously in aid of edifices such as madrasas, Sufi convents (*khanaqāh*), special rooms for reading the Qur'an (*qāri-khāna*), or dedicated places for self-seclusion (*chilla-khāna*). A shrine complex could also include auxiliary structures such as ablution rooms (*tahārat-khāna*), soup kitchens and cemeteries.<sup>11</sup> Shrine complexes are not only to be found outside cities. In fact, they also dot the skyline of most of the urban settlements of the region and they represent an integral part of cities' infrastructures.<sup>12</sup> Ubiquitous in Central Asia, shrine complexes offered a space for agnatic groups which, by means of charity, established a bond with a Sufi saint and his descendants.

Equally important was another type of Sufi who commanded authority over local communities by dint of his initiation to a specific spiritual path. Besides embracing a renunciant ethos, these Sufis were above all scholars who mastered a specific discipline in the broad intellectual landscape of Islamic sciences.<sup>13</sup> Their authority *qua* Sufis rested on their belonging to a chain of initiatic transmission (*silsila*), usually attested by a license to accept and teach the doctrine of mysticism to other disciples. Such a license passed from one master to another. In contrast to the descendants of the saints and shrine communities, these Sufis derived their charisma from their specific knowledge and, above all, their followers. The broader the circle of one's disciples, the higher one's status.

The boundaries between Sufis by descent and Sufis by training were of course porous. One can often find licensed Sufis who had a distinguished background as scholars because they studied in a famous madrasa under the guidance of a distinguished scholar, while simultaneously being heirs to a family which either genealogically

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Bakhtiyar Babajanov, Ashirek Muminov and Elizaveta Nekrasova, "Le mausolée de Chashma-yi 'Ayyūb à Boukhara et son prophète," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* Vol. 5-6 (1998), pp. 63-94.

<sup>12</sup> See Ol'ga A. Sukhareva, *Kvartal'naia obschchina srednevekovoï Bukhary* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), pp. 77, 169, 179, 182.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this subject, see James Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

or economically was connected to a Sufi saint and his shrine. It does not come as a surprise, then, to find that ulama who received a Sufi license too were often labelled as *eshons*.

Not everyone in Central Asia had sympathy for the Sufis, however. In fact, throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, many Sufis became the target of various forms of criticism for their supposedly aberrant behaviour. I shall look at the various manifestations of anti-Sufi rhetoric, for one finds these all fused into the discourse that SADUM developed to distinguish between good and bad Muslims, itself a reflection of a broader secularist policy designed to situate Muslims within a state-controlled form of religion.

In the second half of the 19th century, anti-Sufi critiques were premised upon a vision of Muslim ethics, which elevated sharia as the golden standard to measure appropriate behaviour. The people making such critiques often demanded that Sufis who could not prove an association with a strictly normative, i.e., sharia-inflected understanding of Islam should be chastised and marginalised. As we shall see, a normative critique against popular manifestations of Sufism relied upon two different intellectual trends which became phenomena of global significance. The first one was the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya, a mystical path of renewal of Islam enshrined in the doctrine of Sheikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), which spread widely across the Ottoman Empire and most parts of Central and South Asia. Aḥmad Sirhindī, otherwise known as the renewer of the second millennium (Per. *mujaddid-i alf-i thānī*), left a body of epistles in which he articulated a vision of Sufism in strict accordance with sharia and the Prophetic example. The Mujaddidi critique of Sufism focused upon ritual, for it targeted devotional practices such as chanting (*samāʿ*), loud litanies (*zīkr-i jāhr*), and saint veneration as unlawful innovations (*bidʿat*), practices that made Sufis liable to the accusation of polytheism (*shirk*), itself code for unbelief (*kufr*).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Waleed Ziad, *The Hidden Caliphate: Sufi Saints Beyond the Oxus and Indus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021). It would be important,



The second major intellectual trend, which significantly informed an anti-Sufi critique, was Islamic reformism (*iṣlāḥ*), a modernist scholarly discourse that advocated for a return to the scriptures, i.e., the Qur'an and the Sunnah, mainly for political purposes. This line of thinking was inspired by puritanical sensibilities first articulated in South Asia by scholars like Shāh Waliullāh Dihlavī<sup>15</sup> and his followers and further developed by Ottoman reformers such as Rashīd Ridhā and Muḥammad Abduh and their acolytes. Concerned as they were with the socio-cultural challenges that European colonialism posed to the Muslim world, reformist scholars advocated for the rectification of Muslim ethics as a means to ameliorate their society. In their minds, the most effective instrument to achieve such a change was legal hermeneutics, i.e., an unmediated, indeed independent interpretive engagement with the scriptures (*ijtihād*), which required abandoning the adherence (*taqlīd*) to a given school of law and its authoritative traditions. Reformist scholars in Central Asia thus reprimanded Sufis in general because of the latter's association with a conservative posture reflecting superstitions (*khurāfāt*) and a condition of intellectual apathy, which reformists identified with the origins of Muslims' cultural decline vis-à-vis the West.<sup>16</sup>

These two intellectual currents, the Mujaddidiyya and modernist reformism, have been the subject of sustained scholarly commentary over the last decades. It is important to remind ourselves, however, that they had rather different genealogies, which means that at the beginning of the 20th century one could be a Sufi reformist scholar without necessarily claiming to be following the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya. However, popularised by newspapers and

---

however, to remind ourselves that not all Mujaddidi circles in Central Asia were hostile to loud litanies.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Shāh Waliullāh Dihlavī's work *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha* would be referenced by mufti Ziyouddin Bobokhonov in his 1959 fatwa against shrine visitation, see O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 477, l. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Eden, Paolo Sartori and Devin DeWeese, "Moving Beyond Modernism: Rethinking Cultural Change in Muslim Eurasia (19th-20th Centuries)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 59 No.1-2 (2016), pp. 1-36.



journals, in Central Asia these two currents fused together into an abrasive critique of popular Sufism, this latter generally understood therein as a complex of rituals usually practised during shrine visitation: to give alms to a sheikh or the descendants of a saint, to circumambulate a shrine or a tomb, to request a saint's intercession with the divine, to practice exorcism and heal the sick with magic curative powers, to congregate and cry over the tomb of a saint, to smear one's face with the holy dust of a shrine, to slaughter an animal for ritual purposes – these are a few among the many Sufi practices that became the target of censure.

Concomitantly, Russian colonial officials and Orientalists began to attack Sufis, arguing that these latter represented an exoteric manifestation of Muslim culture, inherently anti-state and therefore potentially detrimental to the integrity of the imperial project. This idea originated from the supposed Sufi roots of anti-colonial resistance in the Caucasus, an idea embraced by many rank-and-file members of the administration of Tsarist-ruled Turkestan. Russian literature dubbed Sufis as 'itinerant mullahs,' thereby conjuring the image of peripatetic mystics who dodged relationships with the state and plotted in the dark against colonial authorities. The Russian term which best conveyed this notion was *ishanizm*, a derogatory expression which was deployed in order to present Sufism as a subversive ideology of some sort. Once seen in this light, *eshons* morphed into anti-state itinerant mystics and thus came to embody all the features which defined the bad Muslim.

What particularly spurred aversion among colonial officials to *eshons* was the 1898 Andijan uprising led by the Sufi Sheikh Dukchi Eshon (d. 1898). On the night of 18 May, detachments of Dukchi Eshon's devotees attacked the Russian military garrison in Andijan. Twenty soldiers and two officers were killed, and several dozen soldiers were wounded. The attackers lost about fifty men and over a hundred wounded. On 21 May most of the instigators, including Dukchi Eshon, were captured, and they were subsequently executed a month later. 'Far more dangerous for us than canonical

Muslimism’, noted an internal report on the uprising, ‘*ishanizm* has made a strong nest for itself in Turkestan.’<sup>17</sup>

In the eyes of the Russian authorities, the Andijan uprising was proof, if any more were needed, that something ought to be done about Sufism. In the report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (December 12, 1898), Governor-General of Turkestan S.M. Dukhovskoi (1898-1900) referred to Sufism as ‘communities or teachings not permitted by the government.’<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, colonial experts’ critique of Sufism was redolent of anti-Sufi views among Muslim reformist scholars. In a programmatic report devoted to the reorganization of Muslim spiritual life in Central Asia, one Russian expert observer suggested that ‘the establishment of monastic mendicant orders and, finally, Sufism is rooted in local customs and has nothing in common with the basic tenets of Islam.’ Further, noting how certain local ulama used derogatory expressions with regard to *ishanizm*, he concluded that ‘this dislike should be used in the struggle against Sufi fanatics.’<sup>19</sup>

The demonisation of Dukchi Eshon, who was held up as the archetypal resentful riotous Muslim, long continued to inform colonial approaches to Sufism. Despite the small scale and quick termination of the 1898 uprising, information panic spread havoc through the bureaucratic sinews of the empire. Imbued with ignorance of things Islamic, colonial officials broadened the category of people whom they regarded as ‘fanatic Sufis’, by which they meant enemies of the empire.<sup>20</sup> Russians lumped public criers, folk preachers (*maddahs*) and mendicant dervishes (*qalandars*) into a list of pan-Islamists together with *eshons*.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the categories of Sufi

---

<sup>17</sup> O’MA, f. I-1, op. 11, d. 1725, l. 63.

<sup>18</sup> O’MA, f. I-1, op. 11, d. 1725, l. 55.

<sup>19</sup> O’MA, f. I-1, op. 18, d. 29, l. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Morrison, “Sufism, Panislamism and Information Panic. Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising,” *Past & Present* Vol. 214 No. 1 (2012), pp. 275-304.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Maddahs are folk preachers. [They are to be found among] dervishes who preach in bazaars in the spirit of bright fanaticism. ... One can have an idea of the extent to which natives pursue their pan-Islamic goals and make everything

fanatic and pan-Islamist became coextensive.<sup>22</sup> A circular issued by the Military Governor of the Ferghana Province just a year after the Dukchi Eshon uprising explained that the activities of *maddohs* and other ‘wandering’ *eshons* were very similar to preachers inculcating fanaticism into the population, and concluded that there was no way to control the content of such people’s sermons. Furthermore, colonial officials were intimately convinced that *eshons* were more influential among those communities who were ostensibly only superficially Islamised. They held, for example, that ‘the influence of Sufis, i.e., *eshons* among the Qazaqs is incomparably stronger [than in any other society]. With his strange appearance, stories about miracles and amulets against all kinds of diseases, the *eshon* has a frightening effect on the superstitious soul of the uneducated Qazaq who is afraid of everything mysterious.’<sup>23</sup> Thus presented, *eshons* came to be regarded as the embodiment of the malevolent Sufi.

### **Soviet Fatwas Against Sufis**

I make now a chronological leap from the end of the 19th century into the 1940s to find that SADUM deployed both the aforementioned critiques, that of Muslim reformist sensibilities as well as the derogatory talk of Russian commentators. As we shall see,

---

Russian look bad by visiting the old city during Ramadan. At the time when thousands of people gather from all over the area, maddahs and dervishes walk in the bazaars and they stage puppet shows: all this aims at propaganda and discrediting the Russian name and prestige.’ O’MA, f. I-1, op. 31., d. 540, ll. 28-30. Other examples of derogatory depictions of maddahs in Russian Turkestan can be found in Aftandil Erkinov, “Le contrôle impérial des répertoires poétiques. La mise au pas des prédicateurs *maddāh* dans le Gouvernorat général du Turkestan (fin xix<sup>e</sup>-début xx<sup>e</sup> siècle),” *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* Vol. 24 (2015), pp. 145-182.

<sup>22</sup> Paolo Sartori and Pavel Shablei, “Delo Mukhammada Sharifa: Rossiiskaia imperiia i sufizm v Kazakhskoi stepi v seredine XIX veka,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* Vol. 64 No. 3-4 (2023), pp. 561-595.

<sup>23</sup> O’MA, f. I-1, op. 18, d. 29, ll. 70-71.

SADUM was manned by scholars who, while belonging to families of Sufi masters, were adepts of Islamic scripturalism and categorically opposed many of the devotional practices associated with Sufism, including notably the whole array of rituals revolving around shrine visitation. In addition, by appropriating the colonial discourse which represented Sufis as potentially seditious (i.e., anti-government) members of society, SADUM's ulama attempted to monopolise spiritual authority over the Muslim ecumene. Thus, for instance, during the second plenum of the second assembly (*qurultoy*) held on 25 March 1952, SADUM's ulama agreed to issue a fatwa against *eshons*, which would condemn Sufis as charlatans.<sup>24</sup>

From its establishment in 1943 until its dismemberment into five national muftiates in 1991, SADUM pursued a range of various strategies to condemn Sufi rituals as the worst manifestations of polytheism and unbelief. The conventional means to mount a moral persecution of Muslim behaviour deemed illicit was a compositional genre known as fatwa (Uzb. *fatvo*; Rus. *fetva*). The term fatwa originally conveys the idea of a 'legal opinion,' but SADUM's fatwas were very different from the opinions that had been issued by muftis prior to Sovietization. Under the rule of the khans and throughout the Tsarist period, fatwas were legal opinions given on a specific point of Islamic law. Usually, they were produced at the request of a party to a dispute in order to confer additional legal force to a claim during a litigation heard by Muslim judges. Even though such opinions embodied the authority of the jurists who appended their seals thereupon, they were not binding and could thus be ignored at court or by other institutions of recognized legal authority (the royal court and other muftis).<sup>25</sup> With the establishment of SADUM, however, the meaning of the term underwent a process of change whereby it came to denote an Islamic legal 'ruling' (*buyruq*) – or at least this is how Uzbeks referred to SADUM's fatwas between the 1960s and the 1980s. This was an important lexical shift and one which

---

<sup>24</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 190, ll. 26-32.

<sup>25</sup> Paolo Sartori, *Visions of Justice: Shari'a and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), chap. 5.

indicates that Central Asian Muslims began to regard Soviet fatwas on a par with the resolutions of the Communist Party. As early as the 1940s, CARC itself began to refer to fatwas as ‘sharia-based resolutions’ (*shariatskie ukazy / predpisaniia / tsirkulary / postanovleniia*),<sup>26</sup> and it is very possible that such bureaucratic expressions percolated through the Soviet institutions and eventually informed Central Asians’ understanding of the term fatwa.

In the long run, SADUM’s condemnation of Sufism had negative unintended consequences. Premised as it was on a highly normative, indeed rigid understanding of Muslimness, SADUM’s Islamic discourse put in place an artificial distinction between good and bad Muslims – a distinction which we can find in Uzbekistan to this very day. In addition, by targeting people who enjoyed the respect of their co-religionists, and by attacking devotional practices which were socially pervasive, the Spiritual Board and its acolytes progressively distanced themselves from many constituencies, which ultimately led to the weakening of their status vis-à-vis the Uzbek Muslim ecumene.

SADUM’s first fatwa against *eshons* was authored by someone who not only had immaculate Sufi credentials, but also sported the title *eshon* in his name. He was Eshon Bobokhonov.<sup>27</sup> Little is known about him and even less do we know about his elevation to the position of mufti at the helm of SADUM. This is what Eren Tasar writes about him:

---

<sup>26</sup> Polianskii to Iskanderov, 08.12.1947, O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 61, l. 15. See also Iskanderov to Polianskii, 04.11.1947, <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/19801>, accessed online on 6 October 2023.

<sup>27</sup> The fatwa has been discussed in Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, pp. 156-157. Tasar, however, seems to be suggesting that it was crafted at Ziyouddin’s initiative, not Eshon Bobokhonov’s. In the following paragraphs, I offer passages of the fatwa in translation from Arabic-script Uzbek, cf. *O’rta Osiyo va Qozoghiston musulmānlari dīniyya nazāratining chiqarghan fatvāsi*, IVANRUz, lithographs, inv. no 16734. In 1966, Ziyouddin Bobokhonov re-worked the same text into a new fatwa against mendacious Sufis, Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried.

Like virtually all other *'ulama*, he had experienced persecution during the Terror. Eshon Boboxon completed the Baraxon *madrasa* in Tashkent in 1905 and the Saray Tosh *madrasa* in Bukhara in 1911. One year later he went on Hajj. He was arrested twice during the paranoid years leading up to the war, in 1937 and 1940, but on both occasions the authorities “abandoned his case.” For a member of the *'ulama*, his trajectory is perhaps remarkable only because he survived NKVD detention during the Terror. His lineage was probably a more important consideration than any alleged political culpability. The Boboxonovs possessed considerable stature in the eyes of Central Asia’s *'ulama* because of their descent from two saints, Hazrati Yuvoshbob (730–830) and Qaffoli Shoshiy (903–976), whose tombs are housed in the Hast Imom complex in Tashkent’s old city. [...] By establishing its headquarters at Hast Imom, SADUM consciously projected the authority its leadership derived from these two saints. (For this reason, Eshon Boboxon would expend considerable time and money over the remainder of the 1940s to remove the complex’s wartime tenants.) As was common among Central Asian *'ulama*, the Boboxonovs relied on their saintly pedigree to acquire a significant following. In 1889, for example, the Russian Orientalist N. S. Lykoshin listed Eshon Boboxon’s father as one of Tashkent’s most important Naqshbandi Sufi *shaykhs*.<sup>28</sup>

Judging by the correspondence between CARC and SADUM, the fatwa against *eshons* was issued at Eshon Bobokhonov’s initiative. As we shall see below, the fatwa resorted to colonial derogatory verbiage, with emphasis on the notion of itinerant clerics and fanaticism. But at a deeper level, it showcased a fundamentalist approach to Islamic traditions, which had characterised much of Islamic

---

<sup>28</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, p. 49.

reformist literature in Central Asia prior to the October revolution and Sovietization. The fatwa begins with a quotation from the Qur'an (5:3): 'Today I have perfected your faith for you, completed My favour upon you, and chosen Islam as your way.' Bobokhonov's vernacular exegesis in Arabic-script Uzbek makes abundantly clear that the holy scriptures, i.e., the Qur'an and the Sunnah, are in themselves a perfect form of divine expression: 'Today I have perfected for you [Muslims] the words of your religion. Some of these words I have sent down in the Qur'an and some in the form of illumination to my Prophet, and thereby I have told you all that is necessary for your religion. From this day on, nothing will be added to what has been said and nothing will be taken away from it.' Interpreting the scriptures in this way allowed the mufti to lay the groundwork for the next argumentative move – namely, the assertion that Sufism does not belong to Islam and should be therefore regarded as an 'unlawful innovation' (*bid'at*):

The Prophet, may Allah be pleased with him, said: 'If anyone introduces in our matter something that does not belong to it, will be rejected.'<sup>29</sup> That is, if our scholars of Islam find nonsense (*khurāfi narsalar*), which does not exist in our religion, by claiming that it brings a reward in the afterlife (*savāb*), then [such nonsense] will be returned (*mardūd*) to those same individuals. That is, this [course of action] is unacceptable because this religion of Islam has attained perfection by explaining all its precepts through the Noble Qur'an [originating] from God and the words of the Prophet. And there is no need to add superstitions without foundation (*ašlsiz khūrāfāt-lar*). Consequently, all the worship of Allah Almighty in the religion of Islam is quite clearly prescribed as it has been sent down in the Qur'an and the revelations of the Messenger of Allah and, in this form, it remains in force always. According to the Prophet's companions, their followers and the scholars

---

<sup>29</sup> <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:169>.

of [our] religion, in every epoch the community of believers that practices its own religious affairs, that is, devotional practices and acts of worship, according to these two sources [i.e., the Qur'an and the Sunnah] and shows obedience in a suitable manner, can hope to achieve the favours of Allah Almighty in the afterlife and His paradise. Practices of piety pertaining to matters of faith and worship, which have not been sanctioned by these two sources, are alien (*khārij*) to Islam [and are to be considered examples of] unbelief (*kufr*), aberration (*ẓalālāt*), and unlawful innovation. All this is unacceptable and not honourable before the Almighty.<sup>30</sup>

Further, Eshon Bobokhonov proceeded to assert that mendacious Sufis are to be blamed for having corrupted the Muslim community. In the mufti's view, they spread ritual practices and, more broadly, promoted an understanding of religious ethics which was alien to sharia and therefore detrimental to the Muslim ecumene:

Those believers who indulge in these innovations do not understand where lies the truth and consider [said innovations] as God-pleasing worship. Their deeds are worthless and their faith is false. They ignore the fact that on the Day of Judgment this [state of affairs] will harm them. Various factions of phony (*sākhta*) Sufi masters<sup>31</sup> hold in great respect these unlawful innovations and nonsense for the sake of their own personal profit. Having earned false honour and credibility in the eyes of the believers by means of their unlawful innovations, they do not accept the explanations of the true ulama, which have rejected such inventions. Their [deceitful] arguments remain in their sinful books [alone]. Nowadays, such unlawful innovations have muddled significantly the faith and the rituals of the Muslim believers living in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

---

<sup>30</sup> IVANRUZ, lithographs, inv. no 16734, fol. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Here the fatwa lists *īshān*, *miyān*, *hazrat*, and *pīr* which are terms used to refer to Sufi masters.



The phony *eshons*, who are ignorant and unaware of the precepts of sharia, and who pursue only their own gain, have introduced these unlawful innovations. Now it is quite apparent that in the twentieth century, when science, spirituality, and culture (*‘ilm*, *‘irfān*, *madaniyat*) have developed [to such an extent], these deeds go against the worldly affairs and the spiritual practices of Muslim believers.<sup>32</sup>

We have just seen how the mufti defined Sufis as bad Muslims for being, in his words, *sokhta*, or ‘phony’. Further articulating a worldview premised on an artificial division between good and bad Muslims, Eshon Bobokhonov elevated SADUM’s members as the diametrical opposite of the mendacious Sufis. In fact, he justified his crafting of the fatwa by explaining that ‘several true ulama have posed some questions to the Spiritual Board and requested a legal opinion that can address the unlawful innovations and the superstitions which are contrary to sharia.’ Be that as it may, the 1952 fatwa was, in fact, an anti-Sufi manifesto. It went on to explain that, like any other unlawful innovators, *eshons* and sheikhs brought about a major split in Islam, with a faction of Muslims claiming to have exclusive knowledge of the inner aspect of the faith, while degrading sharia to the domain of commoners. His take on Sufism was crystal clear and powerful: ‘In short,’ writes Eshon Bobokhonov, ‘these unlawful innovations, which have become known as Sufism (*ṭarīqa*, *bāṭin*, *khāl*, *ṣulūk*, *taṣavvuf*) were rejected by the ulama who manifested their dissatisfaction. [All this led to a situation whereby] discords and hostilities occurred between two sides. [...] No such phenomenon ever existed at the time of the Messenger of Allah, his Companions and their followers and the great jurists. [...] The proof of all this is the Hadith: ‘There is no monasticism in Islam (*lā raḥbāniyya fī al-Islām*).’ Which means that there is no Sufism in Islam (*islāmda īshānlik yo’qdur*). In addition, the *Khulāṣat*

---

<sup>32</sup> IVANRUZ, lithographs, inv. no 16734, fol. 4.

*al-fatāwā*<sup>33</sup> [...] says that: ‘Whoever seeks a sheikh for guidance is in error. Verily a sheikh is not a guide. It is Allah Almighty who said [to the Prophet]: ‘You are not a guide for everyone. But Allah is a guide for everyone.’<sup>34</sup> This means that if somebody claims that so-and-so is my *eshon* or my [Sufi] master, who can guide me on the right path, that person has strayed from the right path.’<sup>35</sup>

The goal of this fatwa was obvious: to cast Sufis in a bad light and write them out of the moral space sanctioned by the Soviet state. In fact, the fatwa represented only the first step in Eshon Bobokhonov’s broader project to claim for SADUM exclusive moral authority over Central Asian Muslims. This project consisted of a wholesale de-legitimation of Sufis. His strategy was two-pronged, designed as it was to use SADUM’s authority vis-à-vis the believers, on the one hand, and take advantage of its connections to Soviet organs, on the other. In the summer of 1952, Eshon Bobokhonov met with CARC’s head commissioner for Uzbekistan, Khudoyor Iskanderov (1905-?),<sup>36</sup> and requested that the anti-*eshon* fatwa be published in 500 copies. Writing to his superiors in Moscow, Iskanderov reported that the fatwa reflected ‘the need to strengthen the fight against the harmful activities of the unofficial clergy, i.e., *eshons*, and to stop [the latter from] spreading various religious superstitions, which are contrary to the prescriptions of the Qur’an, among Muslim believers.’<sup>37</sup> We do not know whether Iskanderov

---

<sup>33</sup> Widely employed by Muslim jurists in Central Asia, the *Khulāṣat al-fatāwā* is a work by Ṭahir b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Rashīd al-Bukhārī Iftikhār al-Dīn (d. 1147), see Sartori, *Visions of Justice*, pp. 260, 262, 269, 292.

<sup>34</sup> This phrase, as well as some passages from the Qur’an and hadith, are given in Arabic.

<sup>35</sup> IVANRUZ, lithographs, inv. no 16734, fols. 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Like most of his comrades working for CARC, Iskanderov had served in the Soviet secret police (NKVD) in the interwar period and during the Great Terror, see <https://t.ly/GdUX2>, accessed online on 9 October 2023.

<sup>37</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 143, l. 7. CARC’s commissioners for Uzbekistan supported the publication of fatwas in the official journal of SADUM *Muslims of the Soviet East*, from the very issue of the journal: see the classified communique of Ibadov to Sadovskii in O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 61, l. 2. For Iskanderov facilitating the publication of fatwas in *Muslims of the Soviet East*,

reported faithfully what Bobokhonov had explained to him. In any case, though, in the eyes of CARC the fatwa had been crafted to fight mullahs who operated without the sanction of the state. Effectively, the fatwa made *eshons*, and by extension all Sufis, appear coterminous with the unofficial Muslim clergy. Writing from the CARC offices in Moscow, Ivan Polianskii (1898-1956) left his Uzbek colleague to decide whether to support the publication of the fatwa, but he nonetheless expressed doubts at the idea that a legal opinion could be weaponized to decrease the influence of unofficial mullahs. Having gained CARC's full support, Bobokhonov could now turn his attention to the believers themselves. Just a few weeks after the publication of the fatwa, the mufti had circulars sent out to all the congregational mosques requesting that imams address the public by referring to the fatwa and explaining that what *eshons* do is illicit from the point of view of sharia. In particular, the circular encouraged the mosques' staff to form discussion groups and to devote extra time to explaining the matter to believers.<sup>38</sup>

But how was the fatwa received by Muslims? Reactions varied considerably. Someone in Namangan wrote a poetic text in praise of the legal opinion. The poem explained that an official from SADUM travelled to the Ferghana Valley to comment upon the fatwa. The congregation welcomed him, for, reportedly 'he was sent to us to shatter prejudices.' Clearly sharing Bobokhonov's puritanical sensibilities, this man from Namangan lauded the fatwa, for, he

---

see O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 105, l. 225 (07.06.1948). In fact, Iskanderov tended to back most of Eshon Bobokhonov's initiatives, and his soft approach to SADUM earned him at some point the ire of Polianskii in Moscow. In 1956, for example, in the wake of a report about the 'religious situation' in Khiva, Polianskii reproached Iskanderov for failing to take advantage of his proximity to the ulama and allowing himself to be swayed by the information which he gathered from 'Soviet believers and Party cadres,' see O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 191, l. 81

<sup>38</sup> I am here referring to the original record crafted in Arabic-script Uzbek (06/11/1952), O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 144, unnumbered folio. SADUM also produced a Russian translation, but with significant omissions. Cf. O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 172-173.

argued: ‘there have appeared many *eshons*, who are ignorant men. [They sport] a large turban and a rosary, [but] have no mind, and do not fear [anyone], not even God. Their demeanour is like [that of] a vagabond, they are [like] Satan. Like hunting dogs, they chase disciples; by cunning and deceit they take girls and money [from] the common people. This [behaviour] has repulsed many.’<sup>39</sup>

But there were also individuals who frowned upon the fatwa. While embellishing his report and describing enthusiastic reactions at the reading of the fatwa in his mosque, an imam reported unfavourably about one Azimkhon Hasan who protested against it. Known in town for his exploits as an exorcist (*porkhon*), Azimkhon Hasan ostentatiously ignored the meeting. ‘He remained at home, ashamed of his occupation which is contrary to sharia,’ concluded the imam, thus genuflecting deferentially before the authority of the mufti.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere reactions were even more tepid. One anonymous official reported back to SADUM in mid-November 1952 about his recent travels to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. He had been sent to the congregational mosques of Frunze (today Bishkek) and Almaty with copies of the fatwa to request that they be read during the Friday prayer when believers’ attendance usually reached its peak. The qadi of Kyrgyzstan, Olimkhon To’ra Shokirkho’jaev read only half of it, leaving the congregations somewhat baffled: ‘the attendees did not pose any question,’ reported our official in dismay, thereby suggesting that the believers could not make sense of it. As he reached Almaty, the situation looked ever more discouraging. Having met with the Qazaq *qadi*<sup>41</sup> and entrusted to him a copy of the fatwa, he sought to find the local CARC representative but with little success. He then tried to summon all the imams of the province, but to no avail: with the looming celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice, nobody

---

<sup>39</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 144, l. 84.

<sup>40</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 144, l. 149.

<sup>41</sup> This would have been Abdalghaffar Shamsutdinov, a Tatar from Ust-Kamenogorsk about whom we have little biographic information. I thank Allen Frank for this clarification.

was willing to travel from the countryside to discuss the fatwa. The Qazaq qadi persuaded our official to stay for the celebration and attend a new congregational prayer, an occasion for him to explain in Qazaq the content of the fatwa. The report suggests, however, that the resultant encounter was distinctly underwhelming: ‘When the qadi explained the legal opinion, the elders looked at each other and noted ironically: ‘Who would have thought that it is forbidden to follow a *pir* (*eshon*)? It seems like that our mullahs have been deceiving us.’<sup>42</sup>

Reports on the fatwa’s reception across Uzbekistan and the neighbouring republics are evidently sanitized, for they clearly reflect the efforts of officials to convey a sense of generalised compliance and acquiescence among Muslims. We know, however, that the picture was much more complex and, as we shall see in Chapter Two, there were also many who vented their deep frustration at the all-out assault that SADUM was waging against Sufis.

To glean a better sense of the limited success that Eshon Bobokhonov’s fatwa enjoyed among Muslims in Uzbekistan, it may be useful to consider the observations recorded by CARC representatives when inspecting rural communities. When in the second half of 1956, CARC Commissioner for the Samarqand province To’ymurod Tashkenbaev reviewed the situation in the district of Urgut, he lamented that not a single Muslim community was registered, and that ‘believers are currently praying in groups wherever they please.’ The people responsible for this state of affairs, according to Tashkenbaev, were ‘itinerant mullahs,’ i.e., *eshons*, who were free to roam and proselytise. In fact, within the territory of the ‘Five-Year Plan’ collective farm, the shrine of Ghavsul-A’zam, though unregistered, attracted a great deal of people who especially on Wednesdays and Fridays came to perform Sufi rites. Tashkenbaev reported that the same happened in almost all the territories of the collective farms of the Urgut district in which there were shrines

---

<sup>42</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 91-93.

and other holy places, such as trees and springs, which were sites of mass worship and were tended by *eshons*.<sup>43</sup>

It was most probably the criticism which figures of religious authority directed at the fatwa and the fact that many people simply carried on with their Sufi practices without paying much attention, which pushed SADUM to continue its efforts to crack down on Sufis. In fact, Eshon Bobokhonov's son Ziyouddin (1908-1982), who replaced his father in 1957 at the head of SADUM, took an even more radical approach. While following SADUM's general approach so as to make Sufism appear something alien to Islam, Ziyouddin resorted to juristic authorities beyond the precincts of Hanafism, the school of Islamic law (*mazhab*) which for centuries had been dominant in Central Asia and an edifice of knowledge premised upon the recognition and reproduction of authoritative juristic traditions. In 1966 he signed off on a new fatwa that sported the abrasive title 'On mendacious *eshons* and the illicitness of their burial practices from the point of view of sharia.' Larded with references to the *Aḥkām al-aḥkām*, a work of the 14th-century Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya, which equated Sufi ritual practices to prostitution, the fatwa admonished that 'had the noble companions of the Prophet or the pious predecessors (*salaf-i ṣāliḥīn*) tasked anyone with the performance of various rituals, such as recitations (*avrād*) and litanies (*azkār*), it would have been contrary to Islamic law. The Qur'an, the Hadiths and the words of shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya prove that what those who claim to be *eshons* do, i.e., to oblige their disciples to perform *zīkr*, is absolutely wrong.'<sup>44</sup> We shall return in the course of this chapter to this hermeneutic reasoning informing Ziyouddin Bobokhonov's fatwa. For our immediate purposes, however, it is important to note that with this statement from Ziyouddin SADUM effectively raised its challenge against Sufis. Had a citizen of Soviet Uzbekistan *qua* Muslim believer followed this fatwa *à la lettre*, she would have been required to regard *zīkr*, the hallmark of

---

<sup>43</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 191, ll.47-48.

<sup>44</sup> Archive of the Spiritual Administration of Uzbekistan. Undated and unstamped, the text is in Arabic-script.

Sufism, as a sinful and detestable practice. In other words, to be a Sufi was coterminous with being a bad Muslim.

Eleven years later, in 1977, Ziyouddin Bobokhonov embarked upon a new initiative. The full-scale war that he wanted to wage against Sufis was far from accomplished. With this in mind, he tried to regain the backing of the state to ensure that SADUM's policies could be more effective. He wrote a classified letter to the then CARC chairman in Moscow, Vladimir Kuroedov (1906-1994), explaining that: 'In recent decades, [...] the number of unofficial spiritual figures (*eshons*, *murids*, and other charlatans) has increased... These clerics aim their activities at discrediting the role of official mosques and the spiritual administration in the eyes of believers. At present, we do not have enough trained personnel to firmly curb their initiatives.' The mufti furthermore complained that 'unofficial mullahs and *eshons*' (particularly in the Ferghana Valley and in Qaraqalpaqstan) often outnumber the imams working in official mosques.<sup>45</sup> To add insult to injury, he lamented, the former commanded more authority than the latter. Finally, he explained that 'in order to suppress the activities of the unofficial clergy, conditions must be created for imams to travel to the rural districts and raise awareness about *eshons*, *murids*, and other charlatans.'<sup>46</sup>

Fear of spiritual competition is clearly what prompted the mufti to write to Kuroedov, and it did not take a huge leap of imagination for Ziyouddin to see that CARC could be sympathetic to this cause. CARC was of course eager to cooperate, at least on paper, for, especially in the Krushchevian period, it had been doing little other than complaining about illegal 'Sufi' activity everywhere in Uzbekistan – in Qashqadarya,<sup>47</sup> in the Ferghana Valley, around Tashkent and in other provinces.<sup>48</sup> As we shall see, Sufism enjoyed

---

<sup>45</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 585, l. 29.

<sup>46</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 585, ll. 50, 79.

<sup>47</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 726, ll. 13-34.

<sup>48</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, v. 726, ll. 42-49.

almost absolute freedom within the safe and enclosed space of the collective farms.<sup>49</sup>

### **Condemning Shrine Visitation**

SADUM most frequently focused its anti-Sufi criticism on the so-called *ziyorat*, that is, shrine visitation and the aggregate of devotional practices associated with it. SADUM's arguments reiterated ideas originating from centuries-old disputes among ulama about the permissibility of rituals connected to the pilgrimage to shrines and the cult of holy men as supposed intercessors before God. From a narrow Islamological point of view, therefore, SADUM's criticism was neither new nor particularly original. What differed significantly, however, from earlier anti-*ziyorat* polemics was the language deployed by the Spiritual Board. Drawing upon a peculiar blending of Islamic legalese with Soviet-speak, SADUM's fatwas were usually written first in Arabic-script Uzbek and then translated into (and heavily edited in) Russian. Crafted in this fashion, usually by individuals who were born at the turn of the 20th century, these texts reflected both the epistemic force of specific Islamic written traditions and the specificities of the institutional context in which they were meant to circulate, i.e., the USSR.

As is the case in many other regions of the Muslim world, shrines occupy a prominent place in the landscape of Islamic Central Asia. When referring to shrines, Uzbeks employ various terms such as *mozor*, *maqbara*, *avliyo* / *avliyo-joy*, and *qadam-joy*, which stand for a variety of institutional complexes. More often than not, such complexes were associated with the burial places (either actual or imagined) of holy men, or with specific spots where a given saint had performed a miracle; sometimes such shrine complexes were erected close to a wondrous feature of the surrounding landscape

---

<sup>49</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 10, l. 39.



such as a cave, a stone of unusual shape, a healing spring, or a hollow tree.

In the history of Islam, the cult of saints and its accompanying rituals is a phenomenon with a long pedigree. The Qur'an does not offer clear instructions with regard to the visitation of tombs. However, works of Islamic jurisprudence addressing select devotional practices associated with *ziyarat* usually refer to Qur'anic verses which prohibit the worship of the dead.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the prophetic Sunnah confers legitimacy upon *ziyarat*. There is one Hadith of the Prophet, in particular, which says: 'I had prohibited you from visiting graves, but you may visit them now. Verily, they will weaken your attachment to the world and remind you of the Hereafter.'<sup>51</sup> Indexed as authentic and included in authoritative compilations of prophetic traditions such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Abu Muslim (824-892), this Hadith (or its variations) can be found in Islamic funerary epigraphy, especially on tombstones and mausoleums. The earliest recorded example of this Prophetic tradition authorising the visitation of graves at Central Asian shrines can be found on a memorial complex associated with the tomb of the prophet Ayyub (Job) near Bukhara (the building of which was erected in 605/1208-09).<sup>52</sup>

The cult of the saints and, more specifically, the devotional practices associated with the visitation of shrines started to become socially pervasive at an early stage in the Islamic history of Central Asia. This can explain the emergence of the distinct literary genre of shrine guides, composed for pilgrims who visited the graves of holy men. Such texts offered itineraries of piety, so to speak. They explained how to find shrines, described the sacred landscape surrounding them, included short biographies of the holy men actually or purportedly buried therein and, of course, related the miracles

---

<sup>50</sup> Qur'an 7: 190; 16: 20-21, 35, 85; 18: 38; 16: 35, 36; 31: 13; 35: 22; 72: 18.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2013/06/08/visit-graves-remember-akhirah/>

<sup>52</sup> This shrine complex is located c. 20 km from Bukhara in the Vobkent district, see Babajanov, Muminov, Nekrasova, "Le mausolé Chashma-yi Ayub à Boukhara et son prophète."

performed by the deceased. Sometimes these shrine guides offer insights into the ‘specialization’ of a holy place – that is, what the pilgrim could specifically achieve by visiting this or that grave.

One of the earliest works written in this style is the famous *al-Qand fī dhikr ‘ulamā’ Samarqand*, a biographical dictionary of Muslim scholars in Samarqand written in Arabic in the 12th century.<sup>53</sup> Throughout this work, the polymath Najm al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (d. 1142) refers to the Prophetic Hadīth about the permissibility of shrine visitation. He also writes that visiting the graves of prominent scholars known for their piety in Transoxiana and reading prayers for the souls of the dead is a blessing (*baraka*) which is conducive of success in worldly affairs. An 18th-century updated version of this work, which included the description of newly constructed shrines in Samarqand, defined shrine visitation as fully in accordance with Islamic ethics and prescribed it as an act of piety.<sup>54</sup>

Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī’s works circulated in manuscript form far and wide, and by dint of their successful reception they set the tone for more specialized shrine guides in Central Asia. Among those belonging to this genre, the work of Aḥmad ibn Maḥmūd Mullā-zāda, a disciple of the famous theologian and Naqshbandī Sheikh Khwāja Muḥammad Pārsā al-Bukhari (d. 1419), is of particular importance. Completed originally in 1405, his *Kitāb-i Mullā-zāda* (or *Ta’rīkh-i Mullā-zāda*) was printed twice in Bukhara (in 1904 and 1910) and has enjoyed wide readership in the region. Together with a brief history of the Islamization of Bukhara, its extensive preface includes a lengthy fatwa in Arabic which confers legitimacy on the practice of *ziyora*t. It also describes the order of visiting the graves of saints, specifies the prayers that should be performed in favour

---

<sup>53</sup> Jürgen Paul, “The Histories of Samarqand,” *Studia Iranica* Vol. 22 (1993), pp. 82-92.

<sup>54</sup> Abu Takhir Khodzha, “Samariia. Opisanie drevnostei i musul’manskikh sviatin Samarkanda,” trans. V.L. Viatkin in *Spravochnaia knizhka Samarkandskoi oblasti*. Vyp. 6 (Samarkand: Tipografiia K.M. Fedorova, 1899), pp. 153-259. For a more recent edition, see Abū Ṭāhir ibn Abī Sa’id Samarqandī, *Samariyya* (Teheran: Dānish, 1983).

of the deceased, and indicates the sections of the Qur'an to recite during the pilgrimage. At the same time, the author forbids specific devotional practices during the pilgrimage to holy places such as sitting on the tombs, kissing them, and rubbing the 'holy dust' on one's face, and he calls for the exclusion of women from the pilgrimage. The fatwa concludes with a statement in Persian that 'to visit the graves is Sunnah,' thereby suggesting that the practice had received prophetic sanction. Here the text also indicates the days (specifically, Thursday or Friday) when shrine visitation is preferable (*mustahabb*).<sup>55</sup>

Descriptions of mass rituals associated with shrine visitation have often found their way into local chronicles. For our purposes, the account of a 19th-century Khoqandi court historian, Ḥakīm Khān Tura ibn Sa'id Khān Tura, is particularly interesting. In his *Muntakhab al-tawārikh*, he describes Solomon's Throne, a famous shrine situated on a mountain overlooking the city of Osh in today's Kyrgyzstan (see *infra*),<sup>56</sup> which he visited after a hunting party organized in those areas by the Khoqandi ruler 'Umar Khan (1810-1822). Ḥakīm Khān writes that, according to local lore, the mountain is believed to represent Solomon's earthly dwelling.<sup>57</sup> Further, the author writes about the 'unusual wonders' of the place. For instance, he mentions that after the death of one Shāh Manṣūr Piskatī<sup>58</sup> (not later than 1818) a pigeon flew onto a tree growing on the top of the mountain and cooed *hu-hu-hu* all night long, which sounded like a Sufi litany (*zikr*) with the name of God (*hū*) repeated

---

<sup>55</sup> *Kitāb-i Mullā-zāda* (Samarkand: Tipol. G.N. Demurova, 1904), pp. 4-8.

<sup>56</sup> V.L. Ogudin, "Tron Solomona. Istoriia formirovaniia kul'ta," in S.N. Abashin and V.O. Bobrovnikov (eds.), *Podvizhniki islama. Kul't sviatykh i sufizm v Srednei Azii i na Kavkaze* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003), pp. 69-102.

<sup>57</sup> Muḥammad Ḥakīm Khān, *Muntakhab at-tawārikh. Selected History*, Vol. II, eds. Yayoi Kawahara and Koichi Haneda (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asian and Africa, 2006), p. 184.

<sup>58</sup> Shāh Mansūr Piskatī is said to have lived during the time of the Khoqand ruler 'Umar Khan, Timur K. Beisembiev, *Annotated Indices to the Kokand Chronicles* (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa ILCAA, 2008), p. 264.

continuously. After that miracle, relates Ḥakīm Khān, the townspeople made that place an abode for pilgrimage.<sup>59</sup> The author goes on to say that ‘every year an unbelievably great number of people gather there in spring,’ and that their number is ‘not inferior [to the number of pilgrims visiting] Mount Arafat,’<sup>60</sup> i.e., a holy site south of Mecca where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have delivered a sermon to his companions and which is one of the most important stations of the hajj. In addition, Ḥakīm Khān goes on to list the most typical rituals that pilgrims perform on this mountain, such as touching the holy stone and sliding on it, recommended especially to pregnant women who wish to deliver safely.<sup>61</sup> In recounting these practices, he does not seem to find anything abominable in them.

The comparison which Ḥakīm Khān makes between Solomon’s Throne and Mount Arafat is particularly interesting, for it suggests that the shrine was modelled (at least in its devotional areas) after the example of one of the most important shrines in the Muslim world. In fact, both have stairs leading to the top on its western slope; both include an area to deliver the sermon *Yawm al-‘arafa*,<sup>62</sup> and both have a minaret on the highest peak of the mountain. This analogy is so powerful that it has made its way into hagiographical literature, especially the Islamic narratives of the creation of the city of Osh.

The devotional practices at Solomon’s throne described by Ḥakīm Khān Tura were also recorded by Eugene K. Meyendorf, a Russian officer who joined a diplomatic mission to Bukhara between 1820 and 1821, which was led by the tsarist state counsel Alexander Negri: ‘The pilgrimage, which has acquired massive scope here, facilitates the inflow of large sums of money. Pilgrims come to Osh to visit a small mountain where there is a square building.

---

<sup>59</sup> Muḥammad Ḥakīm Khān, *Muntakhab at-tawārīkh. Selected History*, Vol. II, p. 184.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-185.

<sup>62</sup> On this ritual, see A.J. Wensinck and H.A.R. Gibb, “‘Arafa,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2, p. 604.

According to a legend, Solomon slaughtered a camel here, whose blood is still visible on the rock. If one suffers from rheumatism or other maladies, one has only to stretch out on the flat rock and the pain is sure to go away. Everyone who has been there says so. [...] Superstition constantly attracts many people to Osh.’<sup>63</sup>

Ḥakīm Khān and Meyendorf clearly agree on the popular nature of the cult of the saints in general and the rituals at the *Takht-i Sulaymon*. Deference to the pervasiveness of such manifestations of devotion, however, was far from common. In fact, shrine visitation could be also a subject of scholarly concern and a target of dogmatic criticism. Much of this criticism came from SADUM, an institution which offered shelter to scholars with a long-established die-hard scripturalist pedigree and who attempted to re-configure the very understanding of Muslims’ proper conduct. In the remainder of this chapter, I will try to show how one particular group of clerics attempted to undermine the cult of Muslim saints and, more specifically, the practice of pilgrimage to shrines and the whole array of religious practices connected to it. That SADUM issued fatwas that condemned pilgrimage has been known for quite some time to historians of Central Asia. However, what warrants our returning to this subject is the fact that such fatwas reflected SADUM’s deep connection to a powerful group of reformist ulama that had acquired prominence in the Muslim public sphere during the last years of Tsarist rule.

---

<sup>63</sup> E. Meyendorf, *Puteshestvie iz Orenburga v Bukharu* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 71-72. Healing practices at Solomon’s Throne have also been recorded, albeit briefly, by N. Shcherbina-Kramarenko, “Po musul’manskim sviatyniam Srednei Azii (putevye zametki i vpechatleniia),” *Spravochnaia knizhka Samarkandskoi oblasti*. Vyp. IV (Samarkand: Tipografiia voisk Samarkandskoi oblasti, 1896), p. 53.

## **Puritanism at SADUM**

Serving as the qadi of Kyrgyzstan from 1943 to 1960, Olimkhon To'ra Shokirkho'jaev (1881-1966) initiated a surge of new debates about the legitimacy of *ziyorat* in Soviet Central Asia. This is what Eren Tasar writes about him:

A key figure in SADUM and a member of its presidium, [Shokirkho'jaev] claimed no less scholarly authority in Islamic matters than the *mufti* himself. His father emigrated to northern Kyrgyzstan from the Valley in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and maintained a significant following of *murids*. His childhood included five years of study at his father's side in Mecca, as well as a year of exile in Kashgaria after the 1916 rebellion. Like virtually every other highly placed figure in SADUM, he was arrested, in 1935, for "anti-Soviet agitation" but released after a few months "for lack of evidence of a crime." In the words of Akhtiamov, "Shokirkho'jayevev commands substantial erudition in matters related to the faith of Islam and enjoys great authority among the believers. It seems that SADUM affords him no small esteem." While fluent in Arabic and Persian, "he is completely illiterate in Russian, and manages poorly with Uzbek and Kyrgyz documents written in Russian script." Olimxon To'ra had two brothers whose fates differed radically from his: One became a doctor in the British army during World War II, while another, Alixon To'ra Sag'uniy (1884-1976), served as foreign minister of the short-lived Republic of Eastern Turkistan in the mid-1940s, before fleeing to Tashkent. While a true son of northern Kyrgyzstan, Olimxon To'ra maintained close personal ties with Tashkent and other parts of Uzbekistan through a large network of relatives and students.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, pp. 60-61.

This biographical sketch is mostly based on an ‘official profile’ (*kharakteristika*) crafted by Kyrgyz CARC commissioner Hokim Akhtamov. There is much which this report distorts and patently omits. Shokirkho’jaev’s family archive and interviews with his son Yusuf Khon indicate, for example, that he never transmitted Sufism to disciples.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the claim that he was arrested during the Great Terror is today denied by his family. But what is important to note here is that this account of Shokirkho’jaev’s life is silent about the fact that he was known among Central Asian ulama, and especially within the Tashkent-based scholarly establishment, for his somewhat radical reformist views on Islam. Indeed, crucial to situating Shokirkho’jaev’s role in and contribution to SADUM is the fact that he had played an active role in the founding of the pre-revolutionary reformist journal *al-Islāh* published in Tashkent between 1915 and 1918. In the pages of that Islamic reformist outlet Shokirkho’jaev had penned a series of vitriolic articles that criticized local religious ‘rituals and customs’ (*‘urf va ‘ādat*) from a puritanical viewpoint and he did so, most notably, while popularising the intellectual biography of Ibn Taymiyya and advocating the need for Muslim jurists to rely more heavily on the scriptures.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Shokirkho’jaev embraced without reservations the opinions of the famous medieval theologian on matters related to shrine visitation. In one contribution to *al-Islāh*, in particular, Shokirkho’jaev referred to a Hadith which is often quoted in Ibn Taymiyya’s

---

<sup>65</sup> Such sources include a genealogical charter (*nasab-nāma*), a short history of his family, which was crafted in 1958 on the basis of recollections circulating within the family and the memoirs of the descendants of Olimkhon To’ra. While the original version of the genealogical charter is now preserved by his descendants in Tokmok (Kyrgyzstan), I was able to access a copy made by Muhammad Akmal Shokirkho’jaev, nephew of Olimkhon To’ra. The record in question is stamped with 24 seals, whose dates range between 1754-55 and 1908. Such a genealogical charter established a connection between Olimkhon To’ra and the Naqshbandi Sufi Makhdūm-i A’zam al-Kāsānī al-Dahbidī (d. 1542) and, through the latter, to the Prophet, but does not show that Olimkhon To’ra transmitted his teaching to disciples.

<sup>66</sup> Bakhtiiar Babadzhanov and Paolo Sartori, “U istokov sovetskogo diskursa o “khoroshem islame” v Tsentral’noi Azii,” *Ab Imperio* (2018/3), pp. 219-255.

writings, which prescribes that pilgrimage can be performed only to three recognized sacred places: the Ka'ba, the al-Haram mosque in Mecca, and the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Any other journey to holy places, whether the graves of the prophets or God's friends (Ar.-Per. *avliyā'*), should be considered a 'journey of disobedience' (*safar-i ma 'ṣīyat*). As we shall see, Shokirkho'jaev reiterated some of these arguments three decades later in his correspondence with SADUM about pilgrimage to Solomon's Throne and in other fatwas. For our purposes it is important to note that Shokirkho'jaev's fascination with Ibn Taymiyya has to do with the fact that, towards the end of his life, Ibn Taymiyya rejected the authority of the four schools of law and began to deliver opinions by interpreting directly the Qur'an and the Hadiths. In particular, Shokirkho'jaev confers significance on a saying attributed to Ibn Taymiyya (and transmitted by his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya), which suggests that the medieval theologian regarded it as permissible for someone to interpret the scriptures even if his interpretation goes against what has been established by the four schools. Reiterated by Shokirkho'jaev, this view was tantamount to suggesting that it is forbidden to follow the preponderant opinion of the Hanafi school of law without having full grasp of the scriptural evidence sustaining such opinion.<sup>67</sup> It is important to focus upon the intellectual genealogy of individuals like Shokirkho'jaev in the late Stalin and Khrushchev period for, as we shall see, their reformist genealogy substantially informed debates within SADUM and, to a certain extent, the institution's actual output.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> I have discussed this aspect of Shokirkho'jaev's legal hermeneutics in Paolo Sartori and Bakhtiyar Babajanov, "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 62 No. 1 (2019), pp. 1-65.

<sup>68</sup> Shokirkho'jaev's case was not an isolated one. Another outspoken reformist scholar as well as prolific contributor to *al-Iṣlāh* was a certain Khāl-Muḥammad from Merke, who authored a significant number of abrasive articles against the cult of saints. His intellectual legacy was clearly embodied by SADUM: in the 1940s he donated part of his library together with a complete run of *al-Iṣlāh* to Eshon Bobokhonov, who used Khāl-Muḥammad's articles to compose his



The story of Shokirkho'jaev and its relation to SADUM starts in the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Osh is home to one of the largest Islamic shrine complexes of Central Asia, that of the famous Solomon's Throne,<sup>69</sup> which remained a pilgrimage destination for Uzbeks even after the national delimitation of 1924 and the establishment of the Soviet republics. As early as 1946, the head of SADUM, the mufti Eshon Bobokhonov, personally visited Solomon's Throne, performing the ritual pilgrimage and praying at the Babur Mosque on top of the mountain. According to Yusuf Khon Shokirov (Shokirkho'jaev's son), at Solomon's Throne Eshon Bobokhonov performed the rite of visitation ostentatiously for he knew already about Shokirkho'jaev's outspoken disapproval of such practices. Shokirkho'jaev himself demonstratively refused to participate in the ritual and left for his office at the Kyrgyz SADUM branch in Osh. It is at this juncture in the story that things become particularly complex. Several scholars who operated within the network of SADUM claim that Shokirkho'jaev had a direct line of communication with Eshon Bobokhonov's son, Ziyouddin. Thus, it appears that before leaving Solomon's Throne (and thereby showing disrespect for the mufti), Shokirkho'jaev handed over to Ziyouddin a letter addressed to his father. In this message, Shokirkho'jaev asked the mufti to publish a fatwa against the ritual of pilgrimage to Solomon's Throne and expressed his willingness to contribute personally to the crafting of such a legal opinion. Ziyouddin passed on the letter to his father and tried to persuade him to issue a fatwa supporting the idea that to perform the ritual visitation on Solomon's Throne was not in accordance with sharia. The mufti dismissed Shokirkho'jaev's

---

fatwas, especially with regard to Sufism. So too did Eshon Bobokhonov's son and successor, Ziyouddin, who used this journal as a source of inspiration for his fatwas. The link between *al-Islāh*'s most radical reformist voices and SADUM has been examined in Babadzhanov and Sartori, "U istokov sovet'skogo diskursa o "khoroshem islame" v Tsentral'noi Azii."

<sup>69</sup> Ogudin, "Tron Solomona. Istoriia formirovaniia kul'ta." See also Morgan Y. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp. 36-38.

request, but ordered the representative of SADUM in the region of Osh, i.e., Shafoat Hoji Kholiqnazarov,<sup>70</sup> to station someone at the entrance to the mountain who would explain to the pilgrims how to behave properly in order to avoid accusations of idolatry. Things became even more complex at that point, for in 1947 CARC took a particular interest in Solomon's Throne, and Iskanderov and Eshon Bobokhonov devoted a specific meeting to the subject. Reporting to his superior in Moscow, Iskanderov explained that the mufti 'believes that to call the area and the grave of this Solomon a holy [place] and to try to seek permission to open this grave for pilgrimage is in gross contradiction to the Qur'an and has nothing to do with Islam.'<sup>71</sup> In sum, immediately after the end of the Second World War, continuous mass visitation to major shrines such as that of Solomon's Throne in Osh became a major issue both for Party organs<sup>72</sup> and Muslim scholars of fundamentalist inclinations. Caught in the middle, Eshon Bobokhonov was forced to play a double game.

---

<sup>70</sup> On this individual, see Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>71</sup> Iskanderov to Polianskii, <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/19856>, accessed on 6 October 2023.

<sup>72</sup> 'The [Muslim] clergy is particularly active around the tombs of saints to which large masses of people, including many young people and intellectuals, flock to pray:' see the resolution of the central committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan on the unsatisfactory state of anti-religious propaganda in the republic, 21.12.1946, <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/20066>, accessed online on 11 November 2023. For more information on shrine visitation in Uzbekistan after the Second World War, see Chapter Three.



Figure 1.2 Pilgrims at Solomon's Throne, Osh, 1940. Collection Gleb Snesev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Shokirkho'jaev was not willing to be stopped. On 30 January 1952, the qadi of the Kyrgyz SSR sent an official letter to Eshon Bobokhonov. The missive was in Arabic-script Uzbek and bore the stamp of his office.<sup>73</sup> It addressed what Shokirkho'jaev regarded as a problem: 'The majority of the people travelling [to Solomon's Throne] come from Uzbekistan, and partly from Kyrgyzstan and also Tajikistan. [They come here] several days prior to the Feast and most of them gather together as a single community. It is known that every person acts according to his conviction, be it good or wrong. However, it is plain and apparent that the beliefs and goals of those who

---

<sup>73</sup> The record is in manuscript form and it is written in Arabic-script Uzbek. Like other documents preserved in the Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Administration of the Republic of Uzbekistan, this record too has not been inventoried. The full text in edition and English translation is available in Sartori and Babajanov, "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia."

gather here at Solomon's Throne on the Feast of Sacrifice by coming from faraway places represent [in fact] debauchery and superstition. This is so because everything written on Solomon's Throne has been produced by deceivers and impostors. [Let it be known that] to this day there have remained sheikhs who support the belief of those coming to Solomon's Throne by means of the tracts that are seen in their hands.'

In the dominant puritanical Islamic discourse so forcefully promoted by SADUM, the deceivers and impostors – that is, the Ur-figures of the 'bad Muslim' – were the sheikhs and *eshons* who tended shrines such as Solomon's Throne. And Shokirkho'jaev's tactics to show how such individuals identified with the prototype of the malevolent Sufis were the most common. In a modernist vein, he claimed that the narratives told by sheikhs at the shrine could not be proven historically true. Spouting rationalist platitudes, he went on to claim that 'certain false and abstruse beliefs' could be proven wrong by 'scientific discoveries.' By deploying the derogatory modernist verbiage, he dismissed the sheikhs' words as 'legends' (*afsona*) and reminded his addressee, i.e., the mufti in Tashkent, that the shrine at Osh was ultimately 'just a mountain made of stones.' At this point, a figure such as Eshon Bobokhonov would have been left staggered, indeed flabbergasted. And yet Shokirkho'jaev did not stop here. Flexing his muscles 'in the capacity of the qadi for the Muslim believers of Kyrgyzstan,' he officially requested that 'the Spiritual Board publish a fatwa [explaining] that the activities leading a multitude of people, whose belief is outside of Islam, to invade Solomon's Throne on the days of the Feast of Sacrifice are not in accordance with sharia.' He then ended his missive by reminding the mufti in Tashkent that 'to this very day there have remained sheikhs and their descendants who for their own benefit go around brandishing items of legal documentation and read their made-up tracts to those coming [to Solomon's Throne]. They also make copies [of these tracts] and distribute them around.'<sup>74</sup> Shokirkho'jaev's

---

<sup>74</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, not inventoried.

message was simple: he wanted SADUM to take measures to purge the shrine in Osh of sheikhs and *eshons*.

This single communication between ulama reads in a surprisingly straightforward fashion. Not only is there little here in the way of profound theological musings, but the text is furthermore devoid of references to the rich textual traditions devoted to the cult of saints and religious practices associated with it. There are, of course, gestures at historical literature, but one might have expected something more sophisticated from a scholar of the caliber of Shokirkho'jaev when corresponding with one of his peers. Indeed, his attempt at historicizing Solomon's Throne as a religious monument fetishizes a narrow selection of historical texts, a kind of thinking which is in fact reminiscent of how Sottiev operated at the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoniy in Shovot, as we have observed at the beginning of this chapter.<sup>75</sup>

Could Shokirkho'jaev know that a copy of his text would reach the desk of the CARC commissioner for Kyrgyzstan Akhtamov? And with this in mind, did Shokirkho'jaev attempt to improve relations with the latter? In 1951, a year prior to the crafting of this text, a report of the Tashkent office of CARC blamed Akhtamov for his failure to monitor and prevent 'unauthorized gatherings' of believers at Solomon's Throne in Osh. This report took on board complaints which the CARC had received from the City Council of People's Deputies in Osh and which condemned mass visitation to the shrine as 'a violation of public order.'<sup>76</sup> This was a serious accusation, based on an article of the penal code which prohibited previously unauthorized public gatherings,<sup>77</sup> and it may be that Akhtamov, knowing Shokirkho'jaev's critical views on the cult of

---

<sup>75</sup> On CARC officials developing a 'textual fetish through some academic training,' see Devin DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's Islam in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 13 No. 3 (2002), pp. 311-312.

<sup>76</sup> O'MA, f. R-2574, op. 1, d. 80, ll. 2-3, 7-9, 14.

<sup>77</sup> "... Meetings and other forms of unauthorized gathering are prohibited outside state and public institutions without special authorization, which are issued by Councils of People's Deputies at the republican, city, and local (raion and

saints, pushed the qadi to initiate a fatwa condemning such religious practice.

There is no way for us to know if indeed Akhtamov commissioned this letter to Shokirkho'jaev or whether the latter was simply pursuing his own reformist agenda. Whatever its origin, it served as an appeal to SADUM, as a call for action. And action duly came: on 20 February (approximately 20 days after the report was registered at SADUM's offices in Tashkent), mufti Eshon Bobokhonov convened a council of ulama and qadis, which issued a fatwa on Solomon's Throne.<sup>78</sup> Unsurprisingly, the text of the fatwa fully integrated Shokirkho'jaev's initial report.

Two years later, in 1954, this fatwa was adopted officially once again by the council of ulama and qadis. However, the two fatwas crafted in 1952 and 1954 seem not to have circulated, for I have been unable to find traces of their transmission to the mosques. The fact that these fatwas did not circulate was doubtless a consequence of direct obstruction by Eshon Bobokhonov, but perhaps it also reflects the fact that they were clearly going against the interests of SADUM for donations collected at shrines, which were under SADUM's supervision, represented its major source of income.

Things changed, however, with the death of Eshon Bobokhonov in 1957. Seven months later, on 20 February 1958, SADUM convened a plenary meeting, which was entrusted with the task of coming to some conclusion about the cult of saints, and especially the issue of donations and other religious practices performed during the ritual visitations to Islamic shrines. The initiative of convening such an assembly was not Ziyouddin Bobokhonov's, however. In fact, it came from elsewhere. That year the head of CARC's Moscow office, Polianskii, had sent a letter to his colleague in Tashkent, Inoghomov, requesting new surveys of 'holy places,' the cult

---

village) level," *Ugolovno-protsessual'nyi kodeks UzSSR* (Tashkent: Gosizdat, 1956), pp. art. 126, par. 1.

<sup>78</sup> The record is in manuscript form and is written in Arabic-script Uzbek. It is preserved in the Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent.

of which, he noted, ‘continues to persist and grows seriously out of scale.’ Polianskii warned that such measures were necessary for the preparation of a special resolution (at the all-union scale) of the central committee of the Communist Party and demanded urgently that Inoghomov ‘issue fatwas about the inadmissibility of the cult of saints in Islam.’<sup>79</sup> We are now well into the Khrushchev period and Polianskii’s uncompromising demand merely reflected the bombastic anti-religious ethos of those years. All the same, however, it is important to consider that the SADUM-CARC alliance functioned particularly well when these state organs targeted a common enemy: Inoghomov did precisely as Polianskii instructed, and wrote to Ziyuddin and requested that the ‘fatwa about Solomon’s Throne’ be republished.<sup>80</sup>

Accordingly, the Spiritual Board convened the aforementioned plenary meeting, which was staged according to the established script of party meetings with a keynote speaker appointed to formulate the main theme of the assembly. The speaker in question was none other than Shokirkho’jaev, who reiterated what he had already written six years earlier, and thus simply warned his audience about the continued growth of the popularity of the cult of saints in the republics of Central Asia. As he had done in his report to Eshon Bobokhonov in 1952, Shokirkho’jaev once again attacked with particular emphasis the popular tracts (*risola*) about the city of Osh and Solomon’s Throne. This is where the circle closes: SADUM adopted a fatwa together with a final resolution, both of which were firmly grounded on Shokirkho’jaev’s first report to SADUM,

---

<sup>79</sup> Polianskii to Inogamov (06.01.1958), O’MA; f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 600, l. 149.

<sup>80</sup> *V poslednoe vremia sredi veruiushchikh musul’man nabliudaetsia rost kul’ta mazarov i tak nazyvaemykh sviatykh mest. V vypushchennykh fetvakh 1952 i 1954 godov étot vid palomnichestva byl priznan protivorechaiushchim kanonom islama. V chastnosti, rech’ shla o t.n. Trone Suleimana v gor. Oshе Kirgizskoi SSR. V étoi sviazi schitaem neobkhodimym v srochnom poriadke vnov’ izdat’ i razoslat’ étu fetvu vo vse mecheti SADUMa, zhelatel’no za podpis’iu neskol’kikh avtoritetnykh ulem, Inoghomov to Mufti Z. Babakhanov ([January] 1958), Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Uzbekistan, not inventoried.*

but whose arguments were supplemented with quotations from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Shokirkho'jaev died in 1966 but his legacy lived on with Ziyouddin Bobokhonov who in June 1973 signed off on a new fatwa against shrine visitation. Nothing was actually new in this legal opinion, aside from the fact that SADUM conclusively came to terms with the fact that, 20 years after its establishment, it could not overcome Sufism and establish its puritanical interpretations of Islam. Ziyouddin explained the need to repurpose Shokirkho'jaev's fatwa by stating that: 'truly interested in preserving the purity of the faith in the souls of our venerable Muslim brethren, in 1958 SADUM issued a fatwa, which drew the attention [of the public] to manifestations of superstition connected with the worship of the graves of the saints. This fatwa circulated far and wide among Muslims and was extensively commented upon. That fatwa offered evidence that the various manifestations of superstitions are untenable from the point of view of sharia. However, in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan shrine visitation is increasing, and various forms of superstition are spreading [among the populace]. SADUM has [recently] carried out inspections and found that, due to a defective communication of the content of this fatwa, old and pre-Islamic superstitions still persist among Muslims, especially among women, in Qaraqalpaqstan and many regions of Uzbekistan [...]. In worshipping graves [they] continue to be influenced by misleading beliefs. They visit these graves, worship them, and ask them [=the saints lying in the graves] to cure diseases. [In particular], women vainly request that saints give them offspring. All this leads to [the appearance of] all sorts of charlatans who, under the guise of being the sheikhs of these graves, extort money from visitors. [...] The Presidium of SADUM instructs imams and mosque administrators to proceed in order to explain Muslims the contents of this order (*ukazanie*).'<sup>81</sup>

Was this course of action ever effective? We can confidently answer in the negative, for in 1986, Ziyouddin's son and successor

---

<sup>81</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 540, ll. 32-35.



at SADUM Shamsuddinkhon Bobokhonov (in office between 1982 and 1989) felt once again pressured to craft a new fatwa against shrine visitation and associated ritual practices. This time, Shamsuddinkhon tried a different tack. Writing in a register that blended the normative with the didactic, he stated that ‘naturally, every mortal, his relatives and loved ones sooner or later leave this earthly life because of the will of the Almighty. To keep in one’s soul a clear memory of the deceased, to make a prayer in their honour, and to ask the Creator to forgive their sins and please their souls are all acts [of worship] which are certainly welcomed and encouraged by the Islamic sharia.’ In an attempt to make his line of argument even clearer, he explained that the Sunnah of the Prophet ‘unambiguously defines the purpose for which a righteous Muslim can visit graves and cemeteries: it is to pray to the Almighty for the repose of the departed and to ponder the great mystery of life and death. Only then can he who visits a grave hope for the mercy of Allah Almighty for those for whom he prays and for himself.’ In speaking of righteous Muslims, however, he now necessarily had to address bad believers. Expressing himself in a rather condescending tone, he addressed the Central Asian Muslim ecumene by declaring that ‘it is with great regret that we have to inform you, oh Muslims, that cemeteries and burial grounds, illegally defined as holy, continue to appear in many places. Pilgrims are flocking to them, bringing cattle and money as gifts. It goes without saying that such abnormal phenomena can happen only in view of a misunderstanding of their sinful nature, for such customs are forbidden by sharia. Whoever tries to cleanse his own bad, improper and illicit deeds by offering sacrifices to shrines, i.e., to the so-called ‘holy places,’ must be considered a great sinner and even a polytheist, because every true Muslim can turn only to the Creator with his requests. It is not in the spirit of Islam to ask for help or support from a dead man [lying] in a grave: this is polytheism, which is criminal and unacceptable for a Muslim.’<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, not inventoried, type-written in Russian.

One may wonder what had prompted once again the head of SADUM to take action against Sufism and shrine visitation. Sham-suddinkhon himself offers us some clues to answer this question. His fatwa made it plain that shrines were everywhere in Uzbekistan and that ‘some dubious persons’ attempted to secure the sanction of the state to legalise the status of ‘holy places’ for those sites. To discredit shrine communities looking for official support, he resorted to an old trick, which we saw employed also by Sottiev and Shokirkho’jaev: if one knew with certainty where a given saint had been buried, he argued, then one could not tolerate the presence of multiple shrines to honour the same saint. With this in mind, Sham-suddinkhon concluded his fatwa in a pontificating tone: ‘the Prophet’s companion Sa’d ibn Waqqas was found to have two tombs, one in Samarqand and the other in Surkhandarya province. The mausoleum of Khalid ibn Walid exists simultaneously in the district of Zomin (in the region of Jizzakh) and in Turkmenistan. It is known for certain that both of them were in fact buried in Syria.’<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

Documentation emerging from the archives of CARC and SADUM offers compelling evidence for inferring that puritanical ideals were not unique to the Islamic sphere in Soviet Uzbekistan. Had the Bob-okhonovs’ and Shokirkho’jaev’s rigorist approach to Sufism and the cult of saints been regarded by their coreligionists merely as evidence of bigotry, these individuals most certainly would not have been able to preserve their status vis-à-vis various constituencies in Uzbekistan and Central Asia as they did. In fact, it is perhaps precisely because their religious sensibilities and intellectual orientations

---

<sup>83</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d, not inventoried, typewritten in Russian. At the top of the document, a sentence written in Arabic-script Uzbek says ‘the original was sent to the CARC office’ (*asl nuskhasi sovetga junatildi*).

were shared by many others that they could keep positions of power in SADUM. The case of Rahmatulloh Idrisov (1927-1992) is a good example to show the extent to which fundamentalism was part and parcel of the Uzbek Muslim scholarly establishment. Born into a family of prominent scholars from Chimbay, he was first trained in the Islamic sciences at the Mir-i Arab madrasa in Bukhara together with other students who like Sottiev were destined to play a central role in SADUM. Having completed his studies in 1951, he was immediately appointed to the post of sheikh of a major devotional complex in Qaraqalpaqstan: the shrine of Uvays al-Qarani, known also as the mazar of Sul-ton Bobo.<sup>84</sup> He worked in this capacity for seven years, that is until 1958 when he left for Cairo to study for three years at the al-Azhar madrasa.<sup>85</sup>

At the beginning of October 1958, most probably during a trip back home, Idrisov was summoned to the Tashkent office of CARC by inspectors K.F. Tagirov and A.S. Tazetdinov. Prompted by the new anti-religious wave unleashed under Khrushchev, the inspectors aimed to take specific measures to counteract the popularity of shrine visitation in Qaraqalpaqstan. To pursue this tack, they invited Idrisov to an official meeting (*priem*), for the latter in 1957 had reported CARC commissioner for Qaraqalpaqstan A.I. Irmanov for corruption. According to Idrisov, Irmanov had been issuing deeds attesting to the registration of many shrines in the region and did so in exchange of money. The CARC inspectors proceeded to question Idrisov about his earlier activities when tending the shrine of Sul-ton Bobo. ‘The sheikh of a registered shrine,’ explained Idrisov, ‘usually reads the Qur’an at the request of the pilgrims. He talks to the visitors, explains the mazar’s history to the pilgrims, and leads the worship service.’ Idrisov went on to explain how as a sheikh he was made accountable for the offerings that pilgrims made to the shrine: ‘[Donations in] cash are collected in a sealed box, where visitors put as much money as they can. Cattle, meanwhile, is given to a

---

<sup>84</sup> The shrine was under the official purview of SADUM since 1945, see QPA, f. R-322, op. 1, f. 1114, l. 49. I discuss this shrine in Chapter Three.

<sup>85</sup> Yo’ldoshkho’jaev and Qayumova, *O’zbekiston ulamolari*, p. 261.

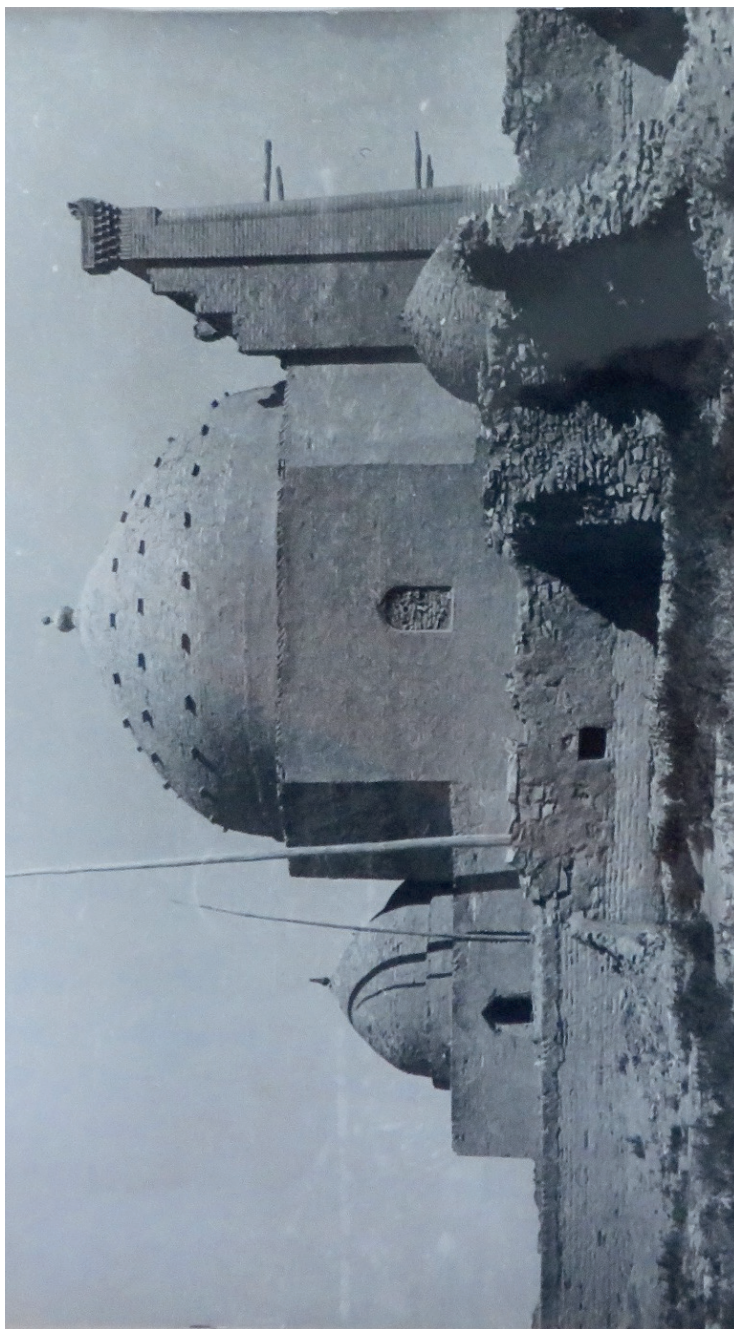


Figure 1.3 The shrine of Uvays al-Qarani or Sulton Bobo, photo by L. Man'kovskaia 1979 © Archive of the National Agency of Restoration, Tashkent.

commissioner and sold at the collective farm market. The proceeds from this sale are transferred to the Spiritual Administration. The box with cash is sealed with two or three locks and the keys are kept by different individuals. The annual flow of sheep and goats to the mazar averages above 1000 heads.’ The CARC inspectors, according to the record that they compiled, documented how Idrisov showed contempt towards those shrines that were not under the purview of SADUM and thus operated illegally:

Unregistered mazars, according to Idrisov, are in the hands of sheikhs, *eshons*, and other obscure individuals. Sheikhs, *eshons* and other parasitic elements who operated in unregistered shrines are a bunch of quacks, who take advantage of believers’ religiosity for their own selfish purposes. The activities of these sheikhs and *eshons*, as a rule, are uncontrolled by the local authorities. Typical of unregistered mazars is a diverse cast of pilgrims who are insane and mentally ill. Sometimes patients flee from the Soviet hospital and come to unregistered mazars. Thus, such unregistered mazars have become a hiding place for shadowy individuals and a breeding ground for contagious diseases. From time to time, representatives of local authorities fine such sheikhs and *eshons* operating around unregistered mazars; they bring them to justice, disperse pilgrims. However, this kind of administration has not yielded any positive effect.<sup>86</sup>

Idrisov’s comment is somewhat disingenuous, here because the mentally ill were specifically brought to shrines to expel the *jinn*s that were thought to possess them, as we shall see more in detail in Chapter Four. But even if Idrisov was simply catering to the ideological thinking of his interlocutors, and employing their vocabulary, it is noteworthy that he ended up reinforcing precisely the reasoning that presented Sufis and *eshons* as bad Muslims; and he did

---

<sup>86</sup> <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/21729> last accessed on 6 October 2023.

so in the same manner in which in 1962 Sottiev would describe the activities of Dusov, the sheikh tending the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoniy, a vignette with which I have opened this chapter.

Idrisov's disdain towards other sheikhs and *eshons*, however, is all the more surprising, for his family is known to have belonged to the famous Qara-Qum Eshons, a network of scholars based in Chim-bay, who commanded authority over Muslims in Qaraqalpaqstan and who had been initiated to the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi path.<sup>87</sup> In fact, his private archive includes a genealogical chart dating to 1946, which shows that he had received the licence (*ijāzat*) to transmit Sufi doctrine.<sup>88</sup> His critique of other sheikhs and *eshons*, however, rehearses themes derived from SADUM's discourse against the bad Muslim: namely, that what was under the control of the Muslim Spiritual Board was acceptable, while what occurred in 'unregistered' spaces was by default illegal and therefore ought to be chastised. It is indeed ironic to read in the CARC inspectors' notes that Idrisov claimed that things are in good order only in registered shrines, for there was no place there for superstition, quackery and debauchery. Things were not that simple, of course, and séances of exorcism, animal sacrifices, and many other ritual practices were recorded at registered shrines too, as I shall show in Chapters Four and Five.

That Idrisov too, by dint of his studies, had been exposed to the kind of puritanism embodied by the likes of Shokirkho'jaev, Sottiev, and Ziyouddin Bobokhonov is beyond question. By the 1980s the unintended consequences of SADUM's fundamentalist leanings and protracted belligerent attitude towards devotional practices of Sufi origin fully manifested themselves. As we shall see in the next chapter, some considered SADUM a Wahhabis' nest, and blamed

---

<sup>87</sup> On Qara-Qum Eshons, see A. Idrisov, A. Muminov, and M. Szuppe, *Manuscripts en écriture arabe du Musée régional de Nukus (République autonome du Karakalpakstan, Ouzbékistan). Fonds arabe, persan, turkī et karakalpak* (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, 2007), esp. the introduction.

<sup>88</sup> Abdusalim Idrisov, private archive, *Nasab-nāma-yi khwājagān-i naqshbandiyya*.

its personnel for having polarized Uzbek Muslim society. Meanwhile, others progressively distanced themselves from the staff of the Spiritual Board, whom they regarded as an elite fully subservient to the Soviet state which had lost touch with the community of believers.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### *Soviet Muslim Authority Contested*



## Introduction

When on the morning of August 13 1950, Eshon Bobokhonov entered SADUM's headquarters, he found an unexpected letter waiting for him. The person who penned it had recently attended the funeral of Gabdrahman Rasulev, the former head of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia and Siberia. Rather than a report from Ufa on the proceedings of the mournful ceremonies and a conventional reflection on the frailty of human life, the letter was a vitriolic slur against the deceased mufti:

Our only wish is that the office which has been vacated should be taken by a dignified personality, someone who is humble and [truly] religious. Amen. It would be proper if the place were taken by someone who is capable of making sacrifices for the benefit of [all] Muslims. The deceased was a victim of [his own] megalomania; although he occupied the office of the Mufti of the Spiritual Board for thirteen years, he did little [that can be called] useful, and caused much trouble for the Spiritual Board. During his work, precious things were stolen from the building of the Spiritual Board [at Ufa], and the handlist was sold at antique shops. The origin of the Muslims of Russia [too], i.e., the archive, was stolen. And our remarks and criticism did not help the cause. [Few things were dear to Mufti Rasulev] when he was alive: lust for money, desire for greatness, boasting, greed and envy; and now he has finally died. We often received missives from him which said: 'There is no money in the Spiritual Board. Send money!'<sup>1</sup>

Although it was left unsigned, the missive clearly came from the ranks of the official Muslim *nomenklatura* of Russia. Someone had furthermore given it to Abdalghaffar Shamsutdinov, then qadi of Kazakhstan, with a request to pass it on to Eshon Bobokhonov in

---

<sup>1</sup> Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, n.d., not inventoried.

Tashkent. The letter left the head of SADUM deeply concerned, indeed shocked. The mufti immediately requested a meeting with Khudoyor Iskanderov, the head commissioner of Uzbek CARC, to discuss the matter. Bobokhonov disliked the idea that people might similarly talk about himself behind his back and tarnish his good name after his death. Iskanderov attempted to reassure the old mufti, explaining that his office inevitably attracted critical sentiments (*oppozitsionnye nastroyeniia*) and that he should not pay too much attention to such derogatory talk. All the parties involved in this conversation, however, were wary of the clear admonishment conveyed by the anonymous letter: if put under the magnifying glass, SADUM too could become the target of the same critique.<sup>2</sup>

The anonymous letter to Eshon Bobokhonov can serve as a useful reminder that SADUM's moral authority over the Muslim ecumene of Central Asia was all but uncontested. The present chapter sets out to probe the limits of this authority by examining expressions of moral dissent within Uzbekistan. Before we begin to look at the various figures who openly criticised the official Muslim establishment, a clarification is here in order. Some Western scholarship has long dismissed the importance of SADUM both in the eyes of the believers and vis-à-vis the Soviet state. Imagined as a surrogate puppet show, SADUM's scholars have been often presented as Soviet officials who were covertly controlled by the state and enjoyed little respect among their coreligionists.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the situation was the exact opposite to this, with the first generation of ulama working for the Spiritual Board commanding authority over local communities and across devotional and initiatic networks. It is important to keep this in mind, for these ulama had been chosen to fill in the ranks of SADUM precisely to counteract the recognised authority of other ulama who operated in Uzbekistan and in Central Asia outside the purview of the state. Born at the turn of the century, most

---

<sup>2</sup> On criticism against Rasulev, see Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War*, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Khalid, "Review of *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* by Eren Tasar."

of the ulama holding official positions immediately after the Second World War embodied a type of Islamic scholarship and specialized knowledge that in the 1940s and 1950s began to be regarded as *uncommon*. In the interwar period, the Soviet state took various measures to do away with key traditional institutions, and these measures particularly targeted Islamic education. Not only were institutes of Islamic higher learning (*madradas*) shut down, but charitable endowments (*vaqf*, pl. *avqāf*), which had financed institutes of Islamic learning (including Sufi convents), also became targets of reform and were ultimately disbanded in 1928.<sup>4</sup> These measures had dented the corporate dimension of Islamic scholarship by curtailing the resources needed for its transmission and perpetuation. In addition, while at the beginning of the 1920s local ulama could still hope for co-optation by the state, starting from 1929 Muslim scholars began to suffer from marginalization. The situation worsened at the end of the 1930s when, during the Great Terror, a sizable number of scholars – the precise figures remain unclear – were exiled and sentenced either to forced labor or to death;<sup>5</sup> those who were able to elude the surveillance of the Soviet secret police (NKVD) simply went abroad, often to Afghanistan, China, Egypt, India, or Saudi Arabia. Given the challenges that they had endured in the interwar period and during the Second World War, the authority of ulama who survived the 1940s did not diminish in the eyes of Central Asians by dint of their entering SADUM.

This chapter is mostly based on a collection of missives (*patta*) found today among the private possessions of Abdulaziz Mansur,

---

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Pianciola and Paolo Sartori, “*Waqf* in Turkestan: The Colonial Legacy and the Fate of an Islamic Institution in Early Soviet Central Asia, 1917-1924,” *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 26 No. 4 (2007), pp. 475-498; Beatrice Penati, “On the Local Origins of the Soviet Attack on “Religious” *Waqf* in the Uzbek SSR (1927),” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* Vol. 36 (2015), pp. 39-72.

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Keller argues that in Uzbekistan alone ‘more than 14,000 Muslim clergy were arrested, killed, exiled from their homes, or driven out of the USSR’ during the Cultural Revolution and Great Terror; see her *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2001), p. 241.

an Uzbek scholar who worked at SADUM's Fatwa Department (*fatvolar bo'limi*) between the years 1982 and 1991 and has served intermittently the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan from the demise of the USSR to this day in various capacities.<sup>6</sup> Such letters range in form and content from questions of Islamic jurisprudence and issues of ethics to complaints about specific fatwas issued by SADUM and conflicts among various religious groups in Uzbekistan. Interestingly, some of them include answers, often formulated in laconic Soviet Uzbek bureaucratise, which the Spiritual Board issued to its appellants. However, most of the missives are left without any answer. I have examined approximately one hundred specimens of this compositional genre.

Though cursory, acquaintance with these records proved nevertheless sufficient to appreciate their enormous historical significance. The *pattas* shed light on many aspects of believers' understanding of Islam in post-Stalin Central Asia. More specifically, they illuminate many Uzbeks' dissatisfaction with the narrow, puritanical, and overtly normative approach of Soviet Islamic authorities towards religious practices which were otherwise broadly perceived as deep-seated intrinsic elements of local culture. Most of the missives addressed to the office of the Soviet mufti from the early 1960s to the 1980s show that a substantial number of Uzbeks openly disputed SADUM's policy of banning rituals such as shrine visitation, acts of collective remembrance, and *zikr* (among many others) by declaring them inadmissible from the point of view of sharia.

As we have seen in Chapter One, SADUM's most common means of implementing such policy was by issuing fatwas which reached far and wide, circulating for instance among communities living in collective farms and in rural areas. They were read during Friday sermons, when, acting effectively as spokespersons of SADUM, imams explained their contents to parishes. It is striking that, in addressing their concerns about the prohibition of certain rituals,

---

<sup>6</sup> Yo'ldoshkho'jaev and Qayumova, *O'zbekiston ulamolari*, pp. 110-112.

local Muslims requested from the muftis additional explanation. So far removed were the fatwas from local conceptualizations of Muslimness that we often find that Uzbeks turned to the mufti to ascertain for themselves whether what they had heard from imams was indeed true (*shu gap rostmi? / bularni gapi rostmi?*). That there existed an ideological and cultural cleavage between SADUM and Central Asian Muslims is confirmed by the disappointingly formulaic answers of the muftis. Their reactions to Muslims' glaring frustration and requests for further clarification generally proved inadequate for the petitioners. Indeed, SADUM's answers often amounted to dispatching members of the *raikom*, the same imams, or the representatives of neighbourhood communities (*mahalla kengashi*) to the localities, to explain once again to parishes the contents of the fatwas—those same fatwas that had caused so much distress among believers in the first place. That this dynamic repeated itself throughout SADUM's life should give us pause, for it points to a chronic inability on the part of its members to design alternative strategies to influence religious consciousness and ultimately transform Muslims' behaviour. Indeed, SADUM's leadership understood early on that they had little control over the mosques, and, furthermore, that their fatwas could be a source of frustration among the believers. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, as early as 1952, SADUM issued a circular (in Arabic-script Uzbek) to all the imam-khatibs operating in the Friday mosques under its supervision, in which it acknowledged the influence of 'individuals spreading superstitious nonsense and engaging in illegal activities.' More specifically, SADUM knew that very few people had approved of its previous fatwas against *eshons*. Nonetheless, its leaders could not think of a better measure than to invite the imams to air the fatwa repeatedly. This required all employees to discuss its contents among themselves, and to devote a specific amount of time to explaining the meaning of the fatwa to believers.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the only way

---

<sup>7</sup> 06.11.1952, *Dīniyya nazāratining a'zālariga: masjid jāmi'alarning imam-khaṭīblariga va mutavalliyāt ha'iyatlariga*, Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, not inventoried.

for SADUM to react against dissent was through indoctrination – which, notably, was the same tactic used by propaganda organs such as the *Znanie* (‘Knowledge’) society, which had taken over ‘the functions of the dissolved Union of the Militant Godless.’<sup>8</sup> However, by holding themselves tight to this tactic, SADUM’s leadership underestimated the extent to which it was delegating its own authority to the imams in the provinces and effectively outsourcing its own moral duties. This way of proceeding brought about two unintended consequences. First, it turned imams into a disenfranchised corporate group who bore the blame for spreading principles that Muslim communities were unwilling to absorb. Secondly, and more importantly, it increased the ideological separation between the official Muslim establishment and the believers.

In the face of the challenges posed by SADUM’s policies, Soviet subjects showed a surprising degree of resourcefulness when looking for Islamic ethical guidance. Muslims often sought advice from mullahs – both male and female – on account of these latter’s familiarity with the scriptures (the Qur’an and the Sunnah) and Islamic elements of creed (‘*aqā’id*). As such, they were regarded as figures embodying knowledge of Islamic ethics and normativity. It is not rare to encounter questions addressed to the mufti in which appellants refer to ‘female mullahs’ (*otin-oyi*)<sup>9</sup> as figures of Islamic authority who articulated different, indeed alternative views on matters of worship than what was prescribed by SADUM’s personnel. In the eyes of Muslims in search of spiritual support, *otin-oyis* represented individuals who could, if need be, access Islamic book culture. Central Asians certainly did not consider *otin-oyis* to be lacking in the kind of specialized knowledge that one might attribute exclusively

---

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Sigrid Kleinmichel, *Halpa in Choresm (Hwārazm) und Ātin Āyi im Ferghanatal. Zur Geschichte des Lesens in Usbekistan im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2000); Annette Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel: Studien über Frauenälteste (otin und xalfa) im unabhängigen Usbekistan* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2002).

to the ulama.<sup>10</sup> There is therefore no need to put in place an artificial separation between the male-dominated world of SADUM and the almost invisible domain of the irregular female mullahs. As we shall see (here and in Chapter Four), the situation was much more complex, with the two ostensibly separate male and female domains showing substantial overlap.

I hope readers will recognise that the *pattas* can provide us with material to redefine the epistemic contours of Islam in the USSR. Indeed, the small stories enshrined in the missives addressed to the mufti suggest that the Soviet Union offered space for epistemic diversity in which the definition of notions such as sharia and Muslimness mattered greatly to the everyday life of communities of Soviet citizens.<sup>11</sup>

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, I want to explore how these *pattas* help us to illuminate the complex relationship between the various sources of Islamic authority in Uzbekistan after the Second World War, which we have just reviewed. My second objective is to consider some of the challenging responses of Soviet Muslims towards SADUM's initiatives to regulate religiosity, especially in the sphere of rituals. I shall do so by introducing here a body of material which has so far escaped the attention of historians of the region, namely missives that Uzbeks sent by regular mail to the Spiritual Board, some of which are addressed directly to the mufti. I hope to draw a picture of Soviet Muslims not as passive recipients of Soviet policies on Islam, but as active participants in the

---

<sup>10</sup> This was noted first by Stéphane A. Dudoignon in his review of "Habiba Fathi, *Femmes d'autorité dans l'Asie centrale contemporaine. Quête des ancêtres et recompositions identitaires dans l'islam postsoviétique*," *Cahiers du Monde russe* Vol. 47 No. 4 (2006), pp. 951-957.

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic sphere of Soviet Central Asia has been conceptualised as an episteme in Paolo Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 30 (2019), pp. 367-405. For a discussion about the interpretive opportunities opened by such conceptualization, see Eren Tasar, "Mantra: A Review Essay on Islam in Soviet Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 63 (2020), pp. 389-433.

definition of what Eren Tasar has termed the ‘Islamic sphere’ of Soviet Central Asia.

I shall proceed by weaving the texts of various *pattas* into the texture of this chapter. The arrangement is chronological, for I cover in sequence the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This systematization thus follows the periodization offered in Tasar’s *Soviet and Muslim*, which views the Khrushchev period as a decade of attack against devotional practices associated with the cult of saints; the 1970s (‘Mature Socialism’) as an epoch of containment of public manifestations of religiosity; and the 1980s as an era of relaxation marked by the rising to prominence of a new cohort of religious figures (often referred to in disparaging terms as ‘Wahhabis,’ *vahhobiylar*, ‘young mullahs,’ *mullo-bachchalar*, and ‘Wahhabi young mullahs,’ see below), who openly disputed the authority of Hanafi traditionalists. The last section of the chapter shows that by the end of the 1980s, in public Muslim perception, SADUM was drifting away from the spiritual needs and religious sensibilities of the constituencies it purported to represent. It shows furthermore that Uzbeks began to recognize a similarity between SADUM’s puritanical drive and the so-called Wahhabis of the Ferghana Valley. This complicates further the narrative propounded by the last Soviet mufti and one of the most influential ulama of independent Uzbekistan, the late Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf (1952-2015), who claimed that in late Soviet Uzbekistan, Muslim scholars were divided into three different groups: the Hanafi traditionalists, the so-called ‘young mullahs’ (‘Wahhabis’), and the state mullahs (members of SADUM).<sup>12</sup> When regarded from the perspective of local communities of believers as it is reflected in our sources, in the 1980s the constituency of Uzbek ulama at the republican level was split mainly into two. On the one hand, there were those who preserved the integrity of the Hanafi school of law by perpetuating rituals of worship perceived as customary practices. On the other, there

---

<sup>12</sup> Babadjanov, “Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan;” Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, p. 357.



were scholars, mostly puritanical and fundamentalist in inspiration, who equated such practices with manifestations of polytheism and thus urged believers to abandon them. Manifestations of the doctrinal conflicts among ulama leading to such a split (otherwise known as the ‘Great Schism’)<sup>13</sup> were recorded in the Ferghana Valley at the end of the 1970s. The documentation is relatively well known and has been commented upon several times.<sup>14</sup> What requires further reflection and study, however, is the fact that such a split appears to have occurred in fact much earlier in Central Asia, and that it acquired particular social significance once puritanical and fundamentalist sensibilities began to inform SADUM’s policies;<sup>15</sup> one can appreciate this split’s social significance down to the present.<sup>16</sup>

### **Challenging SADUM’s Authority**

While the authority of the ulama representing SADUM did not wane, nor did it remain unchallenged. There were a variety of forces denting the authority of SADUM’s scholarship. The first one was CARC, which often pushed SADUM to take an oppositional stance towards Muslim religiosity, and which made SADUM unpopular in the eyes of the communities of believers. CARC pushed SADUM to issue fatwas that supported Soviet state-sanctioned forms of conduct among Muslims. These were fatwas that encouraged

---

<sup>13</sup> Babadjanov and Kamilov, “Muhammadjan Hindustani (1892-1989) and the Beginning of the ‘Great Schism’ among the Muslims of Uzbekistan.”

<sup>14</sup> The latest, somewhat cavalier synopsis of such conflicts is Vera Exnerova, “Radical Islam from Below: The Mujaddidiya and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the Ferghana Valley,” in Pauline Jones (ed.), *Islam Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 55-76.

<sup>15</sup> See Sartori and Babajanov, “Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia.”

<sup>16</sup> Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*, esp. 144-153; Allen Frank and Jahangir Mamatov, *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Loisdale, C.T: Dunwoody Press, 2006), esp. Abduvali qori Mirzoev’s lectures 30 and 55 on polytheism (*shirk*).

believers to embrace an ostensibly modern lifestyle and submit to a secular notion of religion – one premised on the understanding that the state alone could define the space for Islam. In practice, fatwas reflected the policy of the state to regulate ritual observance and confine it either to the mosque or to gatherings requiring permission from authorities.<sup>17</sup> Such fatwas necessarily aimed at changing most Muslims' behavioural patterns in public. They therefore targeted believers' garb, thus for example forbidding women in 1947 to wear the veil (*paranji*).<sup>18</sup> More generally, they attempted to constrain the space for expressions of devotion, spirituality, and Islamically-informed ethics. For this reason, we encounter fatwas allowing for the breaking of the fast during Ramadan<sup>19</sup> or avoiding praying altogether for working purposes, or fatwas that prohibited

---

<sup>17</sup> Z. Babakhanov, 'Imam-khatibam i chlenam ispol'nitel'nogo organa mechetei,' n.d., O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 540, ll. 70-73.

<sup>18</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, pp. 149-151. See also I. Sottiev, "Dopol'nitelnoe raz'iasnenie o noshenii parandzhi," O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 477, ll. 140-141. Sottiev, who at that time was deputy of the mufti Eshon Bobokhonov, argued that the Qur'an and the Sunnah do not say anything at all about the need for women to cover their head and that the use of the *paranji* reflected merely a customary practice among the peoples of Central Asia. In addition, he claimed that the fatwa was received enthusiastically by women and that many of them began to be involved in public life and embraced contemporary science and culture (*èta fetva byla pravil'no vospriniata mnogimi veruiushchimi, blagodaria chemu bol'shinstvo zhenshchin s udovol'stviey navsegda brosilii parandzhu. Mnogie iz nykh aktivno prikluchilis' v obshchestvennuiu zhizn' i za ovladenie sovremennoi naukoj i kul'tury.*). Another SADUM member who actively initiated Soviet forms of women's emancipation was Yusufkhon Shokirov, son of Olimkhon To'ra Shokirkho'jayev. He prepared for publication an article entitled 'Problems of Equality of Women and Their Resolution,' in which he argued that the status of women in Islam is misrepresented by both conservative theologians and atheists. His argumentation is clearly influenced by Egyptian reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yusufkhon Shokirov got acquainted with their works while studying at al-Azhar University (1949-1953). See Bakhtiyar M. Babadjanov, "'Paradise at the Feet of Mothers and Women: Soviet and Post-Soviet Discourses of Muslim Women's Emancipation,'" in Ch. Obiya (ed.), *Islam and Gender in Central Asia: Soviet Modernization and Today's Society* (Kyoto: CIAS, Kyoto University, 2016), pp. 19-33.

<sup>19</sup> "O poste Ramadana," O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 637, ll. 67-68.

communal prayers and rituals outside of the mosque. Needless to say, such fatwas were disregarded by many, and were thus treated on a moral par with Party resolutions, i.e., the bureaucratic output of Soviet policies of secularization designed to undermine Muslim religiosity.<sup>20</sup>

All this said, however, during the nearly five decades of its existence SADUM in fact cultivated a distinctly ambivalent relationship towards CARC and its various representatives. At times SADUM's records seem to suggest that state ulama resented the pressure exerted by CARC to issue certain fatwas. At the same time, one can observe a purposeful alliance between CARC and SADUM to attack religious practices which were regarded as originating from a Sufi milieu and which enjoyed great popularity in the region.<sup>21</sup> This alliance worked as long as the two institutions shared two specific interests. The first was to target non-elite Sufism, and especially the figures of Muslim authority that populated the space of the shrines. The second common interest was represented by the registration of mosque communities which operated illegally. As persuasively shown by Eren Tasar, CARC was interested in lowering the numbers of Muslim parishes which operated outside of the control of the state. Equally, SADUM had a lot to gain financially from the registration of new mosques, for it could levy taxes from them and by doing so replenish its coffers.

However, the CARC-SADUM alliance began to wane with the new anti-religious wave of the Khrushchevian period, which resulted in an overhaul of CARC's staff. With hardliners now in office, CARC discontinued its previous lenient attitude towards the registration of new mosques. In addition, CARC commissioners enjoyed unprecedented freedom when criticizing SADUM. Events in Uzbekistan thus took a dramatic turn when Sharif Shirinbaev (1908-1982), a former KGB officer originally from Samarqand, took office

---

<sup>20</sup> On this point, see later in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> See Sartori and Babajanov, "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia," and Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, chap. 4.

as CARC head commissioner for Uzbekistan. Starting from his appointment in 1960,<sup>22</sup> CARC led an all-out assault against the Muslim *nomenklatura* in Tashkent.<sup>23</sup> The following is an excerpt from a 1961 memo that he prepared for the Party leadership. The passage illustrates how Shirinbaev regarded fatwas issued by SADUM merely in functional terms, that is, as instruments for the state to intrude into the domain of religion – a domain which art. 52 of the 1936 Soviet constitution left in the hands of the believers:

The Soviet legislation on cults allowed the clergy to operate at holy sites [i.e., shrines] for any purpose. However, SADUM, at the initiative of [mufti] Ziyouddin Bobokhonov, took advantage of the connivance of former [CARC] Commissioner Inoghomov and obtained the transfer of a number of shrines [belonging] to the so-called ‘holy sites’ to its [=SADUM’s] disposal. By decree of the Presidium of the central committee of the Communist Party (28/XI-58), all the so-called holy sites were to be closed. In addition, in early 1958 SADUM issued a ruling (*postanovlenie*) on the sinfulness of shrine visitation and instructed its subordinate religious associations to stop local pilgrimages. However, SADUM used its fatwa to close over 150 unofficial, [though] active, holy sites. In return, it achieved an increase in revenues from its official holy sites. More than 60 sheikhs and other permanent staff members of the Spiritual Board have been stationed at 13 holy sites. In recent times, these shrines have been visited by large numbers of believers who have donated substantial sums of money and livestock. The sick visited these places for healing purposes, they prayed to be cured from illness and sought the help from saints to have a child. In order to siphon off more income, the sheikhs [who are registered with] SADUM fomented religious fanaticism among the faithful pilgrims at

---

<sup>22</sup> O’MA, R-2456, op. 1, d. 80, l. 1.

<sup>23</sup> On Shirinbaev, his career and his approach to SADUM, see Sartori, “‘On the Importance of Having a Method.’”

the holy sites. [...] During Eshon Bobokhonov's tenure [as mufti], the Spiritual Board issued several decrees (fatwas) and fought against the depravity of religious superstitions invented by the most reactionary section of the clergy as well as against many fanatical rituals of Islam. Fatwas were issued [against] the non-obligatory performance of circumcision, the harmfulness and non-obligatory wearing of the veil, the sinfulness of suicide among women, and the prohibition of the collection of [ritual taxes such as] *fitr-sadaqa* and *zakat* and the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice. However, after the death of Eshon Bobokhonov these positive trends in SADUM were not pursued further. During his tenure as chairman of SADUM since 1956, [Ziyouddin Bobokhonov] has issued only one fatwa in 1958 on the sinfulness of shrine visitation.<sup>24</sup>

As long as hardliners like Shirinbaev were in a position of influence, SADUM had to meet the challenge of striking a balance between CARC's requests and the perceived need among the official ulama to safeguard the integrity of their own moral authority vis-à-vis the Muslim population. But even when led by soft-liners, CARC remained in many respects an unwanted visitor claiming to have the authority to regulate public manifestations of religiosity. CARC's obtrusion must have been at times difficult to bear for official ulama, especially when it came to dealing with established religious practices. In August 1985, for example, Muslims celebrated the 'Eid al-Fitr, the religious festival which marked the end of Ramadan. As public celebrations were expected, especially at mosques, CARC undertook initiatives to monitor compliance with the legislation on religious worship among the clergy and believers. A CARC commissioner from Samarqand, one A. Miliev, reported that he took advantage of massive attendance at six mosques to have the 1947 fatwa against excesses in the slaughtering of animals (*qurbonlik*)

---

<sup>24</sup> Sh. Shirinbaev, *Spravka o narusheniakh sovetskogo zakonodatel'stva so storony dukhovenstva i SADUMa*, O'MA, 1961, f. 2574, op. 1, d. 79, ll. 3-4.

read during the congregational prayer. By referring to this fatwa, imams were expected to criticise Muslims who, ‘by succumbing to [the evil force of] traditions and rituals, fail to pay due attention to sharia, nor do they listen to the admonishments of our state, and still less so do they think about the workers’ pockets. Excesses at weddings and funeral ceremonies sometimes go beyond human imagination, for they slaughter innumerable rams, and cook food in defiance of the norm. All this is done against sharia and against the economy of the state. Imams urged believers to follow the right path of sharia and categorically forbade the abuse of food under the pretext of faith.’<sup>25</sup> When reading such a report, one can only imagine how unbearable for many imams must have been the presence of CARC commissioners at the mosque. Their heart must have sunk when, prior to delivering their sermon to the congregation, imams were reminded to read fatwas which no one wanted to pay attention to.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the admonishment to follow the right path of sharia, must have sounded absurd to Muslims, especially coming as it did from CARC commissioners such as Miliev.

---

<sup>25</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 110, l. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Imom-khotib SADUMdan kelgan fatvoni o’qib berdilar*, Khayrullaev, mutavalli of the Kho’ja Ahror Vali mosque in Samarqand to Abdullo Meliev, 26.08.1985, SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 110, l. 15.



Figure 2.1 ‘They slaughter a bull close to a ditch,’ outskirts of Khiva, 1966. Collection Gleb Snesev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences

## **Scripturalism**

Another force that did much to undermine SADUM’s authority was Islamic scripturalism, and this came directly from the ranks of the Spiritual Board. As we have seen in Chapter One, scripturalist and explicit fundamentalist tendencies manifested themselves among state-sanctioned ulama at least from the early 1950s and became even more prominent in the following decades. Indeed, SADUM included scholars who prior to the October Revolution propounded a reformist vision of Islam, which was premised upon the eradication of ‘customary practices’ (and especially the whole set of rituals attached to the cult of saints and shrine visitation) from Muslims’ religious practice. It is now plain that the fatwas designed to make shrine visitation in Central Asia illegal from the point of view of

sharia reflected an initiative on the part of SADUM's ulama, most notably by the qadi of the Kyrgyz SSR, Olimkhon To'ra Shokirkho'jayev (see Chapter One).<sup>27</sup> In issuing such fatwas, SADUM was instrumentalizing CARC's concern about manifestations of devotion to the saints performed at the main shrines in the region. If regarded from this point of view, SADUM's fatwas against shrine visitation, and its scripturalist tendencies in general, can be seen to represent a point of contact first with CARC and secondly with the so-called 'young mullahs' we discussed above, who first appeared in the late 1970s. It should be noted, however, that although it championed an aggressive policy against *specific* religious practices associated with the cult of saints, SADUM did not attempt to disrupt shrine visitation altogether. In fact, SADUM's critique of pilgrims' religious behaviour was accompanied by equally assertive measures to appoint its own members to the various posts of shrine keepers. At the same time, SADUM sought to undermine the moral status of individuals who commanded authority over a given shrine community. By claiming that the new appointees would ensure that shrine visitation be performed in accordance with sharia, SADUM effectively attempted to gain control of all the donations to the shrines.<sup>28</sup>

More often than not, it was on account of these fundamentalist tendencies that SADUM attracted the ire of believers. In 1964, one Akmal Qurbonov, a Bukharan barber, sent a letter to the Spiritual Board to pose the following question:

In our noble Bukhara since time immemorial people have performed visitation to the shrine of Bahouddin Naqshband and spent time there during the saint-day festivals (*sayil*),<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> See Sartori and Babajanov, "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia."

<sup>28</sup> See Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, pp. 227-240.

<sup>29</sup> *Sayil* is a term used to denote a complex of celebrations, devotional rites, and fairs held during Muslim saint-day festivals in the vicinity of Muslim shrines. They were usually held in spring, after Nowruz (the New Year according to the



and during the celebration for the end of Ramadan (*hayit*). For several years now, the imams have been telling us to do away with this customary practice; also all the scholars of the Mir-i Arab [madrasa] are against it.<sup>30</sup> In their Friday sermons, they [= the imams] refer to the fatwas of so and so from the Spiritual Board and read them [to the believers]. We are at a loss because they said that pilgrimage is forbidden (*harom*), alms-giving is forbidden, and also saint-day festivals are forbidden.<sup>31</sup>

The barber was livid at SADUM. ‘What is left to [do for us] Muslims?’, he roared in his letter. ‘What happened to our great scholars (*olimoni kalon*)? What kind of times do we live in?’ As he saw things, SADUM’s change of heart with regard to the shrines worsened the conditions of Muslims in the region. He explained that ‘After the [Second World] War, no one touched our shrines: [the shrine] of Bahouddin Balogardon was [open] for Muslims, and it belonged to the [Spiritual] Board. Pilgrimage to shrines could be performed without any restriction.’ Surprisingly, Akmal Qurbonov did not even spare his addressees a good dose of sarcasm: ‘At that time [they said that shrine visitation] was [a practice] consistent with sharia; so what [has happened] now? Is it no more in accordance with sharia? [If so], was sharia different at that time? It seems a new sharia has now been issued. The population of Bukhara the Noble is not happy [about this]. Please understand all these things. Why did we fall into such conditions? And peace be with you!’

---

Iranian calendar) and in autumn. In the Soviet period, during *sayils* Muslims travelled across republican borders to perform the ritual visitation to a shrine and live there in communities, often for several weeks. See Gleb P. Snesarev, *Khorezmskie legendy kak istochnik po istorii religioznykh kul'tov Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1983), pp. 49, 55, 74, 115-120. See Chapter Three for additional material on the subject.

<sup>30</sup> This suggests that the ulama of the Mir-i Arab madrasa had contacts with the community of believers in Bukhara.

<sup>31</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur’s Private Collection, not inventoried.

Common believers were concerned not only by SADUM's attack against shrine visitation, but also by the broader critical approach that its members expressed with regard to Sufi rituals in general. Writing from the collective farm named after the Uzbek Communist writer Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoziy in 1962, one Sayida Sobitboy qizi explained that since time immemorial Muslims in Uzbekistan had been performing the *sadr*<sup>32</sup> during the ritual prayer (*janoza*) at funerals. This ritual is usually performed in the house of the deceased. Women (and less often men) usually stand in a circle, dance, beat themselves on the chest, and repeatedly chant religious formulas. The most experienced woman leads the ritual often by singing poems attributed to the 12th-century Sufi master Ahmad Yasavi.<sup>33</sup> The other participants stand in a circle and repeat the same formulas and move rhythmically to the center of the circle and back. The ritual of *sadr* can be accompanied by loud litanies, a ritual practice which is usually regarded as the hallmark of a particular brand of Sufism, and thus associated with other funerary rites of Sufi origin bearing different names such as *zīkr*, *jahr*, *samā'*, *pā*. Sayida Sobitboy qizi went on to argue that the ritual of the *sadr* marked the beginning of

---

<sup>32</sup> The *sadr* is a funerary rite known through several ethnographic descriptions: Z. Tadzhiikova, "Pesni pokhoronnogo obriada tadjikov (po materialam zervshanskikh èkspeditsii)," in *Problemy muzykal'nogo fol'klora narodov SSSR: Stat'i i materialy* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1973), pp. 95-100; G. P. Snesev, *Relikty domusul'manskikh verovanii i obriadov u uzbekov Khorezma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), p. 155. For a discussion of this body of literature from a historical perspective, see DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57 No. 2 (2014), pp. 348-349; A. Mardonova, *Traditsionnye pokhoronno-pominal'nye obriady tadjikov gissarskoi doliny (kontsa XIX-nachala XX vv.)* (Dushanbe: Donish, 1998), pp. 83-92 and È. G. Gafferberg, "Perezhitki religioznykh predstavlenii u beludzhei," in G.P. Snesev and V.N. Basilov (eds.), *Domusul'manskie verovanii i obriady v Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), p. 246, fn. 51.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, evidence supporting Ahmad Yasavi's authorship of such poems (i.e., the so-called *Divān-i hikmat*) is a much later affair, which can be traced back only to the 19th century. See Devin DeWeese, "Ahmad Yasavi and the *Divan-i Hikmat* in Soviet Scholarship," in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 262-290.

a long mourning period, which was dotted by feasts called ‘three,’ ‘seven,’ and ‘forty,’ when the departed was remembered in a gathering on the third, seventh and fortieth day after his/her death.<sup>34</sup> In her letter, Sayida Sobitboy qizi complained that, helped by the elders in the collective farm, the local party committee had declared such mourning rituals as not in accordance with sharia. ‘They explain to us,’ she wrote, ‘that such a command (*buyruq*) has come down to us from his Excellency the mufti; they shout at us, and threaten us! Why is it that what used to be in sharia has disappeared today? Please, explain. The appellant.’<sup>35</sup> Sayida Sobitboy qizi proceeded in the same way as the Bukharan barber did. Here we observe a Soviet Uzbek citizen challenging directly the moral authority of the mufti on matters of sharia: if once such rituals were accepted and local ulama did not frown upon them, how was one to explain the change of interpretation and the decision now to regard them as unacceptable?

The answer to Sayida Sobitboy qizi was evasive: ‘Dispatch the responsible person from the Spiritual Board to this locality and, together with the people from the local community (*mahalla*), visit the collective farm and clarify [the issues before the people]. Let them read the required fatwas.’ Either the mufti or the officials of the Spiritual Board working at the Fatwa Department believed that to read out a fatwa and explain its contents to the people would be enough to persuade the latter to do away with certain religious practices. On the back of the record, we read the Uzbek expression *bajarildi* (‘fulfilled’), a calque from the Russian *vypolneno*, a formulaic term typical of Soviet bureaucratism. Seen from this point of view, SADUM’s members in Tashkent appear to have dealt with dissent coming from the provinces with condescension, like a member of a literacy commission (*likbez*) scolding the uneducated.

And yet, SADUM repeatedly failed to understand that its messages were perceived as inherently disruptive of the integrity of

---

<sup>34</sup> SADUM’s ulama deemed such ritual inadmissible from the point of view of sharia and issued a number of fatwas to this effect, O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 622, ll. 39-42.

<sup>35</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur’s Private Collection, not inventoried.

Muslimness as people had understood it. Another circular issued at the end of 1955 shows the degree to which SADUM was steeped in a discourse of fundamentalism. Having received complaints about the critique against traditional rituals, ulama reacted by pointing out that ‘those who claim that the [religious] customs that have survived among the majority of believers in Central Asia have been perpetuated first by our ancestors, that turning our backs from said customs (*rasm-rusūm*) isn’t good, and that doing away with the established practices of our previous ulama and sheikhs is immoral (*ādābdan emas*), neglect the noble Qur’an and the true Sunnah of our Prophet, which represent the fundamentals (*aṣāṣ*) of Islam and they are turning their eyes from the truth [...] In our business, let us continue to proceed firmly by following closely the commandments of sharia in accordance with the noble Qur’an and the prophetic Sunnah.’<sup>36</sup>

The situation did not change significantly in the 1960s. If anything, dissatisfaction with SADUM is likely to have increased, for the official establishment in Tashkent was by this time operating in a broader environment (that of the Khrushchevian anti-religious campaigns) which was much more hostile to what went under the label of ‘religious survivals.’ Common people in Uzbekistan, however, still turned to the leading religious figures for moral support. In 1967, one Zumrat Polvon-ota qizi, a woman living in a collective farm named after Marx in the Tashkent district, wrote to the imam of the Kukcha mosque, one of the major houses of worship in Tashkent, to see if he could answer her pressing question: ‘Our customary practices, which we have performed since time immemorial at weddings, or during funerals and mourning prayers, have provoked troubles (*janjal*) with the elders of our *mahalla*. Some of them say that all these [customs] contradict our sharia, while others say they do not. Who is right? Why do all our customary practices, which we have long been performing, now contradict [sharia]? If all this

---

<sup>36</sup> *Masjid jāmiʼlarning muhtaram imām va khaṭīblari hužūrlariga mutavallī haʼiyatlarning raʼislari va aʼzālari hužūrlariga* [1955]. Communique crafted in the Arabic script. Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, not inventoried.

is done in the way of Allah, what is wrong with them? They [=the elders] scolded us [for performing such rituals] under the rule of the Tsar (*poshsho*), but we performed them under Lenin and Stalin.<sup>37</sup> This letter is significant for it shows how official imams were in fact powerless before the resilience of certain manifestations of religiosity. In this case, our Zumrat explained that it was down to the council of elders (*oqsoqollar kengashi*) to implement SADUM's fatwas. Nonetheless, this behaviour may look counterintuitive to us: during the Khrushchevian 'thaw,' people were told that all things bad happened either because of Russian imperialism or during Stalinism. And yet, as Zumrat reminds us, in those proverbially dark days no one intruded into their rituals.

### **Unwelcome Competition**

There existed in Uzbekistan after the Second World War figures of Islamic authority whom believers regarded as *alternatives* to the staff of SADUM based in Tashkent and its representatives on the spot. Such alternative figures of authority were individuals who exemplified an understanding of Islam far removed ideologically from the sermons and the fatwas issued by SADUM. Indeed, as we sift through unpublished Soviet ethnography (see Chapters Three and Four), which illuminates aspects of communal life mostly in rural areas of Uzbekistan, we can observe manifestations of a distinct kind of religiosity, closer to the sensibilities of demographics with vested interests in the preservation of certain Islamically-informed traditions than to those articulated by board members. Embodiments of this type of Muslim religiosity could be found across the entire social and institutional gamut of rural Central Asia. Alternative

---

<sup>37</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

figures could be individuals such as shrine-keepers, i.e., people who were registered as employees of SADUM and thus operated legally.<sup>38</sup> But there were also individuals whose religious services were not sanctioned by SADUM and thus operated illegally, yet nevertheless enjoyed authority within local constituencies.<sup>39</sup>

This group of unregistered religious authorities expanded far and wide. It included, for example, mullahs whose mosques had been taken over by SADUM, which then appointed members of its own network to the post of imam in those mosques.<sup>40</sup> But the group also included scholars who never sought the sanction of the state, ‘fell silent,’ and found a job in or moved across collective farms,<sup>41</sup> for example – something that did not prevent them from offering religious services and, at times, articulating their own critiques against SADUM. To have a better sense of the scope and pervasiveness of this phenomenon, let us consider that in 1956 a classified memo of CARC informed the Party leadership that, together with 90 registered mosques, there existed in Uzbekistan more than 200 unregistered Muslim parishes.<sup>42</sup> These figures of course did not include those mosque communities which operated under CARC’s radar or which CARC was unwilling to report. In fact, in the same year, Poliakov, the head of CARC in Moscow, complained that Uzbek

---

<sup>38</sup> The growing gap between SADUM, which developed a vision of religiosity premised on scripturalism and puritanism (as reflected by fatwas and imams’ sermons), and the system of religious meaning steeped in Sufi practices and hagiographic traditions (which we find alive and well mostly, though not exclusively, in rural areas) is discussed in Dudoignon, “Holy Virgin Lands? Demographic Engineering, Heritage Management and the Sanctification of Territories in ex-Soviet Central Asia, since WWII.”

<sup>39</sup> For Kazakhstan, see Ghylmani, *Zamanymyzda bolghan ghulamalaryng ghuyr tarikhtary*.

<sup>40</sup> This point has been articulated forcefully in Tasar, “Sufism on the Soviet Stage: Holy People and Places in Central Asia’s Socio-Political Landscape After World War II,” pp. 267-270.

<sup>41</sup> Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to Independence (1955–91),” *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 30 (2011), pp. 53-80.

<sup>42</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 190, ll. 15-18.

commissioners were unable to offer an overview of the situation with unregistered mosques in Khorezm.<sup>43</sup> In the same vein, he complained directly to CARC Commissioner Tashkenbaev in Samarqand that the information he had supplied ‘does not reflect the reality on the ground. One finds it difficult to believe that, over five districts each including more than ten rural communities, there are only five unregistered Muslim parishes.’<sup>44</sup> The situation did not improve much under Khrushchev: in 1963 across Uzbekistan alone CARC reported the presence of 1056 unregistered mullahs who were offering religious services of various nature ranging from circumcision to leading the Friday congregational prayers in collective farms.<sup>45</sup> In fact, as we shall see in greater detail in Chapter Five, kolkhozes functioned as protective spaces for unregistered mullahs who were frequently hidden in plain sight, for directors of collective farms usually assigned them hectares of state land in exchange for their services.<sup>46</sup> When I speak of imams hidden in plain sight, I actually mean this quite literally: in 1982, for example, the CARC Commissioner from Samarqand reported the presence of one Dilmuradov serving as imam in the ‘Pravda’ collective farm in the district of Urgut. Father of a member of the Communist Party who served as secretary of the local village council, the mullah had been known to local authorities for years, for he had been paying taxes on the income he had made illegally as imam.

As Eren Tasar adroitly observes, SADUM repeatedly went through ‘a crisis of legitimacy with respect to unregistered ulama [...] identified as unwelcome competition’,<sup>47</sup> and certain fatwas issued by the SADUM reflect an aggressive attempt to drive ordinary Muslims away from illegal mullahs. One would find it difficult

---

<sup>43</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 191, l. 81.

<sup>44</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 191, l. 40.

<sup>45</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 92, l. 14.

<sup>46</sup> O’MA, f. 2456, op. 1, d. 40, l. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, p. 150.

otherwise to explain why in 1970s Ziyouddin Bobokhonov distributed a circular among the official mosques of Central Asia asserting that

to perform congregational prayers on Fridays and during religious festivals without the preliminary sanction of the authorities is forbidden both by sharia and by the Soviet legislation. Despite this, there are cases when some unofficial clergy at individual mahallas decline to use official mosques but appropriate the income from the performance of Friday and holiday prayers and other rituals. There are complaints from believers about the illegal collection of donations of *fitr-sadaqa* by such unofficial clerics, who by their unacceptable actions damage the prestige of the religion of Islam, especially when they do it on behalf of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. During the era of the Prophet Muhammad, such illegal acts of appropriation by individuals were severely condemned by the Prophet himself. A tradition says that the Prophet Muhammad repeatedly confiscated such funds embezzled by some to the benefit of the state treasury. In the interests of sharia and the religion of Islam, the administration of official mosques is expected to monitor constantly the illegal actions of self-appointed clerics and to report periodically about them to the Spiritual Board.<sup>48</sup>

As the situation clearly was out of control in the 1970s, Soviet authorities found no other viable alternative than to attempt a full-scale co-optation of unregistered clergy. We find frequent reports of both SADUM and CARC representatives visiting rural communities and inviting the local unregistered mullahs to executive meetings to explain what the perks of registration were.

Among the figures of religious authority representing a particular challenge in the eyes of the SADUM, we find 'female mullahs'

---

<sup>48</sup> O'MA, f. 2456, op. 1, d. 540, ll. 71-72.



(*otin-oy / otincha*), and exorcists (*parikhon / porkhon*),<sup>49</sup> as well as other individuals who supplied religious services to communities of believers in specific circumstances. Literate in the scriptures and the many textual traditions of Islamic Central Asia, they often led collective prayers (especially for female congregations). In addition, they played a prominent role in the performance of funerary rituals called *sadr*, prayers for rain, and oversee the practice of *fidya*, i.e., donations to people in need to compensate for one's own inability to fast during the month of Ramadan.

SADUM lumped female mullahs into the loose category of itinerant mullahs and sheikhs. In this section, we shall hear the voices of the *otin-oyi* who vehemently protested against this policy together with those believers who spoke out in the attempt to defend them. I would like to start by reproducing here in full a letter which one *otin-oyi* addressed to mufti Ziyouddin Bobokhonov during the anti-religious campaign launched by Nikita Khrushchev in 1958. The letter was written in 1962:

I am Madinabonu, the daughter of Tursun Kho'ja, and I have reached the age of 72. I know the Qur'an by heart. I received my religious education (*diniy saboq*) from my father Tursun Kho'ja, may Allah have mercy upon him, who was a Qur'an reciter. I have four children, twelve grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Our family has never acted against the state (*davlatga qarshi*). My husband [served in the Red Army] on the frontline. My late father encouraged people [to live] peacefully. Since the [Soviet government in 1943] allowed for [the practice of] religion (*dinga rukhsat chiqgach*), I have been cautiously offering my services as a female mullah (*otinlik*) because I am literate. I teach how to read [religious texts] and ethics (*ilm-u-odob*) to those who wish to learn and to perform rituals in accordance with sharia. I have dissuaded many families from divorcing. If you want to test my moral

---

<sup>49</sup> I discuss these figures more in detail in Chapter Four.

standing and my knowledge, I am ready. However, now, in spite of my old age, the district police have summoned me, scolded and threatened me; even though I have reached such a [venerable] age, they have trampled on my status and my failing health. What have I done wrong to them? I was surprised to hear from them that you issued a fatwa stating that to serve as a female mullah is not in accordance with sharia (*otinoylik shariatda ham ko'rsatilmagan*). 'Which of you is knowledgeable in [the business of] sharia? And who gave you such a fatwa?', I have asked.<sup>50</sup> They said: 'It was His Excellency the Mufti.' Really? (*shu gap rostmi?*) If the wives and daughters of our Prophet too taught other girls, [how can you claim that] to obey their example and follow these pure ancestors is against sharia? Or do you have a madrasa only for girls now? Why do you keep women away from the light of knowledge? After all, the state introduced a holiday [called the international women's day] on the 8th of March, [and this is intended to be for the benefit of] girls and women. To hold women in respect is laudable, to be sure, but it is not good to exclude them from knowledge. This is my opinion. Peace be upon you and God's mercy and blessings.<sup>51</sup>

Madinabonu was a Soviet Muslim like many other citizens of Uzbekistan in the early 1960s; but she also represented a particular type of Soviet Muslim. From the very outset of her letter, she explained that her family could pride itself on an immaculate record of Soviet patriotism. At the same time, she did not shy away from stating her religious identity: she made quite clear that she was an *otin-oyi*. For Madinabonu this meant embracing a mission to teach things Islamic to other women, who could not afford enrollment in one of the two madrasas operating in the region. Madinabonu was also profoundly aware of her own moral standing: she was an aged

---

<sup>50</sup> *Qaysi biring shariatdan xabarlarining bor? Kim bu fatvolaringni chiqarib berdi?*

<sup>51</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

lady who commanded authority among fellow believers on account of her specific knowledge of the Qur'an, Islamic dogmatics, and sharia. Her Soviet Muslimness, however, manifested itself most eloquently in the final section of the letter in which she disputed, and openly so, the authority of the mufti. Her critique was abrasive. While *otin-oyis* had been in bad odour with Soviet authorities and the Muslim official elite since the heyday of SADUM, falling as they did into the category of unregistered mullahs, Madinabonu was particularly livid at the mufti for his dubbing her activities as contrary to Islamic law. She objected to this opinion by invoking the Prophetic example. At the same time, she addressed issues of gender equality and reminded the mufti that under Soviet rule women were free to express their views. The penultimate sentence in her letter - 'This is my opinion' (*fikrimiz shu*) – sounds almost like a direct challenge to the mufti, a challenge coming from a Soviet woman and a Muslim scholar. What is indeed striking is how deftly, and quickly, Madinabonu moves between arguments that are Muslim and those that are Soviet; one can imagine her following the comment about excluding women from the light of knowledge with a Hadith citation, but instead she cites not merely International Women's Day, but the Soviet government's endorsement of it. This sort of easy move from one episteme to the other is where one realizes that Soviet Muslimness was really just one world.

Just a few years later, in 1969, another woman decided that she had had enough of SADUM's fundamentalism. Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi, the woman in question, was based in Zangi Ata, a village southwest of Tashkent, which was very well known among Muslims in Central Asia for its association with the shrine of the homonymous saint, Zangi Ata, which hagiographical traditions present as connected with the Sufi master Ahmad Yasavi. It was outrage at SADUM's fatwas against shrine visitation that pushed Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi to write to the mufti in Tashkent. This is her letter:

Every year during the celebration of Nowruz the women of our neighbourhood community perform shrine visitations

(*ziyorat*). We begin by visiting [the shrine of] Zangi Bobo,<sup>52</sup> then we make pilgrimage [to the shrine of] Sulton Bobo<sup>53</sup> and the saints of Turkestan,<sup>54</sup> and then we come back. We make donations (*nazr*) [to the shrines] from what we [have been able to] put aside. We perform a small *zikh*, and [sometimes] we perform *sadr*. These are customary ritual practices that came down to us from our grandmothers (*ènarimizdan qolgan odatlarimiz*).<sup>55</sup> Now we have heard that according to the imams, such shrine visitations and our donations, which come from our pure heart, are useless, and that they are not written in the [books of] sharia. Are these words true? And what is the harm of all this? My older sister was an *otin-oyi* and she knew sharia, but she never said anything to this effect. Now I hope to receive an answer from You. This [*patta*] was written by my granddaughter and I signed it.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> On this shrine and the Sufi narrative connected to the holy persona of Zangi Ata, see Sergei Abashin, "Zangi-ata," in *Islam v territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi imperii: èntsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, ed. S. M. Prozorov, vol. 3 (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura RAN, 2006), pp. 40-41.

<sup>53</sup> In common parlance Sulton Bobo is the way in which Uzbeks referred to the shrine of Uvays al-Qaranī in Qaraqalpaqstan. For more information on this shrine see Chapter Three.

<sup>54</sup> The author here refers to the shrine complex of Ahmad Yasavi in the city of Turkestan, southern Kazakhstan. The shrine complex in question has been the subject of veneration since at least the Timurid period. Communities claiming genealogical and initiatic connections to Ahmad Yasavi enjoyed recognized spiritual authority, administered the shrine complex in various capacities, and thus enjoyed fiscal privileges until Sovietization. For more on this, see Devin DeWeese, "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia: Descent Groups Linked to Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi in Shrine Documents and Genealogical Charters," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 31 (1999), pp. 507-530.

<sup>55</sup> The usual formula is *èna-bobolarimizdan* ("From our forefathers"; see below). The author of the letter emphasizes (perhaps inadvertently) that she perceived this ritual as typical of a female religious milieu.

<sup>56</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried. When writing to the mufti, Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi presumably had in mind fatwas issued by Ziyuddin Bobokhonov, in office at the head of SADUM from 1957 to 1983. From the context it is not quite clear which fatwas are meant, though the author

Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi's letter is interesting in at least two respects. First, it sheds light on the fact that, as we shall see more in detail in Chapter Three, what we call 'shrine visitation' was not just the business of individuals in Soviet Uzbekistan. In fact, the term referred to a broader set of communal rituals, which could involve either a shrine community or a neighbourhood. It furthermore went hand in hand with other rituals of Sufi origin such as *zikr* and *sadr*. In addition, the letter explains that shrine visitation expanded considerably beyond short-range tours to local holy places and, at least once a year, it involved long-range pilgrimages to sites which were far removed from each other. Needless to say, the performance of such pilgrimages required not only financial investments, but also substantial logistical preparation: a bus with pilgrims such as Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi had to cross the republican boundaries with the Kazakh SSR and the Qaraqalpaq ASSR, for example. The second reason why this letter is significant is because it challenged, once again, the moral authority of SADUM's leadership. It questioned whether the message of SADUM's fatwas had been properly conveyed by imams at the mosques. Furthermore, even if imams had operated correctly, Qumrokhon Otakhon qizi was unclear exactly what was wrong with the ritual complex of shrine visitation. We see in her letter that a seed of doubt had been planted by a source of Islamic authority which was *alternative* to the mufti, namely her older sister who was an unregistered female mullah.

The internal response that was prompted by her inquiry, however, simply reiterated the formulaic expressions typical of Soviet bureaucracy: 'Let the qadi of Tashkent and the imam of the Zangi-Ata mosque contact [the representatives of] the *mahalla* and clarify [the issues to the people]. Let them take copies of the fatwas issued by His Excellency the Mufti and distribute them to the aforementioned people. Let them clarify [the issues] at the level of the *mahalla* both

---

most probably referred to the legal opinions that condemned the practices of shrine visitation and making donations to the benefit of the shrines, their keepers, and the shrine communities. Two such fatwas were issued between 1958 and 1959 and were signed by Ziyouddin (see Chapter One).

with reference to [Soviet] legislation (*qonun*) and in accordance with sharia.<sup>57</sup> One wonders at this point whether resorting to common propaganda practices was simply an expedient enabling SADUM to avoid engaging with people's critique. If so, they must have known that such a strategy was doomed to failure. Contiguous as they were to CARC, SADUM's representatives had ample opportunity to observe the limitations of propaganda.

With the following two letters we come to the 1970s. Written by a grieving mother who had just lost her daughter, the first letter conveys a complaint against a representative of SADUM, namely an imam who reproached the mother for performing funerary rituals which, as we have seen, were common among local believers. In presenting this complaint, the letter brings into clear relief the fact that SADUM had failed to understand that rituals are entangled with the believer's individuality and her emotional sphere: if a mother is adamant about the fact that performing a specific ritual brings a reward in the afterlife of the child she has just lost, why should the state attempt to convince her to the contrary? And on what basis should it do so? Interestingly, in this case again, the authority of SADUM and its emissaries (i.e., the imams) is questioned by means of reference to the opinion of a female mullah, which is brandished as a weapon against the intrusion of SADUM into the private sphere of the grieving mother.

Zafar, District of Bekabad, Province of Tashkent, 1971

To the attention of the qadi and the leadership of Imams

I, Bunisa, daughter of Majid, retired three years ago. Recently my eldest daughter died. With whom should I share my grief? On whose shoulder should I cry? Now, for the sake of my daughter's memory, and to secure a reward in the afterlife (*savob*), we began to perform rituals (*marosimlar*) that came down to us from our ancestors (*èna-bobolarimizdan*). We [organized commemorations] on the third and seventh day

---

<sup>57</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

[after her death]. When [we held a commemoration] after forty days, the imam came to our house and said: ‘All that you’re doing, you do in vain (*bekor*). All your rituals will not count as *savob* for your daughter.’ Our *otin-oyi*, by contrast, claims that they will do so, because the Qur’an is read during such commemorations. All this will secure *savob*. What shall we do? If the practices of our ancestors disappear in an instant, and if they [=imams] say that the rituals we performed [for the benefit of] our departed do not count as *savob*, all of this adds more sorrow to our grief. Whom shall we listen to, if one person says this, and the other says that? I felt profoundly distressed at the words of our imam. Give me an answer to all this! I beg you: do not disregard my request. Bunisa Majid qizi.<sup>58</sup>

The next letter comes from Tashkent. Written at the end of the 1970s, it tells the story of one Robiya, a lady who had applied several times to the Spiritual Board in order to be allowed to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. SADUM, however, denied her approval by holding the condescending view that women had never been allowed to visit the holy shrines in the Hijaz. Needless to say, such a view is historically untenable and therefore rather absurd. At any rate, to win the support of her addressee, Robiya followed various tacks. On the one hand, she referred to the authoritative voice of a female mullah who argued that, on the contrary, in the past women too used to perform the hajj; interestingly, she did so by relying on textual traditions and, especially, by alluding to the examples of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and the wives of the companions of the Prophet. Most probably in an attempt to add further rhetorical weight to her missive, she explained that she had seen a saint in a dream reminding her that the hajj is a pillar of Islam, and therefore represents a religious obligation. On the other hand, she tried to avoid being too critical of SADUM and attempted therefore to

---

<sup>58</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur’s Private Collection, not inventoried.

show compliance with the latter's new regulations, including even the most unpopular ones such as the prohibition against shrine visitation, which had brought about a barrage of criticism.

Tashkent, *mahalla* 'Samarqand Darvoz,' 1978

Robiya Rafiq Kho'ja qizi

To the Spiritual Board

My name is Robiya, daughter of Rafiq Kho'ja, and I have come several times to the [Spiritual] Board, requesting it to consider the issue of my pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). For years have I suffered because of this. I even dared to submit applications, but the answer I received was that women are not allowed there. But our *otin-oyi* said that this is not true and that women too [in fact] go on *hajj*. She even cited several examples from the world of Islam. She also read [examples] from old books about how our mother Aisha performed the *hajj*, about how the wives of the companions (*sahobalar*) also fulfilled this obligation (*farz*). Please consider my request again, I beg you. I dream about the saint Khizr Bobo<sup>59</sup> who tells me to fulfill this duty. I have never missed a single prayer, I pay the ritual tax (*zakot*) even with my little pension, and I have never broken the fast. According to the order (*buyruq*) of the Spiritual Board, I have also stopped performing shrine visitations. And I have never uttered a single word against the state. My children are ready to pay whatever sum is needed [for the

---

<sup>59</sup> The author here refers to Khizr, a saintly figure widely venerated in Central Asia and varyingly identified as a saint among the friends of God, a prophet, or an angel. 'Regarded as a source of esoteric wisdom and supernatural abilities, Khizr is often depicted in Sufi lore as an old man who offers guidance in times of crisis. Khizr is believed by most Sufis to be the unnamed figure in the Qur'ān who guides Moses (Q 18:65–82),' Jeff Eden, *Warrior Saints of the Silk Road: Legends of the Qarakhanids* [Leiden: Brill, 2018], p. 91; see also Jo-Ann Gross, "The Biographical Tradition of Muḥammad Bashārā: Sanctification and Legitimation in Tajikistan," in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*, pp. 310-314.



hajj]. At this point I feel reassured that my children will bear the costs. Please solve my question positively. Robiya Rafiq Kho'ja qizi, from Samarqand Darvoz. I beg you! Peace be upon you, the mercy and blessings of Allah!<sup>60</sup>

I did not find any specific comments appended to these two letters and my impression is that SADUM left them unaddressed. It is tempting, of course, to think that with this cavalier conduct, SADUM must have found it increasingly difficult to win the hearts of those who felt that their sensibilities *qua* believers had been hurt or more simply ignored. This view must be tempered by acknowledging a simple fact: not everyone was happy at the increasingly widespread authority which *otin-oyis* commanded among the local population, especially women. In 1974, for example, in a fit of anger, one Tolibjon Abdulkholiqov wrote to the SADUM a letter to complain about a female mullah operating in his *mahalla* who was meddling in his domestic affairs: 'This *otin-oyi* is like a king in my household and is fooling everyone in my family: my mother, my wife, my nephews who claim that she knows everything about Islam. I tried to file a complaint with the local policeman (Uzb. *uchastkavoi menisa* < Rus. *uchastkovyi militsioner*) who replied that he does not want to intrude in this affair. He advised me to deal with my family myself. I talked to the imam, who did not agree with this old *otin-oyi*.'<sup>61</sup> At this point, most probably advised by the local imam, Tolibjon posed a number of questions that clearly struck a chord with the head of SADUM. In an artful rhetorical twist, he asked whether all the money and food given to the *otin-oyi* as a reward for the performance of various rituals represented an unnecessary, indeed excessive set of expenses (*isrof*). If so, he continued, how could such behaviour be in accordance with sharia? SADUM's response was vitriolic: not only did it mobilise the imam and the administration of the mahalla to call a public meeting to explain the damage caused by figures

---

<sup>60</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

<sup>61</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.



Figure 2.2 Mullah Sadullah Rahmatullaev at the holy site of Sultan Hubbi, Khanqa, 1968. Collection Gleb Shesarev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

such as *otin-oyis*, but it also asked that a special committee look into the matter with the family. The resulting outcome was characteristic of the epistemic ambiguity which was ubiquitous in Socialist Uzbekistan whereby representatives of the atheist state were requested to enforce sharia.

## **Wahhabism**

Starting from the second half of the 1970s members of a younger generation of Muslim scholars began to challenge specific doctrinal positions as well as the political quietism represented typically by older scholars (including members of SADUM). They applied various instruments to distinguish themselves, to gain the attention of local Muslim constituencies, and thus to lay claim to spiritual authority. ‘Young mullahs’ disputed the Islamic licitness of ritual practices such as the visitation of shrines, which they depicted as a manifestation of ‘polytheism’ (*shirk*), and they did so by claiming that such practices represented an ‘unlawful innovation’. Their reasoning is thus reminiscent of those arguments deployed in 1958 by mufti Ziyuddin Bobokhonov when he issued a fatwa against shrine visitation. At the same time, their critique was predicated upon the assumption that Hanafism, the school of law which for centuries had been dominant in Central Asia, was a superfluous accessory to the Qur’an and the Sunnah and that, as a consequence, the ideological edifice of Hanafism needed to be dismantled. They therefore concentrated their efforts on eroding the notion of ‘customs’ (*urf-odat*), which was central to the mainstream Uzbek discourse on Hanafi identity. In addition, they became vocal opponents of political disengagement, openly criticizing Muslim scholars who, willingly or not, cooperated with the state, and going so far as to theorize the need to wage a holy war (*jihad / ghazavot*) against the USSR. In addition, they embodied a new ritual conduct at the mosque, and did so ostentatiously, especially during the Friday prayer. For example, they urged mosque-goers to keep their arms in front of the

chest when standing during the prayer rather than letting them fall by their sides, or to answer the imam's prayer with a loud 'amen' (*omin*) rather than with a whisper. Their behaviour gained them the label of 'Wahhabis' (*vahhobiylar*), a term which in local parlance in fact meant a variety of different things, ranging from 'ignorant innovators' to 'fundamentalist' and 'anti-mazhab.'<sup>62</sup>

The next letter that we will consider, which was addressed to SADUM in 1983, encapsulates the voice of one Abdulhokim Qori who for several years had served as imam of the Friday Mosque in Asaka, a major city of the Osh region in the south-east of the Ferghana Valley, located in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. Born in Khoqand, Abdulhokim Qori was 67 years old when he wrote to the mufti. Though retired from his official post of imam, he claimed to be participating actively in the life of the local community of believers (*mo'min musulmonlar*). His letter was a cry for help and a request to SADUM to deal directly with the fundamentalists in the Ferghana Valley. This is what he writes to the mufti Shamsuddin Bobokhonov:

The unpleasant events and disputes that have occurred [recently] have thrown the Muslims of Khoqand and the [community of believers] of the [Ferghana] Valley as a whole into a state of anxiety and fear; and they have led our faithful brothers astray from the true path of Islam. This is the reason why I resolved to write this letter. You are well aware that these discords (*fitnalar*) were initiated by young mullahs (*mullavachchalar*), who have fashioned themselves with the attire of Wahhabis. We, the elders (*qariyalar*), believe that to prevent this [state of anarchy from coming into being] is the duty of the [Spiritual] Board. The elders of other areas share

---

<sup>62</sup> Babadjanov, "Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan: A View from Within;" Dudoignon and Qalandar, "They Were All from the Country: The Revival and Politicisation of Islam in the Lower Wakhsh River Valley of the Tajik SSR (1947–1997)," especially pp. 52–53.

the same opinion: I travel a lot and therefore I know [the situation quite] well.<sup>63</sup>

Abdulkhokim Qori's main concern was the *fitna*, that is, a broad state of tension among Muslim communities, which could potentially lead to public disorder. He wanted SADUM to solve such tension in an official manner, by convening a plenary meeting of the representatives of the various mosque communities which had manifested disagreement on matters of acts of worship (*ibodat*). To clarify what he meant, he offered the following example:

[Let me start from] the ablutions. Discord has presented itself as to how one should wash one's legs. Young mullahs enter the mosques without having completed their ablutions, that is only by sprinkling water on their boots.

This passage refers to the ritual of washing the feet during the ablutions (*tahorat*). More specifically, here the author is referring to the habit of performing only incomplete ablutions, which caused major conflicts within various mosque communities in Namangan in the 1980s. In winter, mosque-goers often wore leather boots (Uzb. *patinki* < Rus. *batinki*), and also put galoshes (*kafsh / kovush*) upon them. In such cases, Muslims who went to the mosque performed their ablutions by sprinkling water on their boots, thereby avoiding having to laboriously take off their shoes. In this respect, Abdulkhokim Qori added:

But how can they [=the young mullahs] proceed by analogy with the practice of sprinkling water on their boots, when they should not be wearing either boots or galoshes!

Here Abdulkhokim Qori means that the so-called Wahhabis considered it licit from a normative point of view to sprinkle water on their shoes, because they saw an analogy between such an action and

---

<sup>63</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

the established ritual practice of wiping their legs with a wet hand (*makhs tortish*). The author suggests that many in Khoqand frowned upon such a new habit. However, in drawing the mufti's attention to this practice, Abdulhokim Qori clearly was unaware of the fact that years earlier, during the tenure of Ziyouddin Bobokhonov, SADUM had issued a fatwa that opined in favour of said ritual practice. After several letters addressing this subject in the 1980s, SADUM repeatedly explained that wiping one's legs with a wet hand should be regarded as a full ablution.<sup>64</sup>

Our author proceeds to review other cases of *fitna*, which originated from the specific policies of SADUM, not from the young mullahs:

Let me draw your esteemed attention to other questions that are well known to you. [There are] female-mullahs, street prayer-reciters, beggars, who ask for alms by claiming [that they operate] 'on the way of Allah', and [for such purposes] visit [private] homes, bazaars and especially the holy shrines. Their number is increasing day by day in ways unseen [so far]. How can we stop this? [I ask] because our women, out of ignorance, run after female mullahs and leave a lot of money at the shrines, while their children and grandchildren go around in rags. And all [this occurs when] the activists of the neighbourhood and the imams of the [local] mosques get together, visit the *mahallas* and tell [people] to stop visiting shrines, thereby leading them astray from the true path; [thus] they have renewed the discord that already existed.<sup>65</sup>

In this section of his letter to the mufti, Abdulhokim Qori criticises the fatwas issued by SADUM against shrine visitation for creating confusion among a population of believers who were deeply committed to the cult of the saints and thus tended to confer moral

---

<sup>64</sup> *Fetva: smachivanie (maskh) obuvi pri omoventii*, Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, not inventoried.

<sup>65</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

authority on female mullahs and other religious figures operating at shrines. We find in the following passage a forceful critique against SADUM, which Abdulhokim Qori blamed for creating a situation in which

the poor believers have fallen between the hammer and the anvil: On the one hand, [we have] the Wahhabis, who, narrow-minded as they are and lacking deep knowledge of our sharia and customs, taint the good name of Islam, deceive the people who have taken their bait, and intensify their actions. On the other hand, [we have the] representatives of [the Spiritual] Board and the imams, who [go around] and yell [at everyone] to stop visiting shrines, as if the performance of the latter was contrary to sharia. But we know well that long ago, this thinking used to belong to people who caused a terrible [state of] anarchy [among Muslims]. Yes, if you say that people have been indulging in this custom, this is true. But if we do away completely with shrine visitations, will this not be contrary to sharia [in itself]?<sup>66</sup>

At this point, Abdulhokim Qori attempts to mount a defence of shrine visitation to safeguard the integrity of the community of believers and offer the mufti a way of avoiding a situation of anarchy within the ecumene:

Shrine visitation falls within the rubric of acts of worship (*ziyarat ibodat masalalari qatorida*), as you well know; and today for many of our Muslims, especially women, shrine visitation is an act of worship (*ibodat amali*). [We know that] many people perform acts of worship only in an incomplete fashion, and [what do we do about this?] Instead of bringing order to shrine visitation, we abandon it completely! Then what will come out of this? That is, if we do away even with such practices, then what will be of Islam? Won't this damage

---

<sup>66</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.



the faith of people who practise even less? Can't you just show them the true rules of conduct so that they [= the people] do not fall into [the trap of] polytheism (*shirk*)?<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, Abdulhokim Qori was concerned about the possibility that in the long run SADUM's frontal attack against shrine visitation would have dissuaded many Muslims from worship altogether, for the cult of saints was in fact part and parcel of believers' devotional repertoire. Abdulhokim Qori was therefore suggesting that it would have been enough for SADUM to introduce *restrictions* to the ritual complex identified with shrine visitation, by prohibiting certain practices such as pilgrims' rubbing the 'holy dust' on their face, lighting candles, crying out loud, and giving alms to the sheikhs. Abdulhokim Qori's critique against specific fundamentalist tendencies embodied by SADUM becomes more intense in the following passage:

I used to spend time with your grandfather Eshon Bobokhon. How many times did I receive his blessings! This man did a lot to regulate shrine visitation, but he knew the Hadith well<sup>68</sup> and did not reject it altogether! After him, for some reason, [SADUM's] initiatives have evolved in such a way that they completely contradicted the Hadith. All because of the intrigues of those seditious [members] of the [Spiritual] Board (*idoradagi fitnachi*). They issue fatwas, in which they say that this act is in breach of norm, this one is contrary to sharia, and that one is another disgrace. Whatever they ask, they talk about the deeds of the ancients, and they even incite believers to fanaticism (*mutaasibchilik*). But the majority does not pay attention to such things. That is, [the majority] proceeds

---

<sup>67</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

<sup>68</sup> Here Abdulhokim Qori most probably refers to the Prophetic tradition 'I had prohibited you from visiting graves, but you may visit them now. Verily, they will weaken your attachment to the world and remind you of the Hereafter,' discussed in Chapter One.



along its own path, while the [Spiritual] Board and the Wahhabis are pulling [people] each in their own direction. [...] Is this not the beginning of anarchy? And other troublemakers further muddle the waters by claiming that the [Spiritual] Board [in fact] became a nest of Wahhabis (*idora vohhobiyashti*). For this reason, if in the near future you don't follow the tradition of your eminent grandfather, and don't convene a big conference [of the ulama], disagreement, anarchy, and disregard for the authorities will increase among the believers. [We shall encounter] a situation like on Judgment Day. We, the elders, have high hopes in you, we hope that you feel you are aware of your duties. I shall stop my statement here, and I will write again if need be. Peace be upon you!

Many of the voices I have collected in this chapter reflect a certain degree of absorption of specific messages conveyed by both SADUM and the government. Indeed, some Uzbeks showed deference and compliance with the regulations coming from SADUM, for they regarded the mufti as an undisputed source of authority. At the same time, however, there was much that did *not* percolate through the meanders of Soviet institutions, and hence failed to shape Central Asians' Muslimness. In fact, many openly criticized SADUM's attacks against devotional practices associated with shrine visitation as disrespectful of established religious traditions and harmful to the integrity of Muslims' identity. It is therefore unsurprising to find one Abdulkhokim Qori, clearly an experienced observer of things Muslim in Uzbekistan, warning the mufti Shamsuddin Bobokhonov of the dangers coming with the attacks against shrine visitations. In so doing, Abdulkhokim qori argued, SADUM had brought anarchy into the community of believers and pushed Muslims to view its representatives as being as divisive as the 'Wahhabis.'

Abdulkhokim Qori represented no doubt a critical point of view. However, he still regarded Shamsuddin Bobokhonov a source of *moral* authority. This transpires from the fact that Abdulkhokim qori attributed authorship of the fatwas against shrine visitation not to

the mufti himself, but rather to other members of SADUM whom he blamed for being seditious (*fitnachi*). This was a sleight of hand, of course; in fact, moral status mattered in the eyes of the community of believers. And, being a member of the Bobokhonov family, Shamsuddin enjoyed a certain degree of moral standing. It is for this reason that Abdulhokim qori urged Shamsuddin to follow the example of his grandfather, Eshon Bobokhonov, who had championed a conciliatory approach towards the cult of the saints in the 1940s and the 1950s, and had tempered the radical views of his most puritanical acolytes.<sup>69</sup>

The next and final letter that we shall consider clarifies the extent to which Wahhabism was a pervasive social phenomenon in the religious landscape of the Ferghana Valley. Crafted by a council of elders representing a *mahalla* in Namangan, this appeal to the Spiritual Board gives a sense of the various conflicts occurring among mosque communities in a particularly densely populated region of Uzbekistan in the second half of the 1980s after the so-called Wahhabis rose to prominence. By the period in which this letter was written, the label *vahhobiy* had already morphed into an umbrella term, which encompassed ulama with puritanical credentials and a cast of religiously enthused, though often aggressive characters. In fact, this letter illuminates precisely the assertive and uncompromisingly energetic behaviour of a group of young believers who, taking advantage of the softening in state-Islam relations in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,<sup>70</sup> attempted to take over mosques in the hope of achieving political authority. The rivalry between Wahhabis and Hanafi conservatives had a distinct generational character. Representing the latter group, the signatories of this letter defaulted to the usual accusations against the Wahhabis, highlighting their cavalier approach towards established ritual practices and their disrespectful behaviour vis-à-vis the elders.

---

<sup>69</sup> Tasar, "Sufism on the Soviet Stage," pp. 275-280.

<sup>70</sup> On the softening of anti-religious policies in Socialist Uzbekistan after 1980, see Chapter Five.

The letter is particularly interesting for its tonality of crisis reflecting a situation of emergency. Indeed, the council of elders who penned this appeal was under the impression that SADUM had abandoned them. They were right in many respects, for the highest local representative of the Muslim Spiritual Board was Umarkhon Qori (b. 1950), a highly controversial figure in Uzbekistan in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>71</sup> Trained in unofficial Islamic study-groups in the Ferghana Valley, he commanded authority over various constituencies in Namangan. It was most probably in recognition of such an exceptional authoritative status that in the spring of 1989, the newly appointed mufti of SADUM, Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, selected Umarkhon Qori for the post of qadi in Namangan. While he openly disputed the authority of the so-called Wahhabis, Umarkhon Qori simultaneously gathered mullahs of radical inclinations around himself, a behaviour which earned him the ire of many Hanafi conservatives who, as this letter shows, were ready to take to the streets in public demonstrations.

Seen from this point of view, this letter reads as a loud cry for help coming from people witnessing the crisis of established forms of Muslim authority in Soviet Uzbekistan during the final years of perestroika. However, this appeal to the head of SADUM was premised less upon the recognition of the mufti's influence as a Muslim scholar than upon recognition of his power as a Soviet Muslim statesman. We should bear in mind that by the time this letter was crafted, mufti Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf had been elected as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. While many in Namangan had already openly attacked him for his conciliatory approach towards Party leaders both in Tashkent and Moscow, others (including the signers of the letter) saw in him an influential political figure who could still bring order to a religious environment divided along the deep fractures caused by factionalism.

Namangan, Kosonsoy district, December 1989

---

<sup>71</sup> For more on this figure, see Martha Brill Olcott, "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia," *Carnegie Papers*, 77 (2007), pp. 20-22.

Elders of the *Tutzor* mahalla (22 people)

To the Mufti and the officials of the Spiritual Board

We support the policy of freedom in religious affairs, which followed the announcement of perestroika in our country.<sup>72</sup> After the opening of mosques in some *mahallas*, a lot of funds were collected for their upkeep, people came out together, gathered in groups and carried out a number of voluntary works (*hasharlar*). We repaired our mosques, and brought their courtyards back to life; we laid inside walkways and carpets, which we brought there from home. When everything was made ready, along came the young Wahhabis (*vahhobiy bachchalar*) and took our mosque. They do not acknowledge us. [Instead,] they make fun of us when we come [to the mosque] to pray. They climbed into the pulpit [of the mosque], without having participated in its repair, without having spent a penny on it. And they took our mats for prayers. They even ceased to pay respect to their parents. They don't consider the elders, they perform the prayer in a strange way (*namozlarini begonacha o'qib*); even the ablutions they can't do properly. These unfortunate things happened to us; it was a catastrophe (*ballo*). The imam<sup>73</sup> appointed by our leadership took their side. He did not trust our words. We wrote to Umarkhon Qori, qadi of Namangan, but to no avail. The believers are overwhelmed by their own conflicts in Namangan.<sup>74</sup> Now, our request to the Spiritual Board is that it should spare no effort to help us take possession of our own

---

<sup>72</sup> *Biz davlatimizda qayta qurish siyosat è"lon qilgach, diniy masalalarda ham èrkinlik siyosatini qullab quvvatlaymiz.*

<sup>73</sup> In the record the name of the imam in question has been smeared to prevent its deciphering.

<sup>74</sup> For more on this subject, see Babadjanov, "The Economic and Religious History of a Kolkhoz Village: Khojawot from Soviet Modernisation to the Aftermath of the Islamic Revival."

mosques. If needed, we shall organize a demonstration. Peace be upon you! The elders of the Tutzor *mahalla*.<sup>75</sup>

As we can observe in the letters addressed by ordinary Uzbek citizens to the mufti, the notion of ‘Wahhabism’ ranged from an ideology embodied by scholars of fundamentalist leanings to youthful disrespect, i.e., the ethos of a young generation of mullahs posturing an aggressive behaviour and anti-intellectual punkism. Regardless of how it was variously conceived, however, Wahhabism was clearly a pervasive socio-cultural phenomenon and one that cut across all the regions of Uzbekistan – to the extent that in early April 1990, the department for ideology of the Uzbek Communist Party prepared a classified memo on the subject. It explained that the increase of newly registered mosques in the country together with the fact that a growing number of small children were receiving religious instruction had to do with the influence of fundamentalist tendencies which had consolidated in the mid-1970s in the Ferghana Valley. ‘One of the distinctive features of fundamentalism in the republic,’ says the memo, ‘is the hostile attitude towards a part of the registered clergy [i.e., SADUM’s representatives], which are referred to as *ahl-i bid’at* (‘people supporting unlawful innovations’). According to their [supporters,] having ceased to fight for the purity of Islam and deviated from its righteous path, the official clergy has embraced a wrong type of rituality merely for profit and betrayed the basic principles of Islam. On this basis, they request the removal from office of those who either have partaken in this wrong rituality or have ignored it. This was the reason behind the appointment of fundamentalists in the mosques of Namangan, Andijan, Tashkent and Denau. [...] In early 1989, this allowed the activists of this movement to manipulate the consciousness of the believers, to organize various meetings without the sanction of the state, demonstrations, [and finally] to appropriate mosques. They even were able to have the mufti [Shamsuddin Bobokhonov] removed and to have

---

<sup>75</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur’s Private Collection, not inventoried.

a profound influence on the proceedings of the 4th Plenary Meeting of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.<sup>76</sup>

The growth of Uzbek Wahhabism had major consequences not only for the religious life and SADUM, but also more broadly for the political scene in Uzbekistan after the fall of the USSR. National independence opened up unprecedented space for Uzbek Wahhabis to stake their claims to political power from the pulpits of their mosques. However, towards the end of the 1990s there appeared on the political scene a new major Islamist actor: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Its fortune was shortlived: a series of bombings against government buildings in Tashkent on the 16th of February 1999 offered President Islam Karimov the occasion to crack down on thousands of individuals accused of supporting fundamentalism. Ever since, the label of Wahhabi has become a catch-all term to lump anyone who is critical of the Uzbek government and its policies about Islam into the hateful category of state enemy.<sup>77</sup> But this is another story.

## Conclusion

‘The deputy imam of the Friday mosque [in Jizzakh] has explained to us that there are no saints in Islam and that it is prohibited to offer alms to [honor the spirit of our holy] ancestors. As for shrine visitation, he claims that it can be performed only under a fixed set of specific conditions. Our fathers and forefathers made offerings [to the saints because] this world will end; and concerned about the otherworld (*okhirat*), they [behaved in such a way in order] to gain a reward in the afterlife (*savob*). [...] What about *our* reward in the afterlife? To whom shall we offer our alms? Why has visitation to the shrines of the Friends of God (*avliyo*) been stopped? If

---

<sup>76</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 58, d. 276, ll. 3-6.

<sup>77</sup> Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*, pp. 144-153.

you explain, we'll listen!' <sup>78</sup> So read a letter posted from Jizzakh to SADUM in 1968. The signatories were a man and a woman, Anvar Khudoyqul o'ghli and Qumri Ona Sardor qizi. They had attended a Friday sermon where a mullah had explained categorically that to visit the shrine of Shah-i Zinda in Samarqand was pointless, and that to make offerings was a sinful act. For people who believed in the saints and their powers of divine intercession, this must have sounded like something close to blasphemy. Their letter made it to the offices of SADUM, and one naturally wonders what crossed the mind of the Soviet mullah who first read it. In fact, we find a clue to this question if we flip the letter and read the terse words which are annotated on the other side of the document: 'A response has been sent to this address which explains the matter and includes copies of the pertinent fatwas. Also, we have called on the phone the imam of the congegational mosque in Jizzakh.' If the missive was so powerful as to push someone in Tashkent to make that phone call, it means that SADUM and its mufti were deeply concerned by criticism coming from their coreligionists, and they knew that they needed to take such criticism seriously.

In this chapter, I have aggregated voices of Soviet Uzbeks who expressed their own Muslimness in ways which more often than not were critical of SADUM. They did so not only by affirming their own individual understanding of things Muslim, but also by situating themselves in a broader cultural field of communal belonging. Indeed, they often referred to a cultural apparatus consisting of rituals, morals, and convictions which they shared with their ancestors, families and neighbours. Eren Tasar has persuasively termed this cultural field the 'Islamic sphere,' and I would like to adopt such a conceptualization, for it facilitates our imagining Muslimness beyond the constraints placed by the Soviet state through its bureaucratic apparatus, instruments of surveillance, and policing organs. The Islamic sphere was instead shaped by forms of knowledge, notions of moral authority, and models of ethical edification that

---

<sup>78</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur's Private Collection, not inventoried.

defied the measures of containment designed and adopted by the Soviet state. It is of course true that Islamic knowledge, morality, and ethics suffered from a severe process of erosion and underwent major transformations throughout the Soviet period, and indeed the meaning of those transformations remains to be studied properly. At the same time, however, the missives sent to SADUM show clearly that Muslims filtered Soviet reality through an Islamic cosmogony that served as a powerful resource to confer meaning on their lives.

Let us consider the references to sharia that one encounters in the records I have aggregated in this chapter. They clearly suggest that sharia was still regarded, in Central Asia after the Second World War, as an apparatus of knowledge usable to define Muslim orthopraxy and to measure behaviour. One may object that such references are merely aspirational, for the Soviet Union did not recognise sharia as an official source of law. In fact, we learn from the documentation at our disposal as well as from the records produced by SADUM that sharia enjoyed a rather ambiguous status in Socialist Uzbekistan. First, the crafting of fatwas issued by SADUM (including those commissioned directly by CARC), to be read before mosque communities, was clearly premised upon notions of Islamic jurisprudence. In this respect, our source base makes it abundantly clear that Uzbeks accorded such legal opinions a highly prescriptive status; hence their being described as ‘orders’ or ‘resolutions’.<sup>79</sup> Secondly, sharia played a meaningful role in the definition of tasks among SADUM’s employees. Not only was the mufti expected to ‘shed light on the path of the true sharia to protect Islam’, but imams were furthermore required to sign a contract stipulating that their behaviour should follow the precepts of sharia (see Chapter Five). Thirdly, Islamic law, more broadly conceived, continued to influence behaviour among Uzbeks who believed in the importance of Islamic orthopraxy and therefore embraced a type of habitus which they perceived as in accordance with sharia. Examples of

---

<sup>79</sup> See also, Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet and Muslims in the Second World War*, p. 163.



such habitus are several: the preference among Soviet Muslims for religious marriages (*nikoh*) at the expense of civil weddings;<sup>80</sup> the practice of polygamy which ‘was not uncommon in the rural parts of Central Asia,’ indeed openly tolerated, and at times even encouraged;<sup>81</sup> and the payment of Islamically-mandated charity such as *zakot* and *ushr* to finance communal activities and the upkeep of mosques.<sup>82</sup>

While appreciating the degree to which Uzbeks critically reflected on the messages coming from SADUM, it is equally important to note that they could and did turn to other individuals of recognised authority while seeking for spiritual guidance. Repeated references to the recognised authority of female mullahs point to Uzbeks’ resourcefulness in religious matters. But they also refer to the capaciousness of the Islamic sphere in Socialist Uzbekistan, a cultural field inhabited by a multiplicity of religious figures whose social significance we have yet to appreciate in full.

Collecting and reflecting upon documentation such as the records I have presented here becomes essential if one wants to overcome the obtuseness of the dominant frameworks available for analysing manifestations of Muslimness in the USSR. More importantly, sustained attention to ego documents is key to historicising the vitality of the Islamic episteme, i.e., a knowledge field encompassing notions of ethics, morality, and aesthetics, which was constitutive of what Uzbeks perceived as their being Muslim. Such an imperative stems precisely from the neglect of the mundane and quotidian, including the sort of everyday-life accounts that historians of Soviet Central Asia have been so stubbornly avoiding equipped solely with a scepticism that looks almost fideistic.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev*, pp. 83, 346, 363, 531-534.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 538-539, 580.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 141 n. 159, 234.

<sup>83</sup> For a critique of this approach, see my “‘On the Importance of Having a Method,’” and “‘Why Soviet Islam Matters,’” *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 5-24.

When we begin to hypothesize that such a thing as Soviet Islam existed and represented a distinctive lived reality emerging from a unique convergence of circumstances, then our next task must be to fill in the vast gaps in our knowledge with all the texture, details, and nuance of lived life. The petitions which ordinary Uzbeks submitted to SADUM after the Second World War point to the existence of a vibrant world of religiosity where many cultivated their Muslimness in ways that were at odds with visions of orthopraxis championed by the Spiritual Board. While often criticised by SADUM for their devotional excesses and spiritual exuberance, however, the communities of pious and observant Uzbeks who inhabited that world were extremely sensitive to the activities and the pronouncements of SADUM. Evidently, notwithstanding alternative sources of religious authority, the words of the Soviet mufti mattered to the faithful in Uzbekistan, as is beautifully exemplified by the following, and last example. On 11 August 1978, one Rashida, a worker in the collective farm named after the 22nd Party Congress, located in the rural district of Piskent in the region of Tashkent, wrote to the mufti. As her missive shows, she belonged to a religious family and all she asked for was for the mufti to take action against cultural practices which she regarded as detrimental to the integrity of religion. Interestingly, the various practices to which she objected blended Sovietness and Muslimness, for they ranged from the mixing of sexes and consumption of alcohol at weddings to the visitation of shrines and alms-giving. Most significantly, however, the author of the letter appears to be truly convinced that, when read at the mosque, SADUM's fatwas could win the hearts of the believers and influence behaviour:

We have celebrations for every possible event [these days]. But if girls and boys, who have already lost their honour in the fun games [organised to celebrate] Nowruz, get together and play games, talk, and drink vodka in their homes, what will be the punishment for them in the otherworld? What about the invitations [to a party] after a wedding? Are they appropriate according to sharia? During the [female] gatherings called

Bibi Mushkil-gushod<sup>84</sup> [which are usually organised] before a wedding, women and girls visit shrines and give money to the shrine guardians as offerings towards the wedding. Is this licit? If I raise such questions, people cease to invite me. I believe that the books of sharia deal with these matters and I have fatwas (*rivoyatlar*) left [to me] by my grandfather and which address this issue. I could copy them and give them to your representative (*vakil*). Then, he and his Excellence (*pir hazrat*) the mufti could craft pertinent fatwas, which would then be read in the mosque of the Piskent district. Consequently, people will [finally] pay attention to such things, stop [their behaviour], think about the hereafter, and, God willing, not destroy our holy religion (*muqaddas dinimizni vayron qilmasalar*).<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Literally ‘the lady who solves troubles’ (known also in the variant ‘Bibi Mushkil gusha’), Bibi Mushkil-gushod is a propitiatory rite led by and accessible exclusively to women. It revolves around the veneration of a female saint to whom participants dedicate the reading of specific poems (*qissa*) and passages from the Qur’an. For more on this, see Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>85</sup> Abdulaziz Mansur’s Private Collection, not inventoried.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### *Shrines' Spacetime*

## Introduction

In 1963, the architect Yuri Stebliuk published an article in a collected volume featuring the accomplishments of the Great Soviet Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition in Khorezm, a gigantic enterprise in the field of archeology and anthropology in one of the biggest oases of Central Asia, situated across western Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and south-western Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup> His work detailed the architectural features of three Islamic shrines situated between Khiva and Köhneurgench. The shrines in question, explains Stebliuk, attested to the cultural patronage of the Qunghrats, the last Muslim dynasty of Uzbek origin to rule over Khorezm between the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 20th century. By detailing the shape of portals, columns, and domes, Stebliuk offered an invaluable and highly detailed picture of the region's Islamic monuments. At the same time, however, his article contains a rich trove of ethnographic information on Islam as it was lived in the Soviet period. More specifically, Stebliuk recorded a number of Sufi narratives that he was told while inspecting the shrines. For our purposes, these and other stories noted down by Soviet scholars like Stebliuk are remarkable in several respects. First, they testify that in Khorezm in the early 1960s sheikhs still administered a number of Islamic shrines in spite of the various waves of anti-religious campaigns designed to discourage public attendance of Islamic religious sites. By providing evidence of the sheikhs' activities, Stebliuk actually informed his readers that Islamic shrines were alive and well, that they were still sites of public devotion and spaces where rituals were performed by local religious personnel. Secondly, his ethnography attests to the fact that Sufi stories were narrated by the sheikhs and most probably understood by the pilgrims

---

<sup>1</sup> "Pogrebal'nye sooruzheniia iuzhnogo Khorezma XVIII–XIX vv.," *Polevye issledovaniia Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii v 1958–1961 gg. II: pamiatniki srednevekovogo vremeni—étnograficheskie raboty. Materialy Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii pod obshchei redaktsii S.P. Tolstova*, vypusk 7 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1963), pp. 98–117.

as constitutive elements of the shrines themselves. By including such stories in his account of objects of architectural significance, Stebliuk indicates that the shrines not only displayed specific artistic features, but also embodied certain historical properties that distinguished them from other historical monuments. Thirdly, and most significantly for us, the narratives in question show that Sufi historical traditions were made available to the visitors of Islamic shrines through the mediation of the sheikhs. What we observe here therefore is a clear attestation to an encounter between Uzbek Soviet citizens and their Islamic past. Listening to the stories of the sheikhs allowed Soviet Muslims to connect to the religious world of their forefathers.<sup>2</sup>

How did Muslims engage with the past in Soviet Uzbekistan? This is a complex question that we must tackle if we are to historicize localized manifestations of Muslimness. What makes the question particularly important is the fact that the Soviet state sought to affect the ways in which Muslims articulated their cultural identity. It pursued this agenda by advancing historical narratives that more often than not dislocated Central Asians from their Islamic past. In this way, the state, through its academic, educational, and, propaganda apparatuses, constrained the range of possibilities whereby Muslims could deploy their past as a resource to make sense of the present. It does not take a great leap of imagination to realize just how the past matters to the modern state and its project of sovereignty. Even an occasional observer of things Central Asian can appreciate how today in Uzbekistan, for example, the past is factored into a discourse of statehood and thus becomes an essential

---

<sup>2</sup> In "Sacred Places and 'Public' Narratives: The Shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavī Šūfī Order, 16th-17th Centuries." *Muslim World* Vol. 90 No. 3-4 (2000), pp. 353-376, Devin DeWeese adopts a similar approach to the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in southern Kazakhstan by examining the holy sites' function as a 'narrative lens' collecting, refracting and focusing hagiographical lore. More broadly, for a work addressing multiple aspects of shrine culture, which I do not have the space to discuss here, see Robert McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines: A Socio-Political History of Architecture* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

component of the everyday experience of citizenship for Uzbeks. Encounters with the past, either mediated or spontaneous, are essential for the making of identities, anthropologists tell us.<sup>3</sup> If this is true for Uzbekistan today, when the state promotes visions of Muslim identity anchored in a selective reading of Islamic history and tradition,<sup>4</sup> we can assume that it applies also to the Soviet period, when the state took spectacular measures to deactivate much of what sounded Islamic in the history of its subjects. The stories told at the shrines, however, did not fit the historical narratives of the state and offered instead alternative ways to imagine the past. One is prone to think, as Bruce Grant does on the basis of materials from Azerbaijan, that encounters with the Islamic past at the shrines offered means ‘to amplify [...] alternative approaches to sovereignty and community’ that were ‘unsanctionable in formal state life’.<sup>5</sup> I shall return to this point later on.

What I want to explore in this chapter is how Sufi narratives embedded in the life of shrines were key to the constitution of Muslim historical consciousness after the Second World War. This process has hitherto escaped the sustained attention of scholars of Soviet Central Asia. This is not to say that the existence of Sufi narratives has been entirely overlooked: for some time now, students of Central Asian history have explored how Sufi narratives played a crucial role in sanctioning the sacred status of a given individual (either historically attested or imagined) or a specific course of action such as, say, the Islamization of a given region or a city.<sup>6</sup> My focus,

---

<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Jacquesson (ed.), *History Making in Central and Northern Eurasia: Contemporary Actors and Practices* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2016); Ildikó Bellér-Hann (ed.), *The Past as Resource in the Turkic Speaking World* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan*, ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Grant, “Shrines and Sovereigns: Life, Death, and Religion in Azerbaijan,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 53 No. 3 (2011), p. 655.

<sup>6</sup> An initial attempt to address this topic has been made by Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Local Lore, the Transmission of Learning, and Communal Identity in Late 20th-Century Tajikistan: The *Khujand-nāma* of ‘Ārifjān Yahyāzād Khujandī,” in Stéphane A. Dudoignon (ed.), *Devout Societies vs. Impious States?*:

rather, is on how Sufi literature was *constitutive* of historical consciousness in Soviet Uzbekistan after the Second World War. What I want to emphasize is that by means of Sufi narratives and, most notably, the oral traditions transmitted and reproduced in the Soviet period, wider stretches of the Muslim population were exposed to the sacredness of many a holy place in Central Asia, and were ultimately informed about their Islamic history. Such an argument should be regarded as a corrective to the existing dominant narrative about Islam in the Soviet Union which is predicated upon the assumption that '70 years of Soviet dominance [...] not only cut off the people from the literate traditions of their Islamic past but also caused an interruption in the hagiographical tradition at the level of oral transmission.'<sup>7</sup>

I want to show, then, that although at school they were taught an impoverished, distorted account of the Islamic history of their region, Uzbeks were still able to access the past through the surviving *architectural* presence of Islam. Monumental sites, however, were not enough for Muslims to understand the past and use it to construct their present identity. Such artifacts acquired meaning only through an interpretive framework. And this framework, as we shall see, was provided by Sufi narratives, i.e., stories about saints and their miracles, which in turn were reproduced and transmitted by shrine communities. Therefore, shrines represented for Central Asia a collective 'memory space'<sup>8</sup> – that is, a place in which the past was mobilized in the present by means of narration.<sup>9</sup> To exemplify how the transmission of such narratives took place during the visitation

---

*Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2004), pp. 213–241.

<sup>7</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, "Religion Is Not So Strong Here": *Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism*, pp. 161–162.

<sup>8</sup> I here draw on the work of Nile Green, 'Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-memorizing History at the Sufi Shrine of Aurangabad', *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 38 No. 2 (2004), pp. 419–446.

<sup>9</sup> 'Although a "foreign country" in official ideology, many people apparently found the past embodied in the shrines very relevant to modern concerns', Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, p. 54.



of shrines, I quote from the unpublished ethnographic diary of another Soviet scholar by the name of Yuri Knorozov (for discussion of whom see Chapter Four). During his fieldwork in Khorezm in 1946, Knorozov was able to visit an impressive number of shrines about which he left detailed descriptions. I here quote at length from one such description in order to recreate the effect of entering the physical terrain of the shrine, encountering the narratives that were transmitted then-and-there and learn about religious practices:

On the eastern edge of Urgench is the cemetery of Okhun Bobo [...] One can reach the cemetery only by walking along pathways. Most of the tombs are in a good state of preservation. There are many rectangular tombs; but most of them are of the sarcophagus type with walls of clay. Seldom does one see tombs made of baked bricks and smeared with clay. [...] One finds a number of tombs also in pits; in one of them I saw lots of books and manuscripts. The shrine of Okhun Bobo is to be found on the southern edge of the cemetery. [...] In the left corner close to the entrance there are sticks with ribbons stuck in the ground. On the left there is an anthropomorphic figure made of iron leaves. Inside the shrine there are two poles with white (and red?) cloth (ten of them are wrapped around the smallest pole). To the left of the entrance there are two stands for lamps. One of them is in the form of a rectangular pedestal made of cast iron, open on one side (I saw twenty candles inside it and above it); the other is a metal rod with a forked end and two metal disks on which there are two candles. In one corner of the cemetery there is a stone pillar. Behind the back wall of the shrine there are bushes to which cloths are tied. There are also books and pages of the Qur'an. Tombs made of baked bricks have been covered in cement. There are three individuals tending the cemetery: the *khotib*,<sup>10</sup> who has an assistant, and a sheikh. During my visit

---

<sup>10</sup> The term *khotib* (or *imom-khotib*) reflected more Soviet bureaucratise rather than local parlance. In fact, by reducing to a bare minimum the number of

the *khotib* was a certain Jumaniyoz Matchanov. According to him, Okhun Bobo was a healer (*tabib*). His bones were sent there from Bukhara 55 years earlier and the shrine was built [on that occasion]. In the smaller tomb lies his disciple and servant Abdulla Khalfa. When he was alive, Okhun Bobo could cure all kind of illnesses. Therefore, people turn to him [=to his shrine] for healing. He died in Bukhara. The shrine is visited mostly by women, who bring offerings. On the night when they wait for the spirits of the ancestors,<sup>11</sup> people bring offerings and light candles [which they leave alight]. When they leave, they tie a white or a red ribbon to a stick and they stick it to the left of the entrance to the portico. The sick smear soot from the lamps on the afflicted spot (especially the eyes). Around the poles on the floor of the shrine corn was poured.<sup>12</sup>

Broadly conceived, shrines in Soviet Uzbekistan constituted a type of religious infrastructure distinct from that of the mosques. Whether they were shut down by the authorities or continued to operate under bureaucratic scrutiny, mosques represented appendages of SADUM based in Tashkent, and were therefore generally associated with the state. Shrines, by contrast, were not administered directly by the metropolitan religious establishment, which had neither the manpower nor the financial resources to follow what

---

people who could work at a mosque, Soviet authorities proceeded by 'assigning only one figure to supervise a registered mosque's functions and labelling him the *imām*, and expecting him also to give the Friday sermon (hence adjusting his title to *imām-khatīb*, functions not typically joined in other contexts, though indeed combined, tellingly, in a similar context of restrictions on religion in the name of forced modernization, i.e. Kemalist Turkey),' DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*," p. 322.

<sup>11</sup> On this practice (known as *juma oqshom*), see Chapter Four.

<sup>12</sup> AIEA RAN, *Polevye zapisi 1946–1947 gg. v Khorezmskoi oblasti UzSSR i Karakalpakskoi ASSR: verovaniia, kladbishchi i mazary*, f. 142, op. 8, albom dlia risovaniia no. 1, ll. 6–7.



Figure 3.1 Women visiting the shrine of Okhun Bobo during the celebration of the end of the Ramadan, 1946.  
Album of Yuri Knorozov, not inventoried © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

happened in myriads of holy sites across the country. Shrines were instead left in the hands of a class of non-urbanized learned men who were considerably less anxious about Soviet bureaucratic practices of surveillance than their fellows in the madrasas of Tashkent or Bukhara, and whose religiosity was not informed by modernist notions of scripturalism. In fact, we know that not only sheikhs, but also the local representatives of the official religious establishment openly disputed the authority of the ulama in Tashkent with regard to the cult of the saints. On 17 May 1961, the Soviet ethnographer Snesarev<sup>13</sup> recorded a conversation with one Ataullah, the officially registered imam of the Friday mosque of Khanqa, who exuded a deep feeling of frustration at SADUM's attack against *eshons* and shrine visitation. At first, the ethnographer posed a few stock questions about mosque attendance, the usual metric to measure the vitality of religion among Muslims:

Snesarev: 'Do a lot of people come to the mosque [here]?'

Ataullah: 'Yes, a lot of people attend the Friday congregation. They are usually people over the age of 40 years old.'

Snesarev: 'What about the young people?'

Ataullah: 'Young people don't go to the mosque.'

Snesarev: "What will you be doing in ten years' time?"

Ataullah: "[I don't know]. I wonder whether my parishioners will be around and whether they will be Muslims at all!"

Snesarev: 'Not many people know Arabic these days, do they?'

Ataullah: 'Well, in some schools Arabic began to be taught from the 5th grade onwards. This is happening in Samarqand and other places. I read about it in the newspaper; I saw a photo of girls writing in Arabic on the blackboard. They were writing something about the homeland (Ataullah grinned).'

---

<sup>13</sup> On this individual, see Chapter Four.

Also, there are countries in the East all around us, and we are connected to them and they are Muslims.’<sup>14</sup>

At this point, the conversation between the Soviet ethnographer and the imam took a different turn. Snesev shifted gears and engaged Ataullah on matters of belief. Only three years earlier the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had journeyed into outer space by completing an orbit around the Earth. Not only did Gagarin’s exploit mark the beginning of the Space Race between the USSR and the USA, but it was also deployed as an achievement of Soviet progress against religious backwardness. Famously, other spaceflights proved that ‘God does not exist’ (*Boga net*) in the skies, as famously depicted in a 1975 propaganda poster inspired by the Soviet cosmonaut German Titov who in August 1961 became the second man to orbit the earth. Snesev turned this rhetoric against the imam:

Snesev: ‘We fly into the space [these days]. Are you ready to go up to the first sky, then to the second, finally to the seventh and beyond?’

Ataullah: ‘I’m ready myself. I’ll take a ticket when they fly at least to the tenth sky! [Ataullah laughs.] Solomon the Prophet was removed from one place to another together with his troops, his household, and his animals [...] So, there must have been scientists at that time too!’

Snesev: ‘Are you saying that Solomon was a cosmonaut?’

Ataullah: (speaking very seriously) ‘Yes, Solomon the Prophet was the first cosmonaut! I believe that our people will also be able to fly like Solomon!’ [...]’<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> AIEA RAN, *Khorezmskaia arkh. étnograf. éksp. Uzbekskii otriad*, 1961 g., Papka 10, l. 65.

<sup>15</sup> AIEA RAN, *Khorezmskaia arkh. étnograf. éksp. Uzbekskii otriad*, 1961 g., Papka 10, ll. 65-66.

Discussion moved on to the topic of the saints in Islam, and the conversation became rather strained, with the ethnographer asking the imam's opinion about the new policies against shrine visitation:

Snesarev: 'Now they have closed down the shrine of Pahlavan Mahmud in Khiva; you have worked there for several years. What do you think about it? Was he really a saint?

Ataullah: 'He was a saint, a poet and a wrestler. But the leadership [i.e., the Spiritual Board in Tashkent,] tells me that the belief in the saints is not compatible with Islam, the true religion. God is one.'<sup>16</sup>

Snesarev's conversation with Ataullah the mullah ends here abruptly, but with an interesting, indeed revealing note. In his field diary, the ethnographer jotted down the following sentences: 'It is difficult to convey Ataullah's expression of both frustration and anger; he says that any type of contact with those mullahs and sheikhs who are not official clergy is forbidden to him.'<sup>17</sup> This observation is of extraordinary historical significance, for it shows how even an official mullah cringed at the idea that not only the atheists, but also, and especially, SADUM's ulama, who claimed authority over the definition of Muslimness, clamped down on shrine activities.

And yet not only did ordinary believers continue to access shrines in Soviet Uzbekistan, but they furthermore did so in spite of the regulations and propaganda activities designed to dissuade and ultimately impede visitation to holy places. The importance of pilgrimage to holy places in Central Asia under Soviet rule has long been noted: it was at the centre of attention of Soviet atheist scholarship, upon which Western historians in the Cold War period in turn heavily relied. However, little has been done to this day to understand why neither the secularist discourse on modernization

---

<sup>16</sup> AIEA RAN, *Khorezmskaia arkh. étnograf. éksp. Uzbekskii otriad*, 1961 g., Papka 10, l. 66.

<sup>17</sup> AIEA RAN, *Khorezmskaia arkh. étnograf. éksp. Uzbekskii otriad*, 1961 g., Papka 10, ll. 66-67.

sponsored by the state nor the deterrence by means of the application of stringent laws against *eshons* and shrine visitation were ever able to dissuade believers from conferring so much importance on rituals practised at holy places. If one is sensitive to the dramatic changes brought upon by Sovietisation and especially the violent drive of the interwar period, one should then be equally alert to the fact that, in spite of this momentous shift, the worship of saints and the visiting of shrines remained central to the making of Muslimness in Soviet Uzbekistan (as elsewhere in Central Asia). With this in mind, I would like to aggregate a series of vignettes to illustrate what kind of experience Muslims Soviet citizens in Uzbekistan encountered when entering into and engaging with the sacred space of the shrines.

As we wade into the historical material, it is useful to remind ourselves that shrines in Soviet Uzbekistan conjure up an image of a religiosity ‘steeped in notions and rituals that the modern, with its mainly theological conception of religion, has utterly repudiated’.<sup>18</sup> Shrines radiated an emotionally complex response to the normative religiosity propounded by Soviet bureaucrats. In local parlance, they are often referred to as doorways to an existential domain where people spent time in the company of saints and the spirits of the dead. It is telling, perhaps, that in Khorezm, as elsewhere in Central Asia,<sup>19</sup> people do not only refer to shrines (*mozor*) as ‘buildings.’ They refer to them also as *avliyo*, a word (originally from the Arabic *awliyā*) that means ‘the friends of God’ and is usually employed to denote ‘prophets and saints.’ In many places in Uzbekistan, the term is used as a metonymy that clearly reflects the significance less of the built edifice than of the holy persona buried therein. The term *avliyo* carries the association of a living entity that operates in the present through the medium of its *baraka*, its numinous and miraculous force. Everything in the shrine’s vicinity is touched by this force. As sites of emotional exuberance where the rigid eti-

---

<sup>18</sup> James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, *passim*.



quette of the mosques could not be applied, *avliyo* thus offered a safe place to perform alternative forms of social behaviour. These were places where people could do away with their inhibitions and express a haunted spirituality in which stories of miracles, practices of exorcism, and mourning over the dead together might yield reward in the afterlife. So, while they represent a memory-space that can channel believers back to a distinct Islamic past, shrines equally require Muslims' physical presence, their repeated visitation, their offerings, and their tears. Here, again, I quote from the field notes of Yuri Knorozov which, like most unpublished Soviet ethnography, can offer revealing insights into the world of lived Islam in Socialist Uzbekistan:

August 28, 1946. Yesterday it was the end of Ramadan. Today [people celebrated] *ro'za hayit*. At about 8AM we were at the shrine of Okhun Bobo [...] In the cemetery we could see mostly women weeping over the graves of their loved ones, sitting or standing, leaning against the tomb. – Or, more rarely, groups of relatives (men and women) sitting around the grave and listening to an old man read a prayer. It was mostly women who accessed the shrine, and they brought (as in the cemetery in general) flatbread, grapes, and melons. Approaching the entrance, they knelt down, touched their forearm with their hand, then passed their hand over their forehead, then the threshold, and afterwards they went inside. In the front right corner, there were two attendants reading something. In front of them sat visitors in a semicircle. Others approached the tomb, knelt down and also 'dusted' the tomb with their heads (they ran their palms over the staves and then over their faces, smeared their foreheads and eyelids with soot from lamps and they did the same thing also for the sick with various diseases). The women, entering the shrine, sat in a semicircle around the attendants – one of our acquaintances was wearing a Japanese overcoat – and after the prayer was recited they served bread, grapes, melons and fried dough (*boursak*). At the shrine, there were a couple of



old women sitting around. They made a prayerful gesture, running their palms over their faces and then over their eyebrows to the sides; the women repeated the gesture; then one woman hugged the other woman, put her cheek to her cheek and kissed her.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 3.2 ‘Preparing the fried dough (*baursak*),’ Khanqa, 1956. Collection Gleb Snesev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

When exploring the various expressions of piety among Soviet Uzbeks that were recorded at shrines, it is important to disaggregate the study of the cult of saints from the problematic labelling ‘parallel/unofficial Islam’. The terms ‘parallel Islam’ or ‘unofficial Islam’ are usually employed to denote practices and persons who did not enjoy a recognized legal status.<sup>21</sup> These persons - mullahs, sheikhs,

---

<sup>20</sup> IEA RAN, *Polevye zapisi 1946–1947 gg. v Khorezmskoi oblasti UzSSR i Karakalpakskoi ASSR: verovaniia, kladbishchi i mazary*, f. 142, op. 8, l. 31-33.

<sup>21</sup> The most recent iteration of this use is in Formichi, *Islam in Asia: A History*, p. 160.

*eshons*, or exorcists (*porkhons*)<sup>22</sup> - were not registered and therefore the state regarded whatever they did in the religious sphere as 'illegal activities.' In this sense the terms parallel Islam or unofficial Islam are derived from Soviet bureaucratese and convey the concern of the surveillance apparatus to label as illegal, unsanctioned religious practices regardless of whether they took place in an urban or a rural setting. I should clarify that the ethnographic observations which I have made used of so far in this chapter, were recorded at sites, especially shrines, that *were* registered (like that of Okhun Bobo described by Knorozov), and therefore enjoyed official status vis-à-vis the state. Therefore, to refer to religious practices described, for example, by Soviet ethnographers in those sites as 'parallel Islam' would be simply misleading. It is of course true that, some among SADUM's ulama at times denounced religious activities at shrines as illegal, and such denunciations may be considered as attempts to discover and identify aspects of parallel/unofficial Islam. It is important, however, to point out that the scholars who criticized religious practices connected to the cult of saints did so mainly from the viewpoint of sharia, *not* of the state. What is more, the fact that some Soviet ulama did criticize such practices should not lead us to think that *all* scholars rejected them. There is ample documentation showing that important representatives of the scholarly establishment in Tashkent performed ritual visitation of shrines, often in public, thereby endorsing such practices.<sup>23</sup> Last but not least: starting from 1960 (when by decree supervision of all Islamic shrines was transferred to the Ministry for the Preservation of Monuments of Material Culture), holy places were made subject to reiterated census, description, and scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> To refer to shrines

---

<sup>22</sup> For more on practices of exorcism in Socialist Uzbekistan, see Chapter Four.

<sup>23</sup> Tasar, "Sufism on the Soviet Stage: Holy People and Places in Central Asia's Socio-Political Landscape after World War II."

<sup>24</sup> I have inspected several such censuses and detailed description of shrines at the Provincial State Archive of Urgench, Uzbekistan. See, for example, *Khorezm-skii oblastnoi Sovet obshchestva okhrany pamiatnikov istorii i kul'tury Uzbekistana: Spiski pamiatnikov istorii i kul'tury Khorezma za 1968-1971 gody*, Khorezm-skii OblGosArkhiv [henceforth OGA], fond 638, op. 1, d. 8; *Spiski*

as a manifestation of ‘parallel Islam’ obscures the extent to which they represented a religious infrastructure fully within the purview of the state.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider two different aspects of shrine visitation in Soviet Uzbekistan. In the first part, I shall offer an example of the type of Sufi narratives that believers could and did encounter when talking to sheikhs during their regular shrine visitations. This section of the chapter is based on an unpublished shrine catalogue crafted in Khiva in 1960 which covers most of the historical region of Khorezm. Occasionally, examples extracted from this source will be complemented by ethnographic accounts (both published and unpublished) of the same period. By contrast, the second section of this chapter will show that, until the demise of the USSR, religious life at the shrines thrived because of the chronic inability (and unwillingness) of local authorities to stamp it out.

## **Part 1**

### **A Soviet Shrine Catalogue**

I now turn to a revealing source that shows the degree to which Sufi narratives in Soviet Uzbekistan after the Second World War allowed for the transmission of historical narratives about Muslim saints within shrine communities, popularized the commemoration of saints within the wider constituency of pilgrims, and latched onto the history of a local tribal dynasty of Uzbek origin, the Qunghrats, which ruled over most of Khorezm. This source was written in Arabic-script Uzbek in 1961, and has been housed ever since in the manuscript library of the Museum of the Inner Citadel (Ichan Qal’a) of Khiva. Its author was one Bobojon Safarov (1891-1983),

---

*pamiatnikov material’noi kul’tury Khorezmskoi oblasti za 1973 god*, OGA, fond 638, op. 1, d. 22; *Spisok memorial’nykh dosok priniatykh na gosudarstvennuu okhranu (1990 god)*, OGA, fond 638, op. 1, d. 131.

a local Muslim scholar who navigated through the final decades of Qunghrat power in Khiva and then repurposed himself to work in various jobs, including as the cashier of the Pahlavan Mahmud shrine complex.<sup>25</sup> The work in question is a pilgrim guide offering a description of 135 shrines that were situated in Khorezm, across the different states of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the subsidiary autonomous republic of Qaraqalpaqstan.<sup>26</sup> By opting not to confine the focus of his work to the territory of just a single Soviet republic, Safarov demonstrates his understanding of Khorezm less as a Soviet administrative unit than as a sacred geography of shrines either built or renovated by the Khans of Khiva in the nineteenth century. From this perspective, his work should be seen as further development of a local writing tradition that ‘combines a “sacred history” of the region with a shrine guide that leads the pilgrim, in effect, through the towns, deserts, and mountains of Khwārazm to seek solace, blessings, purification, and the expiation of sins through the saints who lie buried in the region, and are indeed ‘mixed’ with

---

<sup>25</sup> He was removed from this post in 1955 after a case of embezzlement, O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 169, ll. 90–1. On Safarov's biography, see Ulfat Abdurasulov and Nuryoghdi Toshov, “Soviet ‘Local’ Knowledge: Babajan Safarov's Notes on Slavery in Khwarazm,” in Nader Pournaqcheband and Florian Saafeld (eds.), *Aus den Tiefenschichten der Texte: Beiträge zur turko-iranischen Welt von der Islamisierung bis zur Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2019), pp. 265-292.

<sup>26</sup> The staggering figure of 135 shrines functioning in this region at the height of the Khrushchevian anti-religious campaign may sound exaggerated, but it is not. In the early 1980s, the doyen of Soviet ethnography in Qaraqalpaqstan, Tat'iana Zhdanko, indirectly confirmed the figure by pointing out that members of the Great Soviet Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition in Khorezm surveyed ‘more than 130 mazars’ (*bylo obsledovano bolee 130 mazarov (mest zakhoroneniia) khorezmiiskikh /sviatykh,/ palomnichestvo k kotorym igralo bol'shuiu rol' v obshchestvennoi i dukhovnoi zhizni mestnogo naseleniia i ne vpolne izzhito do nastoiashchego vremeni*, Tat'iana A. Zhdanko, “Étnograficheskie issledovaniia Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii (narody, problemy, trudy),” in M.A. Itina Iu.A. Rapoport, N.S. Tsycheva, B.I. Vainberg (eds.), *Kul'tury i isskustvo drevnego Khorezma* (Moscow, Nauka, 1981), p. 32.

its soil'.<sup>27</sup> I speak here of a relatively recent tradition in the sense that in the nineteenth century we observe in Khorezm a boom of Chaghatay-language works (sponsored either by Qunghrat dynasts or various local literati) most of which show deep attachment to the sacred topography of Khorezm – a topography, that is, which leads local communities (as well as the peoples living in the neighbouring areas such as the Qazaqs and the Turkmen) to conceive of Khorezm as a region of its own, strongly identified with specific saints and their narratives.<sup>28</sup>

Safarov does not clarify the larger context within which this manuscript was produced, though several references in his work to the State Museum in Khiva imply that the work may have been commissioned from him by the Museum.<sup>29</sup> It is nonetheless clear that the production of this manuscript coincided with a renewal of state-led campaigns to discredit pilgrimage to shrines in Central Asia. Indeed, on 14 March 1960 the Council of Ministers of Uzbekistan mandated that the supervision of all Islamic shrines in the country be transferred from SADUM to the committee for the preservation of monuments.<sup>30</sup> This decree was also integral to a new anti-religious campaign launched by Nikita Khrushchev, which targeted shrine-based religious activities.<sup>31</sup> This latter trend manifested itself at a local level in different activities: on the one hand, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Devin DeWeese, "Mapping Khwārazmian Connections in the History of Sufi Traditions: Local Embeddedness, Regional Networks, and Global Ties of the Sufi Communities of Khwārazm," *Eurasian Studies* Vol. 14 No. 1–2 (2016), pp. 37–97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> In the 1950s Safarov crafted various works on the history of Khorezm upon commission of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, the al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Tashkent, see Abdurasulov and Toshov, "Soviet 'Local' Knowledge: Babajan Safarov's Notes on Slavery in Khwarazm," pp. 268-269.

<sup>30</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 224, l. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991*, p. 313.

publication of anti-religious literature designed for local audiences<sup>32</sup> and, on the other, the intensification of a trend of museification of certain shrines. It is possible, therefore, that Safarov was caught up in the whirl of a new anti-shrine sentiment and that, when such new policies began to be implemented in Khiva, he was commissioned to gather material on holy places in Khorezm.

Be that as it may, as the author explains, one of the major goals of his authorial effort was to account for the prominence that oral narratives commemorating the lives of Muslims saints had acquired in the region in the modern period:

I collected and wrote for the State Museum some facts regarding the saints that I listed above; I did so in a concise way. [These days] all sorts of stories regarding these saints are being told among the people. The thrust of such stories credits these past saints with miracles of various types, and it also reflects the extent to which the shrines' importance seems to have increased in popular perception. Given that it is not important for the institution of the Museum that [we pause to reflect on] the legendary (*afsānavī*) stories about the virtues of such saints, I did not collect all the minor stories [that circulate about the shrines. Instead,] I have described how in the region of Khorezm the people attach their faith to the shrines of the saints, I have illustrated where the holy graves of such men can be found, and I have also noted the

---

<sup>32</sup> As far as Khorezm is concerned, the most important of such anti-religious publications targeting shrines was Abdulla Rahmonov and Sobir Yusupov, *Khorazm 'muqaddas' joylar va ularning vujudga kelish sirlari* (Tashkent: Qizil O'zbekiston, Pravda Vostoka va O'zbekiston Surkh birlashgan nashriyoti, 1963). In the preface (p. 2), the authors acknowledged the help of Abdulla Baltaev who, like Safarov, was born at the turn of the century and possessed some insider knowledge of the Islamic history of Khorezm. Baltaev at the time was employed by the Museum of the Revolution in Khorezm based in Khiva. Like him Safarov may well have been involved in similar activities for the State Museum, with his shrine guide a fruit of that involvement.

ethnic affiliation of men [associated with the] shrines as well as the period in which they lived.<sup>33</sup>

Many aspects of Safarov's work warrant extended commentary. One is his scripturalist leanings that led him to invoke sharia in order to condemn the practice of shrine pilgrimage:

In the past in Khorezm the people used to name the graves of certain dead individuals 'the Friends of God' (*avliyā allāh*). In relation to them, they performed pilgrimage and requested their intercession. They [also] made offerings to such graves [by bringing] animals and personal possessions. People slaughtered cows and goats on them. Such an old custom was a practice [transmitted] from father to son, from uncle to nephew. Whoever had met with an [unfortunate] situation or problem would make his vows to [one such] shrine. These sentiments spread among the ignorant populace and it became a custom to worship saints [by requesting] a cure for the ill, cattle for the poor and children for those without offspring. Even young girls looking for a husband performed pilgrimage to the shrine and worshipped saints [...] Even if Islamic law forbids worshipping the saints, embellishing their graves, pleading for their intercession, invoking their curative powers, and offering them donations, there are some parasites [who ignore such commands]. There are certain personalities who deceive the people. They clamber onto the people's backs to extort money and goods. They attribute various miracles to fake graves, and by claiming that that grave is a master of miracles, they turn it into a place of pilgrimage for the people. With stratagems of one sort or another, they exalt everyone's grave. Although they are Muslims, the people of Khorezm never inquired and asked whether worshipping the saints is a

---

<sup>33</sup> *Khwārazmda muqaddas o'run tutub khalqlarning ziyāratgāhi bo'lub kelgan avliyālarning ta'rīkhī vāqi'alari*, MS Khiva, Ichan Qal'a Museum, inv. no. 3266, fol. 106.

good or a bad deed according to sharia. The scholars too, who are the religion's leaders, even though they observed the diffusion of the acts of worship to the saints in Khorezm, never forbade the people to do such unlawful things with precise exhortations and advice.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere Safarov adopts the language of Soviet propaganda against 'social parasitism' (*tuneiadstvo*):

The people of Khorezm, ordinary women and men, consider it a religious duty (*farz vājib*) for themselves to make offerings to the saints, sacrifice animals over them, and worship them. This has developed to such an extent that women bring eggs to the graves when they want to have children. For this reason, over the shrines of the saints all sorts of families of blood-suckers and parasites who on the pretext of serving as sheikh or cook, guardian and butcher, preserve the shrine of the saints and profit from the people's offerings.<sup>35</sup>

Safarov also frames pilgrimage to the shrines as a cultural practice that developed under the patronage of the Khivan rulers. It is here that we can best appreciate how the shrines were intimately associated with the Islamic past of Khorezm:

Former rulers too worshipped the saints. In whatever regnum or region the graves of the saints were made objects of pilgrimage by the ignorant people; [the rulers] erected great edifices over them, exaggerating their ornamentation. They placed a new tomb over the [existing] one, built cupolas over the grave, constructed magnificent convents, large soup kitchens for the cooking of offerings and the like, separate houses and lodges for solitary retreat for those coming for a cure and worship or for celebrations, as well as houses for

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, fols. 1–3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, fol. 4.



sheikhs and attendants who lived permanently at the shrines [...] Even today, such magnificent edifices are visible. Their ornate buildings are distinguished by their beautiful inscriptions and the decorations added to their walls.<sup>36</sup>

Before delving into two specific entries in this shrine catalogue to show how this work functioned, I would like to draw the attention of the reader to a remarkable feature of this shrine catalogue. As we have seen, from the introduction we can glean a rather conventional picture of Safarov – that is, a man who blended both puritanical as well as modernizing sensibilities and therefore viewed shrines and the plethora of devotional practices around them as relics of the past and the quintessence of backwardness. Nonetheless, Safarov shows a specific interest in recording how believers manifested their piety and devotion to shrines in spite of all the measures taken by the state to hamper pilgrimage. In fact, his shrine catalogue is important for the study of Soviet policies against Islam, and, more specifically, for enabling us to appreciate their limitations. While Safarov’s purpose in writing it was not to deride Soviet-style atheism, the work shows very well the constraints within which anti-religious policies were executed, and it offers an eloquent reminder about the rhetorical nature of the literature devoted to the achievements of scientific atheism in Central Asia and in other Muslim-majority regions of the USSR.

While sifting through the pages of the shrine catalogue, we cannot fail to observe that Safarov diligently noted how people continued to worship a shrine even if the various building surrounding it had been left unattended and in a state of disrepair.<sup>37</sup> On other occasions, clearly unable to temper his surprise, Safarov acknowledged that ‘pilgrims keep coming [to the shrine] and that the tombs [therein] still stand to this day without having been bulldozed (*hāzīrgacha buzilmasdan*).’<sup>38</sup> He mentioned, furthermore, cases in which shrine

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., fol. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., fol. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., *passim*.

complexes had undergone reconstruction in the Soviet period.<sup>39</sup> In one case, that of the shrine of Ismā'īl Īshān situated in the district of Urgench, the author duly recorded that 'while to this day the convent built upon the tomb has not yet fallen into disrepair, in the year 1940 the edifice of the mosque, which abutted on the convent, was removed. However, in 1950 the people from the villages nearby replaced it with a new mosque.'<sup>40</sup> In another case, that of the shrine of Okhun Bobo in Urgench about which we have heard from Yuri Knorozov, we learn that in 1935 the building had been taken down completely and its bricks used as construction materials in a collective farm nearby. However, since 1944 local communities had been able to rebuild the mosque and the khanaqah where Okhun Bobo's tomb was said to be located. Safarov then noted that people had immediately begun to use the newly erected building for their prayers and that Soviet authorities did not tear it down.<sup>41</sup>

These and other entries in the work show not only how local communities were invested in preserving the integrity of the institutional complex centered on a shrine, but also the degree to which Soviet citizens *qua* Muslim believers were ready to take action against the changes imposed by state authorities.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the most eloquent example of popular defiance is represented by the communities devoted to the cults of Narimjon Bobo and Ismamut Ota, whose shrines are located in areas close to the Qara-Qum desert in the Qaraqalpaq Autonomous Republic and Turkmenistan,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., fols. 68, 85.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., fol. 61.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., fol. 101.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, one could say that to a certain extent the cult of saints embodied notions of authority that challenged Soviet sovereignty. This is best exemplified in Safarov's shrine catalogue by the account of local communities worshipping one Jalal al-Din Eshon, a descendant of 'Umar Khon Eshon, a sheikh whose tomb is situated in the district of Qo'shko'pir, 17 kms north of Khiva. While he was widely known for having supported the basmachis of Junayd Khan against the Red Army, 'the ignorant people (*aḥmaq nādān khalqlar*) believed that Jalal al-Din Eshon was a mystic, made offerings to [his grave] and worshipped him like a Sufi', *ibid.*, fol. 88.

respectively.<sup>43</sup> Safarov explains that these shrines were among the most famous devotional complexes of all Khorezm and that people who worshipped these *avliyo* used to bury their loved ones in the cemetery surrounding one or other shrines. This practice enjoyed so much popularity that authorities resolved to block the road leading to the shrines in order to hamper pilgrimage. This measure notwithstanding, said Safarov, people found many alternative ways to reach the shrines, perform the ritual visitation and bring offerings.<sup>44</sup> He was writing in the year 1961, under the renewed state attack against religion. However, Safarov recorded once again how the Soviet government proved helpless before the resourcefulness of its pious subjects. When read together with the documentation produced by CARC showing the vitality of the cult of saints at the shrines of Narimjon Bobo in the 1970s (see Part 2 of this chapter), Safarov's shrine catalogue offers important material with which to pose the question of what anti-religious policies under Khrushchev sought to achieve.

### Meeting Najm al-Din Kubra

Safarov's shrine catalogue is a remarkable source chiefly because it sheds light on Islamic religious knowledge and practices that were current in a large area of post-WWII Central Asia, but which we find only partly recorded by Soviet ethnographers. When I say that

---

<sup>43</sup> For a useful survey of the literature concerning these two shrines and a description of the routes which pilgrims followed when visiting these and other holy sites in Khorezm, see Devin DeWeese, "Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The 'Description of Khwārazm' and the Experience of Pilgrimage in 19th-Century Central Asia," in Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo G. Pinto (eds.), *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 183-218.

<sup>44</sup> *Khwārazmda muqaddas o'run tutub khalqlarning ziyaratgāhi bo'lub kelgan avliyālarning ta'rīkhī vāqi'alari*, MS Khiva, Ichan Qal'a Museum, inv. no. 3266, fols. 20, 29.

this text illuminates religious knowledge I mean here specifically hagiographic knowledge, i.e., narratives about Sufi figures and their transmission throughout the Soviet period within shrine communities and initiatic constituencies. More specifically, Safarov did not aggregate hagiographies extracted from surviving manuscripts, an exercise which he found futile.<sup>45</sup> He was chiefly interested in the transmission of oral traditions about holy figures, which did continue during the Soviet period, contrary to common wisdom. I take as an example the narratives relating to Najm al-Din Kubra (1145–1221), a Sufi master who operated under the rule of the Khwarazmshahs and was one of the most important and best studied intellectual figures of medieval Islamic Central Asia.<sup>46</sup> I focus on this figure in spite of the fact that his shrine was and is still located in Kōneürgenç in Turkmenistan, and thus ostensibly beyond the purview of this book. The reasoning behind this decision is simple: the shrine was widely revered by Uzbeks for whom in the Soviet period it was relatively easy to hop on a bus and cross the Uzbek-Turkmen border.

Examining how Safarov deals with the Sufi narratives told at this shrine will allow us to show that in 1960s stories circulated about the Mongol conquest and the conversion of Hülegü Khan's son, Yalghuz, that were identical to narratives of Islamization which had been in circulation a full century earlier. Highlighting such similarities will serve, I hope, as an invitation for the reader to appreciate that the enduring character of such Sufi narratives was integral to and made possible by shrines' spacetime, an environment which was left mostly unencumbered by the Soviet state and its atheist policies.

Safarov writes about Najm al-Din Kubra as follows:

The grave of this Sheikh Najm al-Din is in Turkmenistan, in the province of Daşoguz, in the city of Kōneürgenç. This is a

---

<sup>45</sup> *Qadīmghi afsāna kitāblarda ko'p karāmatlarni kursatib yozganlar ularni munda yozishni lāzim taflmadi*, *ibid*, fol. 42.

<sup>46</sup> DeWeese, "Mapping Khwārazmian Connections in the History of Sufi Traditions."

very famous person who lived during the time of the Uzbeks of old Khorezm. He completed his primary and secondary studies on texts in Arabic and Persian, he followed the path of the Sufis (*t̄shānliq sulūkin*) with the great masters. When the sons of Chinggis Khan conquered Khorezm, they could not kill him. [In the end], his head was taken away and his corpse was left. His head could not be found. Later they did find his head and so his corpse was buried in the edifice of the shrine. Regarding his corpse various oral traditions circulate. [For example] they say that the corpse of Najm al-Din disappeared in the hands of the Qalmuqs, and that only later an angel showed [where] it [was]. Other narratives say that while Najm al-Din Kubra was standing at the door of a garden with his Sufis, Hülegü's fifteen-year-old son [= Yalghuz] cut off his head. Sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra took his own head under one armpit; under the other, meanwhile, he took Hülegü's dead son [= Yalghuz].<sup>47</sup> He then entered the garden and disappeared. Wherever they searched, the Sheikh could not be found. After some time one of his Sufis cried so much that Sheikh Najm al-Din appeared to him in a dream, showed to him a place, entrusted to him a watermelon seed and told him: 'Plant it there: wherever the root goes, [the plant] will bear a watermelon; and in place of the latter will lie [my head].' By the way they say that his corpse has indeed been found. Nowadays the laymen call the grave where his corpse lies 'a blessed holy [place]' and they perform pilgrimage to it. In

---

<sup>47</sup> Safarov here repurposes a common hagiographic trope, namely that Yalghuz decapitated Najm al-Din Kubra, but the latter first took his head under one armpit, while with the other hand got hold of Yalghuz's hair. The Mongol soldiers attempted to cut off the sheikh's hand in order to free Yalghuz, but with little success. At this point, hagiographical sources include a conversion narrative, whereby the Mongol prince, impressed by the miraculous course of action taken by Najm al-Din Kubra, embraced Islam, after which they both ascended to Paradise (see *infra* in this chapter). In this shrine catalogue, the element of Yalghuz's death is clearly Safarov's addition.

the later period, Muhammad Rahim Khan<sup>48</sup> erected new magnificent buildings for Najm al-Din Kubra such as a convent for Sufis, a house for Qur'an reciters, a mosque, and a lodge for solitary retreat. He also restored those that were made of stones and thus made exalted [his name]. His son Allah Quli Khan<sup>49</sup> embellished with cupolas covered with blue glazed tiles all the stone buildings that his father had erected in the name of Najm al-Din Kubra. Such beautiful buildings erected upon [old structures] are preserved to this day. Even if the government of Turkmenistan has prohibited pilgrimage to the graves of Najm al-Din, people with offerings go to such sites, make a circumambulation around his graves and bring gifts to the sheikh.<sup>50</sup>

This oral tradition is remarkable because it is very close to two oral traditions that were recorded in Kōneürgenç a hundred years earlier. That is to say, we encounter exactly the same story about Najm al-Din Kubra's martyrdom together with the conversion of the Mongol prince Yalghuz in two ethnographic texts, the first one crafted in 1873, the second one in the late 1960s. The one in the left column was jotted down immediately during the Russian siege of Khiva. The text in the right column, meanwhile, is Snesev's ethnography collected a century later in the Khrushchev period.

---

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Rahim Khan I was a Qonghrat dynast who ruled over Khorezm between 1806 and 1825. See Yuri Bregel and Paolo Sartori, "Khanate of Khiva," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* Vol. XVI Fascicle 5 (2020), pp. 530-538.

<sup>49</sup> Allah Quli Khan was a Qonghrat dynast who ruled over Khorezm between 1825 and 1842, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Khwārazmda muqaddas o'run tutub khalqlarning ziyāratgāhi bo'lub kelgan avliyālarning ta'rīkhī vāqi'alari*, MS Khiva, Ichan Qal'a Museum, inv. no. 3266, fols. 30–1.

When the Mongols came and took Khorezm, the son of Hülegü, Yalghüz Khān cut off the head of the sheikh [Najm al-Dīn Kubrā]. It was in the year 616 [...] When Yalghüz Khān cut off his head, his Excellency the saint grasped the hair of the khan. They tried to cut [his arm] off, but it could not be severed. The sheikh spoke: You have to convert to Islam! The [Mongol] prince pronounced the *kalīma* and became Muslim. The sheikh took with him Yalghüz Khān and disappeared. Nobody knows where they are.<sup>51</sup>

The Mongols attacked the country and destroyed Kunya [= Köneürgenç], the seventy-year-old Vapa Vaisov told us. ‘When they beheaded Sheikh Najm al-Din, the head did not fall on the ground: the sheikh grabbed it and with the other arm he reached out to the hair of his murderer, the son of the Mongol prince. He did so in such a way that they could not divide them, i.e., they could neither sever the arm of the one, nor cut the hair of the other. Najm al-Din stated, as it were, that he will take his murderer with him to the paradise and he will not let him go until he converts to Islam.’<sup>52</sup>

The similarity between these three narratives collected between the second half of the 19th century and the Cold-War era should be of course regarded as a clear attestation to the strength of oral traditions throughout the Soviet period. But what is most striking is that these oral traditions originate in fact from written narratives about Najm al-Din Kubra that circulated widely in the region and that were copied at least until the eve of WWII. Below, in the left-hand column I present a narrative about Najm al-Din Kubra and the conversion of Yalghuz from a late 19th-century manuscript coming from Khorezm, now held in St Petersburg. In the right-hand column, I present the very same

---

<sup>51</sup> MS St Petersburg, IVRAN, Arkhiv Vostokovedov, f. 33, op. 1, d. 134, l. 66 [under the heading *Kuhna Urganch tavābi ‘idagi avliyālar*].

<sup>52</sup> Snesarev, *Khorezmskie legendy*, p. 146.

tradition about Najm al-Din Kubra as I found it in a manuscript now in Nukus, which was copied in 1936.

They narrate that Hülegü had a son whose name was Yālghūz Khān. [...] The boy came closer to the sheikh and with his blade beheaded him. The head was severed from the neck, but did not fall on the ground. His Excellency grabbed his head with one hand, while with the other he held the boy's hair. The Qalmuqs began to cry. His Excellence's hand did not let go of the boy's hair. No matter how they tried, they did not succeed. They wanted [to cut the sheikh's arm] with a blade, but the blade did not cut. They wanted to cut the boy's hair, the blade did not cut. Everyone was astonished. The news reached Hülegü who gave orders to the sage of Tus [...] who said that there is no other solution than to become Muslim. The boy pronounced the *shahāda*. His Excellency said: 'I will take the boy with me to Paradise' and holding his head he disappeared. The cries of Hülegü reached the sky. As a result, in revenge for his son, he attacked Khorezm and subdued its people [...] This happened in the year 616.<sup>53</sup>

They narrate that Hülegü had a son whose name was Yālghūz Khān. [...] The boy came closer to the sheikh and with his blade beheaded him. The head was severed from the neck, but did not fall on the ground. His Excellency grabbed his head with one hand, while with the other he held the boy's hair. The Qalmuqs began to cry. His Excellence's hand did not let go of the boy's hair. No matter how they tried, they did not succeed. They wanted [to cut the sheikh's arm] with a blade, but the blade did not cut. They wanted to cut the boy's hair, the blade did not cut. Everyone was astonished. The news reached Hülegü who gave orders to the sage of Tus [...] who said that there is no other solution than to become Muslim. The boy pronounced the *shahāda*. His Excellency said: 'I will take the boy with me to Paradise' and holding his head he disappeared. The cries of Hülegü reached the sky. As a result, in revenge for his son, he attacked Khorezm and subdued its people [...] This happened in the year 616.<sup>54</sup>



The narrative collected and recorded by Safarov encapsulates a great deal from other smaller narratives that circulated both orally and in manuscript form. Fully to unravel all the various threads entangled in Safarov's shrine catalogue would require a complex intertextual analysis: suffice it to note here that Safarov's reference to the watermelon seed is derived from a rather complex story in which Najm al-Din Kubra's neighbour and disciple is lost on the top of a mountain. The latter has been lured there by a rich man with a promise: in exchange for only one day of service, Najm al-Din Kubra's neighbour could freely avail himself of one year of agricultural labor. While on the mountain the man has a dream in which he is sitting in a 'Sufi gathering' (*khalqa*) with Najm al-Din Kubra and others among the latter's famous disciples. They drink wine together and get intoxicated. At this point, the lost man turns to Najm al-Din Kubra and asks him to help him find his way home. The text proceeds as follows:

That noble saint took out a seed from his bag; it was a watermelon seed: it was white and its kernel was red. That [sort of] watermelon too is called *shahīdī* [i.e., 'that of the martyrs']. The magnanimity of that saint, [who was the] leader of martyrs, Sheikh Kabir Ata [Najm al-Din Kubra] was such that

---

<sup>53</sup> *Shaykh Najm al-Dīn Kubrāni shahīd qilib shahr Khwārazmni kharāb qilghanining bayāni*, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, MS St Petersburg, A 708. The manuscript was first purchased by the famous Turkologist Aleksandr N. Samoilovich in Kho'jayli: see his "Kratkii otchet o poezdke v Tashkent i Bukharu i v Khivinskoe khanstvo komandirovannogo SPB. Universitetom i Russkim Komitetom privat-dotsenta A.N. Samoilovicha v 1908 godu," *Izvestiia Russkogo Komiteta dlia izucheniiia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii v istoricheskoi, arkhologicheskoi, lingvisticheskoi i étnograficheskoi otnosheniia* 9 (1909), p. 13. It has been described in great detail in Evgenii È. Bertel's, "Roman o sheikhe Nadzhm ad-Dine Kubra," in his *Izbrannye trudy, III, Sufizm i sufiiskaia literatura* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), pp. 329–334.

<sup>54</sup> Mullā 'Uthmān Marghīnānī, [*Manāqib-i hazrat-i Shaykh Najm al-Dīn Kubrā*] Jumādī al-thānī 1355/ August 1936 or *Istoriia Khorezmshakha*, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Qaraqalpaq Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, MS Nukus, 1939.

he gave the seed to that man and asked him: 'Do you know where our famous land is?' The man said: 'Yes, I know.' [The sheikh said]: at the end [of this land] there is a tree; from there pace out a distance of 10 *gaz* towards Mecca; there plant the seed and weed out all the stems that grow around it except that one which goes west! At the end of this stem there will be two watermelons. Take the furthest one and eat it. Keep its seeds in memory of me! This watermelon comes from Paradise: everyone who plants and eats [it] will be protected from the flame of Hell. If [the other watermelon] faces Mecca, let it remain there! Under the stem of that watermelon there is my corpse and where is the watermelon there also is my head: the place where I was made martyr is unknown to everyone for the angels took my corpse together with my head and buried [them] in my place.<sup>55</sup>

This is how the narrative came down to us as conveyed in manuscripts recounting the virtues and the miracles ascribed to Najm al-Din Kubra. But, as we mentioned earlier, the same narratives lived on by means of oral transmission, and they were made accessible to the broad public of Muslim believers – that is to say, anyone who visited the shrine.<sup>56</sup>

### **Out in the Desert: Worshipping Sulton Bobo**

I would now like to turn to Safarov's discussion of a shrine associated with the cult of another saint known as Sulṭān Uvays al-Qaranī in Muslim hagiographical sources and referred to as Sulton Veys Bobo or alternatively as Sulton Bobo or Veys Bobo in local

---

<sup>55</sup> *Kitāb-i ḥazrat-i Shaykh Kabīr Āta / Maṅqabat-i Shaykh Kabīr Āta*, MS Tashkent, IVANRUZ, inv. no. 2069/2, fols. 29b–30a.

<sup>56</sup> Snesev, *Khorezmskie legendy*, pp. 154–155.

parlance.<sup>57</sup> The shrine in question is part of a massive devotional complex situated on the right bank of the Amu Darya river, out in the Qyzyl-Qum desert and perched on the western slope of the Sultan Uvays hills. It is named after a mystic of Yemeni origin who was known for having ‘received spiritual training from the Prophet Muhammad without ever meeting him.’<sup>58</sup> As I will show below, this shrine owes its popularity among Uzbeks more to the oral narratives circulating in the region than to the written hagiographic lore devoted to the figure of Sulton Bobo. In fact, Safarov’s shrine catalogue does not offer much in terms of hagiographical material. However, Soviet ethnography provides a much richer picture in terms of the narratives surrounding the saint, which can explain retrospectively why it remained an object of popular devotion throughout the Soviet period, in spite of the fact that the shrine is situated at a considerable distance from populated areas. I shall review this body of ethnographic literature in a moment, but let us begin by reading what Safarov noted about Sulton Bobo in 1961:

The tomb of this Sulton Veys is located inside the Qarashli mountain in the district of Shabboz [now Beruniy] in Qaraqalpaqstan. Originally, Sulton Veys was an Arab. He died sometime in the sixth [sic] century in the battle of ‘Ali against Mu‘aviya, then the governor of Syria, in a place called Duma al-Jandal. His corpse was buried there. In the fifteenth century, a traveller known as Yodgor came to hunt on the mountains where today the tomb of Sulton Bobo [is located]. Yodgor Bobo was known to the people as Bobo Chiqar on account of his own height.<sup>59</sup> One day he went to a village and told the people that he had seen the shrine of Sultan Veys in

---

<sup>57</sup> For purposes of consistency, I shall refer to the saint as Sulton Bobo unless otherwise formulated in the sources from which I quote.

<sup>58</sup> Devin DeWeese, “The ‘Tadhkira-i Bughrā-khān’ and the ‘Uvaysī’ Sufis in Central Asia: Notes in Review of ‘Imaginary Muslims,’” *Central Asiatic Journal* Vol. 40 No. 1 (1996), p. 87.

<sup>59</sup> In Uzbek, the name ‘Bobo Chiqar’ contains an allusion to his height, suggesting that he was a giant.

a dream and that his tomb was on this mountain. [Also,] he claimed that Sultan Veys had given him mystical foresight: [the mystic] had shown [where] his tomb [should be built] and had invited him to make it thrive. The ignorant people believed in such stories: they built a tomb of Sulton Veys where it had been shown, they stuck poles and flags [all around it] and they turned it into a site of pilgrimage. This Bobo Chiqar [claimed] to have dreamed of Sulton Veys once again. [During that dream, Sulton Veys] showed to him the place where he should pray to God with requests (*munājāt*) and said that, whatever his request, one should stand there and God will satisfy him. He therefore stuck poles and flags on the slope of that mountain and named it 'The Mountain of Appeals.' He also began to read verses of the Qur'an. [Following this example,] the commoners turned [that mountain] into a place of ritual visitation and began to go there with a mullah, read the Qur'an and prayed God to fulfil their requests. Once again Sulton Veys gave Bobo Chiqar the ability to see the future and one day showed him a place where to hunt for antelopes. Having stuck poles and flags [into the ground there], the commoners began to visit this place as a site of pilgrimage. In this way, both from nearby and faraway places, ignorant people started to visit the shrine where the corpse of Sulton Veys [was buried] and made offerings by bringing rams, cows, camels, bread and pilaf; also, they made pilgrimage to the so-called Mountain of Appeals. After that, they began to worship the space of the shrine of Sulton Veys where they bred antelopes; they also appealed to that shrine [to fulfil] their own wishes. In later times, among rulers and governors, one [Qunghrat dynast] Nazar Biy began to worship the tomb [of Sulton Veys] in that shrine, and he erected [a number of] buildings upon it. He made a convent for the sheikhs and a house for seclusion for pilgrims. He also embellished the tomb by putting

in very tall poles and flags. Eltüzer Khan<sup>60</sup> enlarged all of this. He built a mosque and a dedicated ablutions house. He also endowed land in support of those serving the mullahs and the imams. Muhammad Rahim Khan I too became devoted to Sulton Veys. Above his tomb, he built a big convent for Sufis with a portal, a dome and cupolas. Around it, he erected a place for Qur'an reciters, a small madrasa and a house for seclusion for pilgrims. He too endowed land to the benefit of these institutions. It is for this reason that the tomb of Sulton Veys has become a famous and such a magnificent place of worship. Today the marvellous buildings erected by the past rulers are still preserved.<sup>61</sup>

Proceeding in a fashion similar to his narrativizing the cult of Najm al-Din Kubra, Safarov here historicizes the saintly persona of Sulton Bobo. Indeed, Safarov is adamant about the fact that this figure's shrine exuded Islamic history, for Qunghrat dynasts worshipped the saint and made necessary investments to erect the same buildings that one could observe in the early 1960s and which have indeed remained to this day. This is to say that, after the Second World War, a pilgrimage to the shrine of Sulton Bobo could create a strong connection between a believer and the Islamic history of the region. In fact, Safarov was not the only writer who sought to situate historically Sulton Bobo's persona and his saintly status. There is a robust body of textual sources produced in Khorezm that together scaffold and support the narratives we find in Safarov: the notion of the death of Sulton Bobo at the hands of Mu'aviya fighting against the Fourth Caliph, for instance, is articulated in a recently discovered hagiography crafted in the region at the turn of the 20th

---

<sup>60</sup> Eltüzer Khan was a Qonghrat dynast who ruled over Khorezm between 1804 and 1806. See Yuri Bregel and Paolo Sartori, "Khanate of Khiva."

<sup>61</sup> *Khwārazmda muqaddas o'run tutub khalqlarning ziyaratgāhi bo'lub kelgan avliyālarning ta'rīkhī vāqi'alari*, MS Khiva, Ichan Qal'a Museum, inv. no. 3266, fols. 53-55.

century.<sup>62</sup> Local rulers' devotion to the holy figure is furthermore widely attested in the chronicles produced at the court of the Khans of Khiva,<sup>63</sup> an attestation which we find in Soviet ethnography too.

The body of narratives about Sulton Bobo in Khorezm is somewhat complex and deeply fragmented, with noticeable confusion surrounding the dates of his life and death. One informant, for example, told Snesev that Sulton Bobo died during the Prophet's lifetime, that he took part in 'Ali's battles to ascend the Caliph's throne, and this happened many years after the Prophet's death. Another version of the narrative came from one Said Aka, a 73-year-old carpenter from Khanqa:

Sultan Veys always walked barefoot, naked, barely covered by a blanket. He would walk around shouting: *hu! hu!*<sup>64</sup> Out of his mouth came only prayers. Every sigh of Sulton Veys was heard in Mecca, and angels surrounded him. The four rightly guided caliphs, Abu-Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali came to him and brought him clothes sent to him by the Prophet Muhammad: a cloak and a hat. Sulton Veys received gifts from Muhammad and lost his memory. He wore the cloak and the hat. Then he grabbed a stone and hit his head, [which made him] cry. All the birds gathered and wept over his broken head. Sulton Veys requested that God accept all the sinners, so that he might guide them to the right path. But God was angry at him for breaking his head. 'Your tears have turned into a river,' said God to Veys. 'I ask you for all the sinful men,' insisted Sulton Veys. God gave him only one-third of all the sinners, but Sulton Veys insisted. He expressed his objection by hitting his head with the stone again. When the Caliphs came in help, God shut the door of grace and

---

<sup>62</sup> Allāh-Yār, *Riyāz al-zākirīn*, MS Urgench, Private Collection, fol. 146a.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Shīr-Muḥammad Mīrāb Mūnis and Muḥammad Rizā Mīrāb Āgahī, *Firdaws al-iqbāl: History of Khorezm*, translated from Chaghatay and Annotated by Yuri Bregel (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 204 and *passim*.

<sup>64</sup> 'He is God'.

Sulton Veys accused them of hindering his conversation with God. He began to pray for the fate of the remaining sinners, and they too were handed over to him.<sup>65</sup>

Despite its erratic character, this narrative encapsulates details of major significance for the hagiographical lore associated with the image of Sulton Bobo. The first one is that he was the Prophet's beloved, which explains why he had received the Prophet's cloak as a gift. The second detail is his bold 'trade' with God for the sins of the Muslim ecumene, and his subsequent grief over the image of God turning away from him, a topic which occupies most of the written hagiographical lore coming from the region pertaining to Sulton Bobo and which was copied until (at least), the 1920s.<sup>66</sup>

Consensus furthermore formed around the idea that he was a shepherd, hence his association with animals, as narrated by Safarov. 'Sulton Veys was a camel herder,' one Amed Maksim Abdukarimov from Beruniy told Snesev; 'he used to sit on a mountain, on the ruins of a tower, and play the flute. The camels heard the sound of the flute...' Vaipa Vaisov recalled a similar story: 'Here lived Sulton Veys herding camels while sitting on a tower. Sulton Bobo was a camel breeder, and on the tower, he sat and watched the camels grazing.'<sup>67</sup> This latter detail is once again a motif that we find recorded in the *Khwārazm ta'rīfi*, a pilgrim guide first crafted in Khorezm in the 19th century. This source tells us that Sulton Bobo went to a castle on a mountain where he cried and because of his laments the wild animals gathered around him, including antelopes and camels,<sup>68</sup> all images that we have encountered in Safarov's shrine catalogue.

---

<sup>65</sup> Snesev, *Khorezmskie legendy*, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Bekjān Raḥmān o'ghli, *Khwārazm ta'rīfi*, MS Tashkent, IVAN RUZ inv. no. 7700, fols. 46a-47a. This manuscript was copied in 1928.

<sup>67</sup> Snesev, *Khorezmskie legendy*, p. 87.

<sup>68</sup> On the association between antelopes and the cult of saints in Central Asia, see Allen J. Frank, "Sayaq Ata and the Antelopes: Game Animals as an Islamic Theme in Qazaq Hagiography," in Eren Tasar, Allen J. Frank and Jeff Eden (eds.), *From the Khan's Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian*

Where was Sul-ton Bobo from? Snesev's informants had a variety of views regarding this matter, but they all agreed on one thing: the saint was foreign to Khorezm. One Vapa Vaisov held that he was a native of Yemen, while Abdurahman Sharipov was sure that the saint came from Africa. But if Sul-ton Bobo was of African origin, how to explain the fact that he was buried in Khorezm? A man who tended the shrine explained that: 'After his death, seven rulers argued over who would have the honour of taking the body of the saint to his country. 'Ali ordered seven coffins to be prepared with sentinels placed to guard them; and then he ordered: 'In the evening check in which of the seven coffins the body of Veys will be put so that it may be taken to his homeland!' In the evening, the rulers inspected the coffins and it turned out that Veys' corpse was in all of them. The rulers took them to their countries. But the original body of Sultan Veys was brought here to this place by the ruler of Khorezm; the other coffins contained only lookalikes [of the saint].'<sup>69</sup>

Sul-ton Bobo is not, of course, the only saint in Khorezm whose ancestral origins branched to the Middle East. In fact, local narratives' insistence on the import of his corpse is a widely circulating story<sup>70</sup> and one that makes him a truly 'international' saint and which ties the holy ground of Uzbekistan to other, equally holy areas of the Muslim world.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, it also privileges Khorezm over

---

*Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese*, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 409-434; Kleinmichel, *Halpa in Choresm (Hwārazm) und Ātin Āyi im Ferghanatal. Zur Geschichte des Lesens in Usbekistan im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. II, pp. 263-264; Bekjān Rahmān o'ghli, *Khwārazm ta'rifi*, MS Tashkent, IVAN RUZ inv. no. 7700, fols. 47b-48a.

<sup>69</sup> Snesev, *Khorezmskie legendy*, p. 88.

<sup>70</sup> The same narrative line is to be found in the Khorezmian hagiographical lore devoted to the saintly figure of Abu Muslim, whose coffin was brought, as the story goes, from Merv to Darghan-Ata in today Turkmenistan, see Paolo Sartori, "From the Demotic to the Literary: The Ascendance of the Vernacular Turkic in Central Asia (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries)," *Eurasian Studies* vol. XVIII (2020), pp. 241-242.

<sup>71</sup> See DeWeese, "Mapping Khwārazmian Connections in the History of Sufi Traditions. Local Embeddedness, Regional Networks, and Global Ties of the Sufi



those other areas, by making clear that it was Khorezm that got the real body; this resembles the victory of the spirits of Baqirghan (a town in northern Khorezm) in ensuring that another saint, Sayyid Ata, was buried there, thus prevailing over the spirits of the Ka'ba who came to contend with them for the body.<sup>72</sup> Both stories are rather daring affirmations of the local over the universal. This local appropriation can explain why Safarov interjected the figure of a traveller who brought the tale of Sulton Bobo to the people of Khorezm. Himself a foreigner and a giant – another typical feature of other Arab fighters for Islam such as Shamun Nabi, a prominent saint whose shrine is in Qaraqalpaqstan (see Chapter Four) –, the traveller acted as a bridge-figure between the saint and the communities in Khorezm which were destined to worship him.<sup>73</sup> Be that as it may, Sulton Bobo himself endowed the traveller with miraculous foresight, which was necessary to uncover the location of the *avliyo* in Khorezm. Here again we observe how the shrine acted as a memory-space: by preserving narratives about Sulton Bobo's death as a martyr while fighting for the fourth Caliph, the shrine conjured up a strong connection to the Islamic annals and offered a powerful narrative of subversion against an unjust rule.

Finally, the oral narratives recorded at the shrine of Sulton Bobo in the 1950s offer material that invites us to reflect on the transfiguration of the hagiographical lore into practices of devotion. Absent in Safarov's shrine catalogue, the following account is extant in

---

Communities of Khwārazm.”

<sup>72</sup> Mehmet Fuad Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 112.

<sup>73</sup> In fact, another text (originally from Eastern Turkestan) clarifies that the image of the 'traveller' belongs to the narrative cycle devoted to Sulton Bobo where the traveller is a designation for a hidden saint. In this respect, Safarov has included once again an oral narrative whose origin was most probably to be found in a hagiographical tradition circulating not only in Khorezm, but also within broader devotional communities in Central Asia. Devin DeWeese, "An 'Uvaysī' hagiography from eastern Turkistān: The *tadhkira* of Quṭb al-Dīn 'Irāqī," *Etudes orientales: Revue culturelle semestrielle* Vols. 27–28 (2016), pp. 34–35.

poetical texts written to eulogize the saint. As the story goes, having found out that someone had knocked out a tooth of the Prophet Muhammad with a stone at the battle of Uhud, in a fit of fervour Sulton Bobo wanted to do the same to himself. However, not knowing what tooth the Prophet had lost, he decided to knock out all his thirty-two teeth.<sup>74</sup> This shard of hagiographical lore was still circulating when Snesarev visited the devotional complex of Sulton Bobo in 1958. However, this account was anchored in the sacred territory of the shrine. In fact, the sheikhs tending the shrine led Snesarev to the exact location where Sulton Bobo supposedly had knocked out all his teeth. At a considerable distance from the shrine itself, in a deserted area, Snesarev was shown a huge pile of rocks topped by poles (*tughs*) tied with votive cloths.

Reviewing most of the textual corpus devoted to this saint of local production, Sigrid Kleinmichel has suggested that the circulation of this hagiographical lore well into the Soviet period makes perfect sense: hostility to public religiosity must have pushed many to return to the foundations of their belief – which is to say, to hagiography.<sup>75</sup> Sufi narratives allowed believers to travel back in time and away from their daily chores and, in doing so, they offered ample opportunities to escape the dullness of Soviet reality. Retaining their ability to speak to multiple audiences, Sufi narratives told at the shrines were clearly subversive of Soviet modernity.

---

<sup>74</sup> *Halpa in Choresm (Hwārazm) und Ātin Āyi im Ferghanatal. Zur Geschichte des Lesens in Usbekistan im 20. Jahrhundert*, ii, p. 291.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.



Figure 3.3 Pilgrims at the holy site of Murajag-Tau close to the shrine of Sulton Bobo, 1956. Collection Gleb Snesarev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

## **Part 2**

### **After the Khrushchevian Anti-religious Wave**

Now that I have offered several examples of how shrines connected Uzbeks to their Islamic history by keeping Sufi narratives alive, I would now like to turn my attention to a different issue and attempt to explain what went wrong in the ways in which the Soviet government attempted to curtail shrine visitation.

In mid-March 1968, one A. Nurushev, a representative of the department for anti-religious propaganda based in Beruniy, wrote a memo about the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice, the second most important religious holiday for Muslims in Central Asia, where he reported about local atheistic initiatives to the head of the Communist Party in the region. On that occasion, accompanied by a Qaraqalpaq CARC commissioner, activists chose to visit the shrines of Sulton Bobo and Narimjon Bobo, located in the Beruniy and To'rtko'l districts in Qaraqalpaqstan respectively. The memo says that the group of activists made it first to the shrine of Sulton Bobo where they were met by a crowd of approximately seven hundred pilgrims. The first thing they did was to take notes of the number plates of the vehicles that had transported the people to the devotional complex. However, to their bewilderment they discovered that all these vehicles belonged in fact to collective farms located in the Beruniy district, and that they had travelled to the holy place *officially*, that is, with the permission of their administrations. Indeed, all of them sported on their windshields a sign in Russian: *ziarat*, or 'shrine visitation.'<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> *Vse éti transporty prinadlezhat khoziaistvam i organizatsiiam Biruniiskogo raiona. Pochti vse oni priekhali s razresheniem rukovoditelei. O chem svidetel'stvuiut otobrannyem nami putevye listy*, QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 34, l. 1. See also the report to the first secretary of the provincial committee of the Communist Party (25.03.1982), QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 222, l. 23.

С П И С О К  
автомашин и др. виды транспорта посетивших "Султан-Бобу"  
10-11 марта 1968 г. ( с 11 часов утра до 1 часу дня).

№ п/п	Номера автомашин и тракторных прицепов	Какому хозяйству принадлежит	К-во перевезен. на них пассажиров
<u>за 10 марта 1968 г.</u>			
1.	Груз.автомашина № 26-87 КПА	Не известно	
2.	Прицеп № 32	Совхоз "40лет Узбекистана" ✓	
3.	Автомашина "Москвич" №95-88 КПА	Не известно	
4.	Грузовая автомашина № 60-86 ЕТ	"-	
5.	Автобус 60-92 КПА	"-	
6.	Грузовая автомашина 59-79 КПА	"-	
7.	Груз.автомашина № 00-61 КПБ	Колхоза "Правда" ✓	
8.	Автобудка № 98-96 КПА	Не известно	
9.	Лег.автомашина газ-69 № 50-46 ЕТ	Бирунийский райводхоза ✓	
10.	Грузовая автомашина № 88-98 КПА	Не известно	
11.	" автомашина № 27-52 КПБ	"-	
12.	" " № 33-09 КПБ	"-	
13.	" " № 24-04 КПБ	"-	
14.	Тракторный прицеп № 68	Совхоза "40 лет Узбекистана"	
15.	Автобудка № 12-53 КПА	Не известно	
16.	Груз.автомашина № 82-98 КПА (привоз семьи Себарман ишана)	Бирунийского райпо ✓	
17.	Груз.автомашина № 61-55 ЕТ	Не известно	
18.	Автобудка № 82-89 КПА	"-	
19.	Тракторный прицеп № 88	Совхоза им.Бируни ✓	
20.	Тракторный прицеп № 89 трактор № 92 прицеп	совхоза "40 лет Узбекистана"	
21.	Груз.автомашина № 13-86 КПА	Не известно	
22.	Груз.автомашина № 66-01 КПА	"-	
23.	" " № 14-91 КПБ	"-	
24.	" " № 61-53 ЕТ	Колхоза "Коммуна" ✓	
25.	Тракторный прицеп № 223	Не известно	
26.	Легковая автомашина газ-69 № 86-80 ХВА из Хорезма		
27.	Грузовая автомашина № 59-79 КПА	Автобаза № 42 Бируни ✓	
28.	" " № 21-32 КПА	Не известно	

Figure 3.4 The left-hand column lists the vehicles found at the shrine of Sul-ton Bobo on 10 March 1968. The right-hand column indicates the vehicles' owners. © Party Archive of the Qaraqalpaq Regional Committee of the Uzbek Communist Party, Nukus

One can only guess the atheists' disorientation upon their realizing that schools too had joined this religious tour, and they could do little else other than observing how sheikhs commanded authority over the pilgrims who eagerly made offerings to them. The activists

encountered a similar state of affairs when they visited the shrine of Narimjon Bobo on the next day, for they found that a funeral was being celebrated with more than six hundred attendees.<sup>77</sup> The presence of various representatives of the local Qaraqalpaq intelligentsia was naturally a source of particular concern. But what most of all left our atheists shocked was to note that the Narimjon Bobo shrine had turned into a major burial site where people of every stripe brought their deceased loved ones. Indeed, Nurushev lamented that many had built expensive tombs 'in pursuit of false glory and at the behest of an imaginary authority.'<sup>78</sup> Further, he explained that these tombs were so large that they each required more than 35-40 thousand burnt bricks for their construction. Then he noted a revealing detail: many of these Islamic-style mausoleums were in fact dedicated to Communist party apparatchiks. 'How could a monument with religious features be erected [to honor] the late Yunus Ibrahimov, a former member of the Communist Party?,' he thundered in a fit of anger. As we shall see, Nurushev had uncovered a widespread scheme to steal Soviet state property for religious purposes. Indirectly, however, his memo sheds light on the fact that Communist Party members *qua* Muslims assumed that because their tombs will be erected on sacred ground, they too would be endowed with holy status.<sup>79</sup>

It is striking that the conclusions of his memo were so trite, amounting to little more than the meaningless banality of Soviet bureaucratism. The following statement can be read as a memento of the ingrained inability of many like Nurushev to think beyond

---

<sup>77</sup> On cemeteries as a space of religiosity in Kazakhstan after the Second World War, see Isabelle Ohayon, "Documenting Kazakh Funeral Rituals through Material Life Indicators (1960s-1980s)," *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 83-106.

<sup>78</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 34, l. 3.

<sup>79</sup> On shrines shedding an aura of religious prestige on the institutions, including cemeteries, erected within their precincts, see John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 176-177.



clichés and elaborate a performative language that could truly act upon society:

Having visited these shrines, we have established that the massive attendance is due to inadequate or lack of preventive measures on the eve of the Feast of Sacrifice and, most importantly, the conciliatory attitude towards the vestiges of the past ... The shrine of Sul-ton Bobo has now become a district cemetery which accomodates burials of people coming from all over the district. In our opinion, it would be desirable to take a number of measures to improve the area, namely to fence off the shrine, to build a teahouse nearby, and to organize a funeral team of 2-3 people on a cost-sharing basis. This measure would be a manifestation of humanitarianism, it would put an end to cooking in unsanitary conditions, and probably would give positive results in the fight against charlatans and itinerant clerics, who will reach there for alms.<sup>80</sup>

At this point, it is difficult to imagine how the Secretary of the Qaraqalpaq Communist Party, Q. Rzaev, reacted to these suggestions. Did he burst into laughter or did he flinch and snarl in anger? There is of course no way for us to know. At any rate, while examining this record I have found myself repeatedly wondering whether this Nurushev ever thought in earnest, even for one second, that a teahouse alone could fend off the attention of people who had travelled for hours on a tractor-trailer, painfully bumping along the road towards the edge of the Qara-Qum desert. Certainly, it is ironic that a local official imagined that the pilgrims who made it to the shrine to supplicate Sul-ton Bobo for intercession before God would happily be fobbed off instead with a visit to a Soviet-style teahouse.

When Rzaev reviewed Nurushev's memo he took a red pencil and underscored the names of those who, unbeknownst to the atheist authorities, had built their own tombs in the territories of the

---

<sup>80</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 34, l. 4.

shrines in a full display of competitive ostentation.<sup>81</sup> That was a sign that Rzaev would not leave the matter unaddressed; and nor indeed did he do so. He alerted the local branch of the KGB, which found out that 'individuals without official permission of the local authorities have built very large tombs, sometimes up to eight metres in height, similar in form to shrines over the graves of so-called [Muslim] saints. Attached to the memo [sent by the KGB] is an album with photographs of 29 tombs built in cemeteries in a number of areas. These tombs were built mainly on the grounds of deceased mullahs, tradesmen and economic organisations. There have been cases of mausoleums built for mullahs who are still alive. For example, close to the shrine of Narimjon Bobo, tombs have been built [to honour] Ibadulla Kurbanbaev, who was convicted in 1971 for charlatan activity, and to the mullah Oryv Batyrov who is still alive [and who is the guardian of the shrine itself],<sup>82</sup> and the late Sadulla Ataniyazov. A total of eight tombs were built in this cemetery, using 15 - 20 thousand bricks. In the district of Kho'jayli, several tombs were built close to the shrine of Yusup Eshon to honour Sheikh Akhun Sisenbaev, who is a mullah, Amin Akhun Kulsharov, who is the former administrator of the [local] mosque, Kaybrakhman Koshchanov, who is the former director of a collective barn (*otkormochnaia baza*) in Kho'jayli, the former chairman of the Engels collective farm, one Sankebay Tynyshtykov, and many others. [We are dealing here with] over ten large structures in total. In the same area, in the Mazlumkhon suluu cemetery, large tombstones have been built in the shape of *mazars* for Tazhi Shankulov, a former tax official of the Kho'jayli district (*zagotkontor*), and for one Smagulov, a former teacher, and other people, for a total of eight tombs. [...] There are similar structures in the cemeteries the Kungrad, Kegeyli and Beruniy districts.'<sup>83</sup>

Not only was the construction of such tombs a means to foment religious fanaticism, but it was also becoming a source of frustration

---

<sup>81</sup> See f. i, op. 3, d. 458, ll. 39-40.

<sup>82</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 34, l. 4.

<sup>83</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 598, ll. 43-44.



among workers who observed how large quantities of construction materials were stolen and repurposed to build Islamic mausoleums, as explained first by Nurushev. Qaraqalpaq Communist Party Secretary Rzaev was furious. However, he was unable to do much beside trotting out the usual secularist platitudes: ‘When making these [execrable] facts known, the Party central committee draws the attention of the city, district, party and Soviet bodies to the need to take measures to put an end to these violations. The city and district party committees and city executive committees should strengthen their leadership over communal services and village and settlement councils, which are obliged, in accordance with the legislation on religious cults, to ensure strict compliance with sanitary rules and norms for the arrangement and maintenance of cemeteries. It is necessary to revive the activity of commissions for the observance of the legislation on religion in order to suppress the illegal activities of the clergy: the commissions should expose the deceptiveness of the clergy and the activities of charlatan elements which spread superstition among the population. It is necessary to further strengthen the work of party, Soviet, trade union and Komsomol bodies in the field, councils of elders, councils for the introduction of new rituals and ceremonies into the life of workers, and the organisation of the ‘Knowledge’ society for the scientific and atheistic education of workers to combat religious rituals and ceremonies.’<sup>84</sup> As we shall see, however, this lofty statement of purpose was destined to remain a mere dead letter.

The measures which the most active representatives of Soviet atheism were ready to undertake in order to fight the opiate of the people amounted to making empty promises. We should therefore not be surprised to find that several years later, in 1974, a classified memo addressed to the Communist Party of Qaraqalpaqstan explained that the situation had not improved much in the meantime.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the CARC commissioners for Qaraqalpaqstan opened their

---

<sup>84</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 598, l. 44

<sup>85</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 24, d. 186, ll. 34-40.

report with the warning message about a certain revival (*ozhivlenie*) of religious life both in urban and rural areas. More specifically, the commissioners lamented that congregational prayers to celebrate the end of Ramadan were held at the shrines of Sul-ton Bobo in the Beruniy district, Narimjon Bobo in the To'rtko'l district, and other holy sites in the district of Kho'jayli, which had witnessed massive attendance: 37 vehicles belonging to the collective farms transported more than 600 pilgrims to the shrine of Sul-ton Bobo. Reporting to the authorities in Nukus, the CARC commissioners painted a lively scene of a collective religious ritual which transcended the regimented proceedings of a congregational prayer. In fact, the description provided by CARC representatives is reminiscent of *sayls*, the seasonal massive pilgrimages during which entire villages relocated at a specific shrine to live and work there for a period of time.<sup>86</sup> A *sayl* represented more than just a ritual visitation to a holy place. It was a radical experience of communal religious belonging: '[all around the shrine,]' write CARC commissioners, 'there were various assortments of goods (children's toys, earrings, combs, sunflower seeds, apples, etc.) in the common area and in huts that were built by the pilgrims themselves among the graves. Among them,

---

<sup>86</sup> A memoir written in 1964 offers a vivid description of a *sayl* to the shrine of Go'zli Bobo in Khorezm: 'Musicians, Qur'an reciters and preachers used to gather at night: they played the *soz* and the *sur-nay* and commented [upon texts that were read]. Anyone could either cook their own offerings individually or prepare food for the other guests joining the festivity. People were also free to add supplementary offerings to those already available: in this case, they used a big cauldron to cook a pilaf and distribute it among the people who could not make it to Go'zli Bobo. The cemetery of Go'zli Bobo was tended by its own sheikh who served the people coming both from the villages and the city. Part of the offerings that they brought with them would go to him too. Since attendants came here with an open heart, they spent the night together with musicians and preachers and only at dawn they would part and go. 'Abdullah Bältäyif [Baltaev], *Ta'rikh Khivā esdaliklari* (1964), *daftar* no. 45, MS Khiva, private collection, 91a-b. On the hagiographical tradition of Go'zli Bobo in the early modern period, see Devin DeWeese, "A Khwārazmian Saint in the Golden Horde: Közlük Ata (Gözlü Ata) and the Social Vectors of Islamization," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* Vol. 143 (2018), pp. 1-22.

[we saw] people selling newly published editions of religious books *Aptik* [*<Haftiyak*],<sup>87</sup> printed with garish bindings on plain cordon paper of various colours. People were buying each book for 40-50 roubles, and asking for the Qur'an, 40-*parz* [*< Uzb. qirq farz*]<sup>88</sup> and other titles. Incidentally, the sale of these titles of religious literature is taking place in the Kho'jayli district by various persons, who have already been reported to the competent authorities. In addition, on this day of the religious holiday of [the end of Ramadan] (*Uraza Bayram*), there were numerous beggars, sheikhs and clergymen, charlatans who came with pilgrims, and some who are almost permanent residents of cemeteries around the mosque and in so-called holy places. Most of the pilgrims arrived by truck also from neighbouring provinces in Turkmenistan and brought small livestock (seven rams in total) to donate in the name of Allah. They cooked the meat and handed it out to strangers. Pilgrims to the holy sites of Sulton Bobo, Narimjon Bobo, Ketmenchi Ota and Sheveli Eshon organised congregational prayers (*aitnamaz*) directly in the cemeteries, which were performed by local imams.<sup>89</sup>

What could the CARC commissioners do at this point? They seem to have found themselves at a loss, for their measures amounted to hosting conversations with pilgrims, explaining the legislation on religious cults. In the end, they resorted to their familiar old tactic and instructed the imams of the Kho'jayli and Chimbay mosques to read the fatwa issued by the SADUM against the cult of saints. At times, one feels pity for the Commissioners when reading their reports. Not only did they often lack imagination, but they also approached their task in a desultory fashion, as if they had to check off items on a list. One is inclined to think that they were merely

---

<sup>87</sup> The *haftiyak* ('one seventh') contains a selection of Qur'anic sūras and it used to be employed in the *maktab* as a primer. Depending on their size, they could also be used for talismanic purposes, see Marie Efthymiou, "The Qur'ān Manuscripts in the Al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, Republic of Uzbekistan. An Overview," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* Vol. 6 No. 1 (2015), pp. 1-16.

<sup>88</sup> A manual of Islamic religious ethics in Turki.

<sup>89</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 24, d. 186, l. 38.

following a meaningless bureaucratic pattern when at the end of their report they added 'it should be noted that before and during the Ramadan, a large group of atheists from the 'Knowledge' (*Znanie*) society held numerous lectures among the population and in the fields during the cotton-harvesting campaign.'<sup>90</sup> Whether perfunctory or not, these courses of action would seem to have the effect of ceding the state's authority to SADUM, i.e., telling the practitioners not that the state disapproved of their actions, but that SADUM did. Of course, this tactic may also have raised the believers' ire against SADUM, but it implicitly sent the message that what SADUM said mattered more than what the state said.

As we begin to grasp the sheer inefficacy of anti-religious propaganda, especially with regard to the cult of the saints, we are confronted with the following question: were all parties involved ranging from CARC commissioners to Party leaders simply faking their commitment to the cause? In many respects, what one reads in the documentary output produced by the CARC suggests either that Soviet bureaucracy had no memory of its hitherto unfulfilled decisions and resolutions which were stored away in its archives, or that no one simply cared. In 1977, for example, CARC led a major operation to test the efficiency of anti-religious propaganda. On 7 September, CARC commissioner for Qaraqalpaqstan, R. Qdyrbaev, visited the shrine of Sulton Bobo, accompanied by the representative of the local Party committee. Once at the shrine, Qdyrbaev found more than 50 pilgrims, most of whom were female, including a large number of schoolgirls. When Qdyrbaev stopped one of the girls and asked who she was, the girl replied that she was attending the 9th grade at the Sverdlov school in Beruniy, but refused to say anything more, for a man accompanying her urged her not to speak with the state official: so much for the power of the Soviet state! Interestingly, Qdyrbaev further reported that pilgrims came not only from nearby areas, but also travelled from afar. One family had come to Beruniy all the way from the district of Bulungir, in

---

<sup>90</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 24, d. 186, l. 39.

the region of Samarqand. But when asked why they had decided to come to the shrine, with an artful rhetorical move they claimed they had come to pay a visit to their acquaintances living in the neighbouring town of Manghit, and, just happening to pass by Sulton Bobo, they decided to take a look.

One finds the same emplotment when Qdyrbaev reported on the situation at the holy site of Mazlumkhon Suluu, a major burial complex located in the district of Kho'jayli, which includes the famous shrine of Shamun Nabi.<sup>91</sup> First, to his surprise he found that pilgrimage to this shrine had continued. The surprise had to do with the fact that in 1966, in a dazzling display of power, a special commission had excavated the shrine to 'prove' that the saint wasn't buried there, and ever since activists had claimed that devotional activities at the site had decreased. In thus seeking to undermine the shrine's spiritual legitimacy on the grounds that the eponymous saint was not buried there, the commission was making use of a common tactic. But it was a tactic that had a problematic counter-implication – namely, that if somebody plausibly identifiable as the saint *was* buried at the shrine, then it would be perfectly legitimate to perform pilgrimage there; one might say that this is scientific materialism hoisted with its own petard. Most probably, the CARC commissioner had believed in the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Communist state. In fact, he noted down with bitterness that, while he himself witnessed only a few people at the shrine of Shamun Nabi and the mausoleum of Mazlumkhon Suluu, piles of stones left behind by previous pilgrims were a testament to the intensity of shrine visitation. Secondly, Qdyrbaev to his dismay had to acknowledge that, in spite of reams of resolutions being written on the subject by various Party organs, the construction of expensive tombs in cemeteries belonging to the territories of shrines never stopped. Not far from the Mazlumkhon suluu mausoleum, on the north-eastern side of the building, a massive tombstone had been erected for a former Party official (one Khaytbaev) who had recently died. The large plot of

---

<sup>91</sup> I discuss this devotional complex at length in Chapter Four.

land destined for the burial and the construction of the mausoleum was delimited by a triangular-shaped iron fence, something suggesting that this area had been chosen much earlier and repurposed into a construction site. In reporting about this specific case, Qdyrbaev acknowledged that the parties involved were not in breach of state regulations and were therefore little amenable to considering the construction of this mausoleum a violation of the Soviet law on cults. Inquiring with the builders, Qdyrbaev was warned that Khaytbaev's sons commanded authority in the region: one was the chairman of a collective farm, while the other was the director of a technical college. Facing the prospect of a turf war, the only thing that Qdyrbaev could do was to proceed humbly and 'pass suggestions to the first secretary of the district committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan.'<sup>92</sup>

Qdyrbaev may appear powerless at this point of the story which I am relating. However, he was resourceful in his own way. In June 1978, he sent a secret memo to the first secretary of the Qaraqalpaq Communist Party where he illustrated the results of an inspection of the major shrines of the autonomous republic. As we shall see, Qdyrbaev did not quite fit the profile of the CARC commissioner: while fiercely committed to the atheist cause, he clearly despised formulaic expressions. He preferred to talk from his heart and to address issues directly. His report, therefore, can be read like an ethnographic account of sorts, including a plethora of details which one imagines Party leaders in Nukus may not have wanted to see landing on their desks. In the age of mature Socialism, there was no way that Soviet authorities in Uzbekistan could abandon their struggle against the shrines because of ideological pressure. And yet Qdyrbaev painted a picture where shrines represented a place where Muslim Soviet citizens could operate as they pleased in pursuit of their religiosity and their vision of the otherworld. His memo opens with a characterization of the cult of saints and the practice of shrine

---

<sup>92</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 30, d. 458, ll. 45-47.

visitation which reconciled Islamic fundamentalism, myopic Orientalism, and scientific materialism:

Making pilgrimages to so-called holy places is incompatible with orthodox Islam, and is a relic of ancient religious beliefs that arose at a time when man was powerless in the struggle for life. In the Qur'an and in the writings of many prominent scholars of Islam, the worship of holy places is condemned and called an apostasy from the religion of Islam. Despite this, pilgrimage has a definite place in the life of believers and fulfils an illusory and compensatory function. Under [our] modern conditions, the pilgrimage to holy places is a manifestation of religious survival. Pilgrimage to these places disconnects people and distracts them from socially useful work; also, it makes it difficult to pursue a Communist outlook. Therefore, taking the necessary measures to stop pilgrimages to holy places is an important task at our time.<sup>93</sup>

Once he got ideology out of the way, so to speak, Qdyrbaev shifted gears and put on his ethnographer's hat. In the following excerpt from his memo, he explains that collective farms served as a logistical infrastructure facilitating pilgrimage to Islamic shrines while protecting holy sites from the intrusive gaze of the state:

From March to 16 June 1978, we visited [various] holy places and we could observe many things that are contrary to the legislation on cults [...] There are five big sacred places on the territory of the republic, such as Sul-ton Bobo on the territory of the collective farm [named after] the 40th anniversary of Uzbekistan in the Beruniy district; Narimjon Bobo on the territory of the collective farm [named after] the 21st Party Congress in the Ellikqala district; Kzyl-Asker in the Kegeyli district; Sheykh Shibli and Azler Bobo on the territory of the collective farm [named after] Zhdanov in the district of

---

<sup>93</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l.49.

Nukus, and Daut Ata on the territory of the Kungrad collective farm in the Kungrad district. The day [when people usually make] pilgrimage to Sulton Bobo and Narimjon Bobo is Wednesday; for other [shrines], meanwhile, it is Thursday. In all these holy places, there are [buildings called either] *tileukhana* or *shillekhana* [*<chillakhona*], with three or four rooms, where pilgrims stay and have tea and other refreshments. There are also sheikhs who are the organisers of the pilgrimage: some stay for very long periods. One such case is Jumabay Berdiev, the sheikh [serving] at the Sulton Bobo shrine who has lived here for 25 years.<sup>94</sup>

At this point, Qdyrbaev embarks upon a detailed description of the situation that he encountered at every holy site he could visit. He begins with the shrine of Azler Bobo:

In Azler Bobo there are three sheikhs – Allamurat Jendullaev, born in 1903, a resident of a village named after Zhdanov in the district of Nukus, and Tursynov Medetkhozha and Yusup Kari, who do not have a specific place of residence. When we visited on 30 March 1978 there were several groups of people, most of them young, able-bodied men and women. In the *tileukhana* or *zhilleukhana* [sic!] sat a group of old men, who had gathered to consume opium (*koknar*). Similar facts were observed when visiting the holy site of Sheykh Shibli. Here at Azler Bobo shrine, several women were cooking. Not far from this place, six people were busy slaughtering a cow. Nearby stood a man on crutches who introduced himself as Murtabay Ymbergenov, a worker at the 'Communism' collective farm in the Nukus district. He said that he was the one responsible for leading the cattle to the [ritual] sacrifice. [This ritual is called] *zhan-sadak*. The pilgrims used public transport, cars and tractors for the journey. [In fact,] not far

---

<sup>94</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 50.



from the place where the cattle were slaughtered, there were three tractors with trailers.<sup>95</sup>

He then moved on the shrine of Sheykh Shibli:

On April 6, 1978, we found very many pilgrims visiting the Sheykh Shibli holy site – there were about 200 people, of whom 60% were men, 30% were women and 10% were children of school or pre-school age. Pilgrims first visit the *mazar* of Sheykh Shibli, where they offer money to [two] sheikhs, Kamal Serzhanov and Paluan Jumaniyazov, for reading verses from the Qur'an, and then head to the *tileukhana*, where men sit in a shed and women exchange bread and fried dough, and then take them away with them, as a gift. Six rams and goats were slaughtered here on that day.<sup>96</sup>

Having left the district of Nukus, Qdyrbaev drove north-west towards Kungrat and stopped at the shrine of Daud Ata:

At our visit on 19 April 1978 there were no pilgrims, as that day was not a pilgrimage day. Here too there is a *tileukhana* with three rooms, of which two are for men and one is for women. The necessary utensils for cooking are [also] available. The sheikh Toleubai Kuvatov told us that 50-60 pilgrims, elderly men, women and children gather here on Thursdays. Sometimes sacrifices are made. Beside Kuvatov, there is another sheikh [whose name is] Balymbet Kulimbetov: he is the organiser of the pilgrimage. A special place of worship is the stone pillars at the head of the shrine of Daud Ata, which are coated with some kind of black liquid. The base of the pillars is made of concrete in an oval shape, where on the edge, in one place, a small jug with a lid is placed, where the pilgrims, having made one circle around this pillar, leave

---

<sup>95</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 50.

<sup>96</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 51.

their offerings, mainly money. Of course, such actions have the effect of augmenting religious fervour.<sup>97</sup>

The shrines of Sulton Bobo and Narimjon Bobo close to the edge of the desert and 'the largest of all' were the last ones he visited:

During our visit on 25 March 1978, together with D.M. Malikov, a Commissioner of the Uzbek CARC, and Madiyarov, the chairman of the Society for the Protection of Historical Monuments, there were about 15 pilgrims at Sulton Bobo, while at Narimjon Bobo there were no pilgrims, except for six mausoleum builders, one watchman and one person from the undertakers. Such a low number of pilgrims is probably due to the intense agricultural activity [of the season]. At Sulton Bobo and Narimjon Bobo and at other cemeteries in the area there is a strange custom of leaving blankets after the funeral. [The blankets are used] to wrap the corpse, and there are plenty of [blankets] at Sulton Bobo, lying everywhere, with pilgrims sitting on them, drinking tea and eating. All this takes place in unsanitary conditions. Visiting the Sulton Bobo shrine was key to uncovering the fact that new mausoleums have appeared here; [they are so big that] they resemble a residential house. Such tombstones were built for Abdikadir Yuldashev and Bekimbet Babazhanov (former police officers) and for Gaziz Mukin (accountant). The dimensions of these mausoleums are 5m x 4m, and they are between 2.5m and 3m high. With regard to the construction of a mausoleum for Sадulla Matchanov, a former Party member, we have reminded the district Party and Soviet authorities that they should not allow such excesses. However, they seem not to have taken proper measures. When they visited, they found that the mausoleum was already in its final stages, measuring 4m x 4m, and between 5m and 6m high....<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 51.

<sup>98</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 52.

Qdyrbaev's classified report from 1978 ended with a proposal for 'initiatives' (*meropriatiia*) to implement the 1958 resolution of the central committee of the Communist Party to stop pilgrimages to holy places and the 1976 resolution of the Uzbek Council of Ministries to strengthen control over the observance of religious cults. Together with the predictable set of measures designed to improve agitation and propaganda, Qdyrbaev's initiatives required that the Ministry of the Interior, the prosecutor's office and the law courts take effective courses of action towards regulating religious activities at the shrines. Predictably, Qdyrbaev's recommendations were never implemented.

In fact, when they took the matter in their hands, state authorities could do very little. One such case presented itself in April 1982 when two hardliners, D. Seitniazov, then chairman of the republican commission for the ordering of civil rituals, and his deputy, J. Narymbetov, inspected the shrine of Narimjon Bobo. Reaching the shrine by traveling through the area belonging to a collective farm, they saw many things which left them baffled. One was the usual case of state-owned buses sporting the sign 'pilgrimage' (*ziyarat*) on their windshields, which reminded them that yet another tour to a holy site had been organised with the permission of some local officials.<sup>99</sup> But what particularly caught their attention was the sight of two newly erected massive tombstones. The mausoleums in question belonged to Bekjan Jabbarov and Mamat Reimov, respectively. A retired prosecutor of the Elli Qal'a district, Jabbarov had died in a car crash in July 1981. Reimov, meanwhile, was the former director of the ResPO motor base at To'rtko'l and had passed away in the same year. Seitniazov and Narymbetov sent a detailed report to the propaganda department of the Qaraqalpaq Communist Party in Nukus, in which they painted a rather grim picture: family members and other parties involved in the construction had illegally appropriated a great quantity of construction material (bricks, granite, rubble and bitumen); in addition, one of the mausoleums was

---

<sup>99</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 23.

decorated with 'a commemorative marble plaque, showing a portrait of the deceased, with his name and surname written in Cyrillic and Arabic alphabets, and the sign of a crescent moon. On top of the mausoleum on the four corners there are dome-shaped metal pillars the tips of which are decorated with Muslim symbols, namely crescents turned to the sky,'<sup>100</sup> which we can read today as an eloquent representation of Soviet Muslimness. The report read like a slap in the face to the propaganda department, which immediately took action. In addressing a formal request of clarification to the then head of the Party in Qaraqalpaqstan (A. Kamalov), the propaganda department seized the occasion to denounce Mamat Reimov's son, Komiljon: 'His behaviour as a Communist and a chief engineer of the motor base is reprehensible, for he has forgotten that his high title of a Party member and collective leader [comes with the] moral responsibility towards the public; by building a bulky mausoleum of marble, granite and cast-iron at massive expenses for his father's grave, he has allowed the violation of the Soviet laws, the principles of the Soviet way of life.'<sup>101</sup> The denunciation triggered a formal investigation which uncovered that both families, the Jabbarovs and the Reimovs, were close-knit, and that they had put in place a major scheme. While Komiljon Reimov could use the vehicles at the motor base as he pleased on behalf of the Jabbarovs, Jabbarov's daughter Roza had taken advantage of her secretarial position at the executive committee of the To'rtko'l district to secure a document allowing for the allocation of substantial amounts of marble for the construction of Reimov's tombstone.<sup>102</sup> The investigative commission clarified that both families invested resources amounting to 1200 roubles to build those tombstones. Clearly, they could do so because the departed commanded authority in the region and could mobilize an expanded network of acolytes: everyone ranging from the bricklayers<sup>103</sup> to the members of executive committee in Elli

---

<sup>100</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 4.

<sup>101</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 4.

<sup>102</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 30.

<sup>103</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 10.

Qal'a<sup>104</sup> was adamant that the departed deserved recognition. And the construction of mausoleums with Islamic insignia in the territory of the Narimjon Bobo shrine was the best possible way to express it. In the end, the parties involved did not face any consequences, and the mausoleums were left unmolested. By the beginning of the 1980s, it was apparent that the state authorities did not have a grip on manifestations of religiosity in Uzbekistan and that even measures of surveillance and control had become rather constrained – if indeed they had ever been anything else.

### **Shrines between Bureaucrats and Raiders (1980s)**

The period 1982-1984, when Yuri Andropov was the General Secretary of the Communist Party, witnessed an uptick of hostility against Islam in general and the rituals observed at shrines in particular. Such hostility manifested itself mostly on paper, however. Khorezm was just one region awash with journalists ready to contribute pieces praising state authorities for engaging in a renewed fight against religion. Local editorial outlets particularly focused on the commitment of the state to fight Islam and its ostensible backwardness. One such case is represented by the uninspiringly titled 'The Victory of Communism' (*Kommunizm ghalabasi*), the press organ of the Uzbek Communist Party of the district of To'rtko'l. Featuring a special section devoted to atheism ironically titled 'The Atheist Pulpit' (*Ateist minbari*),<sup>105</sup> this provincial, almost unknown,

---

<sup>104</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 40, d. 122, l. 38.

<sup>105</sup> Zufir Sherlonov, 'Ateistik propagandani kuchaytiraylik,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 17 (7 February 1980), p. 2; Zufir Sherlonov, 'Ateistik tarbiyaning muhim vositalari,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 4 (7 January 1984), p. 2; R. Saidov, 'Ro'za va uning zararlari,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 60 (18 May 1985), p. 2; B. Oqshuraev, 'Yoshlarni ateistik ruhda tarbiyalik,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 91 (30 July 1985), p. 2; Zufir Sherlonov, 'Ateistik propagandani yanada yaxshilaylik,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 124 (17 October 1987), p. 2; R.

Party outlet devoted extensive space for abrasive tirades against ritual practices at the shrines.<sup>106</sup>

Written in the spirit of atheist invectives, such philippics often became a source of pride for local activists, at least for those who believed that they could still win the war against Muslimness. In 1985, one Rajabova, an employee of the Republic-level House for Education in Hygiene, wrote a report to Narymbetov who in the meantime had climbed the hierarchy ladder and had been promoted to the head of propaganda and agitation department at the Qaraqalpaqstan regional committee (Obkom) of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. As we read this memo, we get a sense of the distance which separated life in the shrines and state authorities in the mid-1980s:

Lenin repeatedly spoke about the power of the press to overcome religion. The atheistic propaganda carried on by the press distinguishes itself for its massive outreach, its rapidity of production and its diversity of genres. The editorial board of *Sovet Qaraqalpaqstany* has been working in this direction in accordance with the Party's demand for better use of the mass media in atheistic education. The number of articles, feuilletons and letters which address important issues in both the theory and practice of atheistic education is growing. In the period 1983-1985, we have published over 25 articles on atheistic themes, as well as 40 atheist lectures on scientific atheism. Atheistic press coverage uses two types of materials: ideological and [empirical, the latter addressing] direct questions pertaining to religion and atheism. It also publishes

---

Bobojonov, 'Diniy é"tiqodga qarshi kurash,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 83 (14 July 1987), p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> Iuldosh To'khtaboev, 'Muqaddas joylarni é"zozlaylik,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 83 (31 July 1981), pp. 2-3.; Yo'ldosh To'khtaboev, 'Khalq oghzaki ijodida ro'za va ruhoniylar,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 86 (20 July 1982), p. 3; Yo'ldosh To'khtaboev, 'Duokhonlik, folbinlik, sokhta tabibchilikning reaktion mohiyati,' *Kommunizm ghalabasi* no. 48 (20 April 1985), pp. 2-4.

theoretical articles and feuilletons, and promotes positive experiences of atheist work.<sup>107</sup>

Was all this of any use? How far was the local press able to contain Muslimness and dent public religiosity? It was unable to do so at all, of course, and Rajabova herself was aware of the fact that propaganda was marred by its own deep-seated shortcomings, especially people's disenchantment with atheism.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, people who were moderate in their views of religion kept playing the mantra that further investment ought to be made in the sphere of propaganda in order to introduce new Soviet rituals into believers' everyday life. This approach to Islam was reminiscent of Tsarist colonial policies in Central Asia. Deeply convinced as to the superiority of Russian imperial culture, officials thought it was a waste of effort to do away with Islamic institutions, for indigenes were ultimately *destined* to prefer new imperial institutions over their own. Similarly, the idea of many within the ranks of the department of agitation and propaganda was that Soviet collective rituals would one day replace the stultified religious relics of the past. There was thus an acceleration of Soviet secular rituality during this period, with a cascade of diplomas and medals showered upon young workers, artists and students of all walks of life.<sup>109</sup>

This upswing in propaganda activity did not, of course, necessarily reflect a heightened commitment on the part of agitators and members of the 'Knowledge' society (most of whom were local academics) who were expected to fritter their time away with lectures to which nobody particularly wanted to listen. Indeed, the programme of a seminar held in April 1984 which had been designed to disseminate the culture of atheism among the Qaraqalpaq youth evidently looked so uninspiring that someone noted in the margins 'how boring!' (*skuchno!*).<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, l. 28

<sup>108</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, ll. 28-29.

<sup>109</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, ll. 30-31.

<sup>110</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, ll. 32-33.

In the meanwhile, many who worked for the state propaganda had become disillusioned as to the possibility of curtailing religious activities at shrines. A strange assortment of journalists and physicians was sent to inspect the shrine of Sulton Bobo in 1985 on the occasion of the celebration of the end of Ramadan. They reported that no one from the Party showed up at the shrine during the days of the festival. The only official state representatives were five policemen. They stood still and watched, however, 'for they could not do anything, because of the massive flow of people, mainly from Khorezm,' visiting the shrine. It must have been rather embarrassing for the physicians to attempt to deliver public lectures 'about the spread of infection and the consequences of typhoid and cutaneous venereal diseases' while there were pilgrims cooking the meat of 69 rams and with hundreds of people coming and going. The report ended on a rather pathetic note: 'we have made our observations regarding our visit to the shrine of Sulton Bobo during the celebration of the [end of the] Muslim holiday of Ramadan to the propaganda department of the Beruniy district. However, no actions were taken.'<sup>111</sup> This note was yet another reminder of the fact that propaganda at the shrines was meaningless.

In spite of all this, activists in the 1980s left no stone unturned. At the end of August 1985, during the final days of the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice, members of the 'Knowledge' society, together with a KGB officer and a photographer working for the newspaper *Sovet Qaraqalpaqstany* stormed the shrines of Azler Bobo and Sheykh Shibli. In Soviet speak, these individuals constituted a 'raiders' squad' (*reidevaia grupp*a). Clearly, something must have gone wrong in the preparation of the raid, and the subsequent report shamefacedly noted that no pilgrims were found at the shrines and that the local sheikhs too were absent.<sup>112</sup> The same thing happened in December of the same year when the propaganda department of the provincial committee of the Communist Party

---

<sup>111</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, ll. 40-41.

<sup>112</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, l. 39.



of Qaraqalpaqstan tasked someone working for the journal ‘Young Leninist’ (*Jas Leninshi*), a police inspector and the head of the Republican House for Atheism with a new raid against three different shrines situated in Kho’jayli district: Ketmenshi Ota, Yusup Eshon and, as usual, Mazlumkhon Suluu. Contrary to their expectations, in the first two sites they did not find anyone beside a sheikh and people digging graves. At the Mazlumkhon Suluu shrine, meanwhile, they did encounter a party of pilgrims, who had come from Shumanay – but were unable to take any action against them because the pilgrims had documents showing they were there to attend a funeral. But the raiders found one thing where they could boast of success: they busted the foreman of the Takhiatash power plant with two collaborators who had travelled to the shrine in a car registered with the power plant, bringing sand and water with which to build a mausoleum for the foreman’s deceased brother.<sup>113</sup> What subsequently happened to these people is unclear, for, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this chapter, more often than not authorities were unwilling to take the actions required to initiate an official investigation.

## Conclusion

In recent scholarship, many have argued that for Soviet citizens Islam became a marker of national identity predicated on the notion that different nationalities within the USSR each possessed their own discrete religious customs. This notion, derived from Soviet social science, was promoted by the state and served the purpose of distinguishing Muslims of one Soviet nationality from Muslims of another, thus enabling a sort of policy of ‘divide and rule’ when dealing with the USSR’s Muslim population. The idea of Muslimness was therefore subjugated to the cultural project of nation-building,

---

<sup>113</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 46, d. 493, ll. 3-4.

which could accommodate religious observance only if conceptualized as customary folk practice.<sup>114</sup> Ethnographic materials collected in the 1950s and 1960s allow us to complicate this interpretation. The Sufi narratives embedded in Tsarist and Soviet ethnography, as well as in Safarov's guide to Khorezmian shrines, show that the vocabulary of nationalism did not affect the transmission of certain Islamic traditions. Sufi narratives coming from a trans-national region such as Khorezm challenge the above narrative about engendering divisions between, say, Uzbeks, Qaraqalpaqs and Turkmens. Indeed, they attest to the preservation of hagiographical motifs that emphasize the exemplary character of historical figures who became significant to local communities on account of their unique erudition, their exceptional spiritual powers, and their exemplary piety. Read in this light, such narratives encapsulate approaches to communal religiosity that are alternative to, if not ultimately subversive of, the religious episteme sponsored by the Soviet state.

As we have observed, shrines functioned as public spaces in which forms of communal organization were sublimated into practices of saintly commemoration. They were clearly not under the control of the state – clearly, that is, unless we subscribe to an all-encompassing broad notion of control as a bureaucratic practice of surveillance. The material aggregated in this chapter shows how time and again bureaucrats tended to confine themselves to a ritualized form of inspection which more often than not failed to result in any active measures against shrine visitation. If public spaces allowed the reproduction of Islamic knowledge together with collective religious performances, this requires us to rethink the meaning of what we usually term 'public' in the Soviet Muslim context.

From the narratives that I have discussed, it emerges that people's knowledge of the past in Soviet Uzbekistan transcends our commonsense conception of history. We have seen how, when asked about the history of a certain holy place, Muslim believers in

---

<sup>114</sup> For a critical review of the scholarship propounding this interpretation, see Tasar, "*Mantra: A Review Essay on Islam in Soviet Central Asia.*"

Soviet Uzbekistan were not concerned with how far the truth value of their stories could stand up to rigorous scrutiny. What we observe, instead, is the mixing of different notions of history that are not informed by the idea of evidence. Indeed, in reporting ‘historical facts’ about the saints, Bobojon Safarov brings Sufi narratives into conversation with the history of Khorezm under the Mongols, and connects them to the sacred landscape of monuments erected by the Khans of Khiva in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His work indicates that holy personages are endowed with particular *historical* significance in the eyes of local constituencies, since the narratives in his book supply a living memory of the fact that the last Muslim dynasty to rule Khorezm prior to the October Revolution took various courses of action to ‘institutionalize’ the worship of saints. The Qunghrats established endowments for the upkeep of a shrine, for example, conferred fiscal privileges upon the hereditary demographic and initiatic groups attached to a certain saint, sponsored the production and transmission of written lore about such saintly figures, and ultimately exemplified a model of proper conduct that consisted, among other things, of worshipping a saint. Shrines are *per se* historical artifacts; but they also embody history in the sense that they serve to preserve memory about past Islamic religiosity – the religiosity, that is, of the saintly persona as exemplified in the hagiographies and the religiosity of those dynasts that patronized such saints. Thus, if we want to understand how Muslims encountered the Islamic past under Soviet rule, we should not attempt to disambiguate what we regard as history from the alleged ‘legendary’ mode of Sufi narratives. History inheres in belief. Safarov’s guide to the sacred geography of Khorezm can serve as a reminder that ‘a written text can cast a long shadow, even when the book is inaccessible.’<sup>115</sup> Safarov’s accounts share many characteristics with the modes of historical transmission predominant in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Khorezm, and point to

---

<sup>115</sup> Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 24.

patterns of historical consumption that were premised upon a deep respect for the written word.

At the same time, however, the bureaucratic output of CARC shows, I hope conclusively, that policies to curtail pilgrimage to shrine and attendance to collective rituals of devotion to the saints did not achieve their intended results. In fact, not only did manifestations of religiosity at the shrines continue, but we have also observed how certain shrines indeed increased in importance, for to honour the spirits of the dead, Soviet believers of all stripes ranging from factory workers to prosecutors were buried in mausoleums of Islamic design at or near the shrines in question. To steal construction material to build a mausoleum was of course a risky business, because of the danger of being prosecuted for the embezzlement of state property (*lishenie gosudarstvennogo imushchestva*), even though, of course, theft of property from one's workplace was a nearly universal practice in the Brezhnev era. Many people evidently considered that the risk was one that was worth taking, and that erecting a mausoleum was as important as making offerings to the sheikhs tending a shrine.

By the second half of the 1970s, it had become a ritual for CARC commissioners to cite draconian Party resolutions against religion issued in the 1950s as a means of embellishing classified memos as well as routine reports. Clearly, this was due to broad disillusionment among state officials as to whether it was possible to win the war against religion. No matter how often pilgrims were reported and roadblocks were placed to deter visitation to the shrines, believers found ways to worship the saints, maintain their shrines, and support the moral authority of the sheikhs. Belief proved to be stronger than Party resolutions. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Snesarev repeatedly recorded how small children were driven to the shrines and 'sold', albeit in a purely ritual sense, to an *eshon*. When a child was born, he was usually taken to a shrine to receive blessing for the circumcision. On that occasion, the parents would take a vow and promise the child to the *eshon* as an offer (*nazr*). When the child turned 9 or 10 years old, he was taken to the *eshon* together with a ram. On that occasion, the boy was ritually

handed over to the *eshon* to be bought back immediately for the ram.<sup>116</sup>

Once in Kho'jayli, I came across an interesting story recorded in 1988 by an expert of local history. When parents attempted to betrothe their daughter to a young man living in the neighbouring collective farm, they were reminded by the council of local elders that she had been promised to Sul-ton Bobo. With a ram in his car and an envelope full of money in his pocket, the father took his small daughter to the shrine. There he went up to the sheikhs and asked them what they wanted: 'the offerings or the girl?' They opted for the former, gave their blessing, and let the girl go home with her father. It is therefore ironic to read in a local newspaper that not until the year 1990 was the shrine of Sul-ton Bobo formally reopened after decades 'thanks to the noble character of perestroika' (*qayta qurish sharofati tufayli*).<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaiia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 14, l. 67.

<sup>117</sup> Q. Shoniyozov, 'Ziyoratgoh ochildi,' *Pakhtakor* No. 89 (26.07.1990), p. 3.



Figure 3.5 The shrine of Sultan Bobo, 1982, unknown author; private collection, Urgench. © Paolo Sartori



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

*Living with the Spirits*



## Introduction

How is one to make sense of a modern life populated by evil spirits meddling in the affairs of humans? That the scholars of Islam regarded spirits as every bit as real as the world in which they lived has been repeatedly noted in the past. Conceived of as God's creatures like angels, evil spirits (*jinn*, *ajina*, *pari*) and demons (*albasti*, *dev*) have been a subject of scholarly attention as well as popular apprehension in Central Asia since time immemorial. In particular the exorcist – which is to say, the individual endowed with the powers to cast out spirits from the possessed – has long been a figure of both devotion and contempt. While such figures were integral to the socio-cultural texture of the region, their pervasiveness seems to have made them rather a banal topic in the eyes of local chroniclers. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain their absence from most of the indigenous historical records. Given the sparsity of modern attestation, I here turn instead to Ata-Malik Juwayni, a 13th-century polymath, and his history of the Mongol empire, to shed light on practices of exorcism in the Islamic history of the region:

In the year 636/1238-9 there was a conjunction of the two malefic planets in the house of Cancer, and the astrologers had calculated that an insurrection would break out and that perhaps a heretic would arise. Three *parasangs* from Bokhara there lies a village called Tarab, in which there dwelt a man named Mahmud, a sieve-maker, of whom it was said that in stupidity and ignorance he had not his equal. This man began to sham and counterfeit piety and saintliness and claimed to have powers of magic (*parī-dārī*), i.e., he asserted that *jinn*s held converse with him and informed him of what was hidden. For in Transoxiana and Turkestan many persons, especially women, claim to have magical powers; and when anyone has a pain or falls ill, they visit him, summon the exorcist (*parī-khwān*), perform dances and similar nonsense and in this manner convince the ignorant and the vulgar. Mahmud's sister used to instruct him in all the absurdities of the magicians

(*parī-dārān*), which he would at once spread abroad. Now what can the vulgar do but follow their ignorance? And in fact the common people turned towards him, and wherever there was a paralytic or one afflicted in any way they would bring him to Mahmud. It chanced that one or two of the persons that were brought to him in this way were found [afterwards] to bear signs of health; whereupon most of the people turned towards him, both the nobility and the commonalty, “save them that shall come to God with a sound heart.” [Qur’an, xxvi, 89]. In Bokhara, I heard from several respectable and creditable persons how in their actual presence he had blown a medicine prepared from dogs’ excrement into the eyes of one or two blind persons, and how they had recovered their sight.<sup>1</sup>

From this somewhat disdainful portrayal of a medieval exorcist, we glean that to command demons is a form of distinctly feminine knowledge that involves a great deal of dancing and animal dung (we shall return to these images in the course of this chapter). Exorcism is furthermore treated as a manifestation of heresy – the quintessence of all sins, to be equated with polytheism and unbelief. This topic has been given sustained attention by scholars with a penchant for the occult in Islam in the medieval and early modern period.<sup>2</sup> Less attention, however, has been paid to the fact that spirits and the knowledge of magic remained significant in Central Asia after the Second World War,<sup>3</sup> even though anthropologists have recorded

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Ala-ad-Dīn ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, translated from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini by Johan Andrew Boyle (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 109-110.

<sup>2</sup> Travis Zadeh, “Commanding Demons and Jinns: The Exorcist in Early Islamic Thought,” in Alireza Korangy and Dan Sheffield (eds.), *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston’s 70 Birthday* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), pp. 131-160.

<sup>3</sup> This argument has been inspired by Matthew Melvin-Koushki and James Pickett, “Mobilizing Magic: Occultism in Central Asia and the Continuity of High Persianate Culture under Russian Rule,” *Studia Islamica* Vol. 111 (2016), pp. 231-284.

repeatedly how practices of exorcism and divination played a significant role in the religious landscape of the region in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in Soviet Uzbekistan people of all stripes showed concern about the pervasive presence of evil spirits, and practices of exorcism were part and parcel of Uzbeks' everyday life. Private archives show how ordinary pious people took various courses of action and made emotional investment to deflect the obtrusive presence of evil spirits: prayer amulets and talismans of every shape and form are to be found attached to other ostensibly more sophisticated compositional genres. Let us consider, for instance, a fatwa crafted roughly at the middle of the 19th century. The text of the fatwa states that a group of *jinn*s had appeared somewhere in a town of Khorezm before a lady named Ay Jamāl Bika both in her sleep and while she was awake, and that they did so in contravention of an agreement (*'ahd*) with the Prophet Muhammad. Made on the night of the spirits (*laylat al-ajnān*), the agreement stipulated that the *jinn*s undertook not to manifest as snakes or in some other wicked form and not thereby to terrorize the members of the Muslim community. 'According to sharia,' says the fatwa, 'it is incumbent upon this group [of *jinn*s] that, in keeping with the agreement [with the Prophet], they should not cause injury or damage to the believer (*mu'mīna*) [Ay Jamāl Bika] or any other [individual], who is a member of the community of the Prophet. If they fail to do so, they will be liable to severe punishment and destined to hellfire, isn't it? Yes, it is so.'<sup>5</sup> Aside from its specifically mentioning the name of Ay Jamāl Bika, this fatwa chastising the behaviour of the *jinn*s is almost wholly formulaic, for it repeats nearly word for word all the conventions that we find in

---

<sup>4</sup> Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel: Studien über Frauenälteste (otin und xalfa) im unabhängigen Usbekistan*, pp. 92, 101-103; Maria Louw, "The Art of Interpreting Visionary Dreams," in Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Madeleine Reeves (eds.), *The Central Asian World* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 351-364.

<sup>5</sup> IVANRUZ, *Khiva qozilik hujjatlari (Aklia Aliakbarova's collection)*, doc. 70. The latter was described briefly, under the same numeration in *Katalog Khivinskikh kaziiskikh dokumentov (XIX-nach. XX vv.)*, ed. A. Urunbaev et al. (Tashkent and Tokyo: Department of Islamic Area Studies, 2001).

other fatwas condemning *jinns* for terrorizing Muslims.<sup>6</sup> However, this particular record is worth our attention because around the time of its crafting Ay Jamāl Bika established a charitable endowment to the benefit of a Sufi convent and resolved to serve as its trustee until the end of her days.<sup>7</sup> Ay Jamāl Bika was most probably a pious and affluent woman who believed that a meritorious action such as the making of a *vaqf* would bring a reward in the afterlife. Her belief in the *jinns* was equally firm, however: such bothersome creatures were resolutely installed in the world as experienced by people charged with living according to sharia. That is to say that, in the eyes of Ay Jamāl Bika, the *jinns* were just as much subject to Islamic law as creatures made of flesh and blood. We must therefore appreciate that the structure and wording of the fatwa treat the *jinns* as though they are the respondent in a legal case. The *jinns* of these fatwas parallel the Soviet *nomenklatura*: hidden from the view of ordinary citizens but nonetheless occasionally subject to the same laws.<sup>8</sup>

As we shall see in this chapter, belief in the supernatural did not end with the Sovietization of Central Asia, and the preoccupation about the threatening forces of the spirits as embodied by Ay Jamāl Bika would continue to manifest itself after the demise of Soviet rule in Uzbekistan.<sup>9</sup> Time and again when one examines private archives in Uzbekistan one comes across texts which show just

---

<sup>6</sup> See nos. 683 and 684 of Thomas Welsford and Nouryaghdi Tashev, *A Catalogue of Arabic-Script Documents from the Samarqand Museum* (Samarqand and Istanbul: IICAS, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> IVANRUz, *Khiva qozilik hujjatlari* (Aklia Aliakbarova's collection), doc. 1683 (d. 1859).

<sup>8</sup> Here I draw inspiration from James Pickett who reads the fatwas against *jinns* as evidence of Central Asian jurists' interest in the occult. See, his *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia*. On the other hand, there is evidence showing that such fatwas were mostly used as amulets against the evil eye, see *Muḥammad Rasūl Jungi*, MS Tashkent IVANRUz inv. no. 8470, fol. 386a.

<sup>9</sup> Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*, pp. 203-229; Kehl-Bodrogi, "Religion is not so strong here:" *Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism*, pp. 129-152.

how common it was for Soviet citizens to defer to Islamic amulets and prayers to keep *jinn*s at bay and escape from the evil eye (see Figure 4.1).

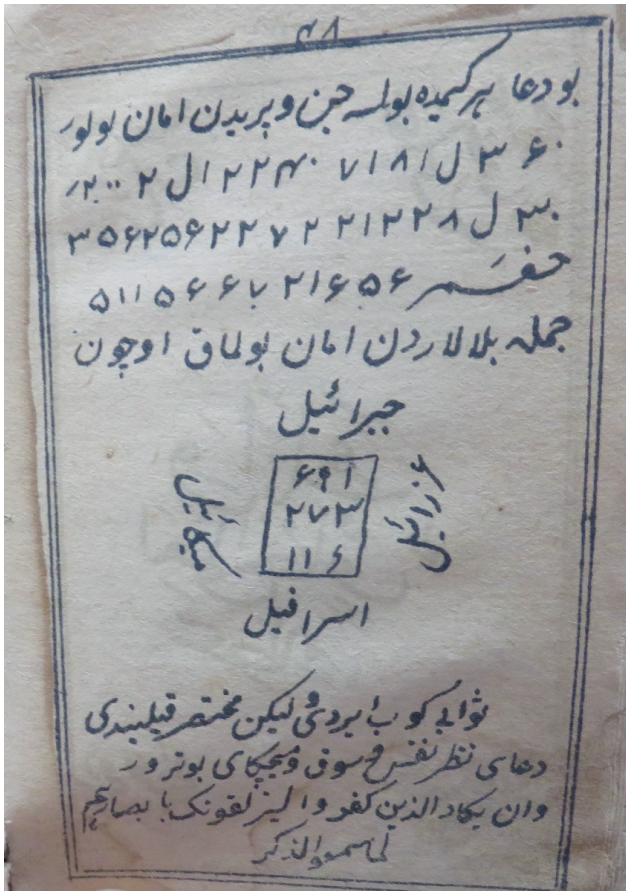


Figure 4.1 Prayer amulet against the evil spirits (*jinn*s and *paris*), Mullā Zuhūr al-Dīn Makhdūm b. Mullā Musā Qārī (ed.), *Nūrnamā* (n. p., n.d.), private collection, Urgench.<sup>10</sup> © Paolo Sartori

<sup>10</sup> On *nūrnamās*, their contents and circulation in Uzbekistan, see Jeanine Elif Dağyeli, «Gott liebt das Handwerk». Moral, Identität und religiöse Legitimierung in der mittelasiatischen Handwerks-risāla (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2011), pp. 50-52, 60-61.

This chapter is based on published and unpublished materials collected by Soviet ethnographers. As I proceed to assemble records showing how magic and belief in the supernatural informed the life of Muslims in Uzbekistan, I want to argue that Sovietization brought about a kind of disorientation in Muslims' worldview, a movement of distancing themselves from what they regarded as their own cosmogony. One could of course object to this idea, on the grounds that Muslims' believing in the supernatural was attested long ago in the region, in epochs that were far removed from the Soviet period. The vignette of Ay Jamāl Bika conjured only a few pages above should serve as a useful reminder here that Central Asians both prior to and during the Soviet period did not just believe in spirits, but lived with them, engaged with them, feared them, summoned them, and sometimes fed them, as we shall see over the course of this chapter. To explain why this happened, one needs only to recognise that, by dint of its utopian nature, Sovietization accelerated as well as exacerbated a sort of existential crisis, and created even more situations in which Uzbeks perceived the need to cling to something more powerful than the authority of the Soviet state and its discourse of progress. And that was the world of the spirits, the 'unseen' world (*ghayb*). For those who believe in it, however, the latter is as real as, or perhaps even more real than, the flattened world of Soviet scientific materialism.

Thinking with magic and the occult more broadly can enable us better to appreciate the social significance of religion also during epochs which one would generally associate with secularist ideology and policies of radical modernization, a significance which is often better appreciated by social anthropologists than by historians.<sup>11</sup> It also encourages us to feel respectful for and attuned to the meaning of cultural practices recorded among peasants and artisans. With this in mind, the field notes produced by Soviet anthropologists can

---

<sup>11</sup> Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Carla Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in An Ambiguously Islamic Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

be read as historical documents suggesting that specific traditions of Sufi origin did not disappear during the Great Terror or WWII. Indeed, such field notes can offer students of Islamic intellectual traditions a documentary repository with which to explore the enduring vitality of a Muslim religious space within the USSR where Islamic practices continued to exist though in altered form and in a different, very specific situation.

At this point, a note of caution is in order. Soviet ethnography has so far received bad press in Central Asian scholarship, and for good reason. Devin DeWeese, in particular, has shown how, fixated as they were with the notion of ‘survival’ (*perezhitok*) and wedded to an ideology of civilizational development, Soviet anthropologists rendered Muslim practices into relics of pre-Islamic cultures, most frequently Zoroastrianism. He has also shown how, by insisting on the similarity between ‘primitive societies’ (including Muslim) where beliefs in the spirits and practices of exorcism could be recorded, they equated manifestations of Sufism with shamanism, thereby belittling the historical persistence of Islamic culture in modern Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> The resulting picture is one in which Soviet ethnographers often make exorcists look guilty of quackery.

Though timely and important, this critique has glossed over the fact that Soviet anthropologists tended to deploy the notion of survival merely as a rhetorical device, enabling them to discuss something whose very existence was a reminder of the imperfection of the Soviet project: to name a cultural practice ‘survival’, whose fault did not lie in the Soviet regime, was thus a way to circumvent censorship.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, drawing attention to the ‘relics of the past’ made authorities aware of sociocultural practices ostensibly aberrant from

---

<sup>12</sup> DeWeese, “Shamanization in Central Asia,” p. 327, fn. 1.

<sup>13</sup> For a diametrically opposing view to my argument, see Devin DeWeese, “Survival Strategies: Reflections on the Notion of Religious ‘Survivals’ in Soviet Ethnographic Studies of Muslim Religious Life in Central Asia,” in Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (eds.), *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Münster: Lit, 2012), pp. 35–58.



the Soviet norm and pushed state organs to devise measures leading to the realisation of Communism.<sup>14</sup> Equally important is to note that some Soviet anthropologists abandoned<sup>15</sup> this notion and attendant vocabulary at the beginning of the 1980s – that is, when the USSR changed tack with regard to the Muslim world in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

### **Casting out the *Jinns* in Kho'jayli**

In 1946 a young scholar from Kharkiv by the name of Yuri Knorozov (1922-1999) was sent to northern Khorezm, in what is today the autonomous region of Qaraqalpaqstan. A junior member of a Soviet expedition that was destined to make some major breakthroughs in archaeology and ethnography, Knorozov visited Uzbekistan in fact

---

<sup>14</sup> Sergei Alymov, “The Concept of ‘Survival’ and Soviet Social Science in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* (2013/9), pp. 157-183.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Gleb Snesev, a prominent anthropologist who specialised in the study of the cult of saints in Khorezm, wrote in 1983: ‘In [my previous] work *Relikty domusul’ maskikh verovanii i obriadov u Uzbekov Khorezma* [Moscow: Nauka, 1969], I [...] have addressed Sufi hagiology only insofar as its objects of veneration facilitated [the achievement of our] main task (*zadacha*), which consisted of showing the pre-Islamic elements in the cult of saints. Apparently, this issue requires clarification. To search for the pre-Islamic basis of the cult of saints, it seems to me, is necessary [only] in theoretical terms, [for it is] exclusively significant for atheism: to expose the pre-Islamic roots of the cult of saints, which often hark back to primitive beliefs and rituals, would once again prove the glaring mismatch between this religious institution and our [Soviet] reality. However, being a complex multifaceted problem, Muslim hagiology cannot be reduced to its pre-Islamic stratum. Like any religious institution, the cult of saints depends on many factors that influence its formation and subsequent development.’ Snesev, *Khorezmskie legendy kak istochnik po istorii religioznykh kul'tov Srednei Azii*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Hanna E. Jansen and Michael Kemper, “Hijacking Islam: The Search for a New Soviet Interpretation of Political Islam in 1980,” in M. Kemper and S. Conermann, (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 124-144.



only twice (in 1946 and 1948).<sup>17</sup> Most probably because of a bad falling-out with the head of the expedition Sergey Tolstov, Knorozov was subsequently repatriated to Leningrad. Though academically marginalised, he nevertheless managed to eke out a career, during the course of which he succeeded, *inter alia*, in deciphering the Mayan script – though that is another story. While stationed in Khorezm, Knorozov produced reams of field notes cutting across the entire cultural gamut and ranging from the cult of the saints to magic healing practices. Knorozov was just one among many ethnographers who recorded Central Asians’ belief in the supernatural after the Second World War and tacitly ridiculed the claims of scientific materialism by showing that Soviet modernity did not sweep away the enchanted.

Yuri Knorozov’s main interest lied in the rituals inhabiting the world of individuals referred to in Uzbek as *porkhon*. The latter word is derived from the Persian *parī-khwān*, which literally means the person who summons the fairies; it is a term which we have already encountered in Juvayni’s world history.<sup>18</sup> One of Knorozov’s interviewees, a man named Yusup Kara,<sup>19</sup> explained that ‘*porkhons* appeared after [the prophet] Muhammad and invented their own

---

<sup>17</sup> Russian Ethnographic Museum, f. 2, op. 3, d. 93 (Knorozov Iuriy Valentinovich), l. 15.

<sup>18</sup> The Turkologist Alexander Samoilovich thus defined such individuals: ‘I was in Porsu [today Turkmenistan], a province which is inhabited by the Choudur Turkmen tribes, between 14 and 17 July [1908]. Here for the first time I could observe a survival (*perezhitok*) of shamanism [known] among the Muslim Turks, which Qazaqs refer to as *bakhsy* and the Turkmen and Uzbeks from Khorezm call *porkhan*. The *porkhan* is [usually] a man or a woman who brings herself into ecstasy with lamentations while beating the drum. In such a state, she drives away the evil spirits from the sick or tells the future. The Sarts [city-dwellers] in Khiva refer to such individuals with a Perso-Arabic word: *fālbīn*,’ “Kratkii otchet o poezdke v Tashkent i Bukharu i v Khivinskoe khanstvo komandirovannogo SPb Universitetom i Russkim Komitetom privat-dotsenta A.N. Samoilovicha v 1908 godu,” *Izvestiia Russkogo komiteta dlia izucheniia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii v istoricheskoi, arheologicheskoi, lingvisticheskoi i étnograficheskoi otnosheniakh* 9 (1909), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Archeology, Russian Academy of Sciences [henceforth, AIEA RUS], f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 18. *Polevye*

tricks. Every *porkhon* has subordinate *paris*, who can be Muslims or else unbelievers (*kafir*).<sup>19</sup> In his discussions with Knorozov, Yusup Kara clarified what *porkhons* do and what their task is. He stated that ‘There are some spirits (*jinns*) and *paris* that make people crazy; they can be cured by the *porkhons* with the help of their [own] *paris*, [that is, the spirits which they command]. Muslim *paris* look like girls, but I do not know about fairies that are unbelievers (*kafir*).’ This description allows us to see more clearly that *porkhons* operated in a Muslim cultural environment, for they were individuals who, by dint of their magic powers, could summon spirits – themselves classified as either Muslims or non-Muslims – in order to cast out other evil spirits, a practice which may commonsensically refer to as exorcism.

The cultural framing which Yusup Kara, together with many other among Knorozov’s interviewees, deployed to make sense of the figure of the *porkhon* is clearly derived from the language of Sufism. As Yusup Kara observed: ‘A séance arranged by one *porkhon* is called *zikr*. A séance with many attendees and with the participation of several *porkhons* is called *jar*, instead. If during a séance there is a person who has not performed a ritual ablution after [sexual] intercourse (*aram*) with a woman, then the spirit of the *porkhon* will not manifest itself. The same happens when one of the attendees holds horse-dung in her hands. There have also been *porkhons* who during the séance have worn women’s clothes, white or red.’ *Zikr*, needless to say, is the usual term to denote a ritual repetition of the name of God and other saints; *jar*, meanwhile, is a derivative form of *jahr*, a term usually denoting a loud recitation. The interviewee furthermore explains how important was the purity of the attendees, clearly making the ritual ablution a prescriptive requirement of the séance and, by doing so, marking the space of the ritual as sacred.<sup>20</sup>

---

*zapsi lu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiki. Porkhani.* Yusup Kara, 70, Uzbek, Ktai. Akhunbabaev collective farm, 01.10.1946.

<sup>20</sup> That participants in séances of exorcism were required to defer to codes of purity and ritual ablution has been noted among Qaraqalpaqs in the early 1940s and among the Choudur Turkmen in the late 1960s. See, respectively, Tatiana

It therefore makes perfect sense that the person who failed to fulfill such a requirement is defined as *aram* (< *ḥarām/harom*). In addition, reference to horse dung is redolent of earlier Central Asian Sufi traditions where dung (together with bones) is regarded as the fodder of the *jinns*.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the mentioning of the *porkhon* wearing female clothing, a practice that we will find recorded by Soviet ethnographers until at least the late 1960s,<sup>22</sup> is reminiscent of what we have learnt earlier from Juvayni – namely, that in the past exorcism used to be mainly a feminine business. In fact, a 16th-century manual for women leading religious rituals prescribed that: ‘Every woman who gets old becomes possessed by a fairy (*parī*) and an evil spirit (*khurāfat*). Her sayings and practices become esteemed (*mu‘tabar*). Every woman who opposes them becomes a great sinner (*gunāh-kār-i ‘azīm bāshad*).’<sup>23</sup> This early modern account, and especially its noting the *porkhon*’s tormented relationship with the spirits, dovetails beautifully with ethnographic observations recorded in Uzbekistan in the 1980s (see *infra*).

---

A. Zhdanko, “Byt karakalpakskogo kolkhoznoogo aula (Opyt étnograficheskogo izucheniiia kolkhoza im. Akhunbabaeva Chimbaiskogo raiona Karakalpakskoi ASSR),” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1949/2), p. 49; Vladimir N. Basilov, K. Niiaklychev, “Perezhitki shamanstva u Turkmen-Choudurov,” in G.P. Snesarev and V.N. Basilov (eds.), *Domusul’ manskie verovaniia i obriady v Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia*, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> ‘I saw a man wearing a red female dress and with a red scarf on his head,’ “Kratkii otchet o poezdke v Tashkent i Bukharu i v Khivinskoe khanstvo komandirovannoro SPb Universitetom i Russkim Komitetom privat-dotsenta A.N. Samoilovicha v 1908 godu,” p. 13; A.L. Troitskaia, “Zhenskii zikr v starom Tashkente,” *Sbornik Muzeia antropologii i étnografii*, 7 (1928), pp. 173-199; Klavdiia L. Zadykhina, “Uzbeki del’ty Amu-Dar’i,” in *Trudy Khorezmskoi Arkheologicheskoi-Étnograficheskoi Ékspeditsii, vol. I [1945-1948]*, ed. S.P. Tolstov and T.A. Zhdanko (Moscow: Izd.-vo Akademii Nauk, 1952), p. 413; V.N. Basilov, “Toshmat-Bola,” *Sovetskaia Étnografiia* (1975/5), pp. 112-124; Basilov, Niiaklychev, “Perezhitki shamanstva u Turkmen-Choudurov,” pp. 134-135.

<sup>23</sup> Aziza Shanazarova, “The Book of Women’s Rituals: The Central Asian Adaptation of the ‘*Aqā’id al-nisā*’,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 33 No. 2 (2022), p. 328.

But how could one become a *porkhon* in Soviet Uzbekistan? Did the secularist and atheist environment of the USSR present obstacles for individuals seeking to hone the specific skills required to summon the sinister forces to heal other people who were possessed by the spirits? One Otajon Yavbasarov, an Uzbek from the town of Kypchak situated in the north of Khorezm,<sup>24</sup> explained that *jiins* can take the form of flies, mosquitos, snakes, lizards, dogs, men, and women. They can be found among ruins and in bushes, but also in the form of wind and whirlwind. Yavbasarov goes on to recall that once he knew a woman who became a *porkhon* after sleeping under a tree: '*jinns* appeared to her in a dream and told her to become a *porkhon*. Her parents weren't *porkhons*. It is dangerous to sleep under trees!' *Paris* were different, Yavbasarov argued, for 'they can appear under various guises, and they can lead men astray for they can assume the human appearance. They can interact with men, enter into a romantic relationship and even given birth to children.' Knorozov then noted that the main *pari* of the *porkhon* is often of the opposite sex to this latter, and observed by way of example that Yavbasarov's grandmother was a *porkhon* possessed by one male *pari*, gesturing at the almost corporeal feature of spirits.

At this point, Yavbasarov added an additional layer of complexity to his account: '*porkhons* used to compete against each other at either casual or organised meetings: they fought by holding one another's hands, or by embracing each other. While they stood motionless, their *paris* and *jinns* fought among themselves. The winner took away the *jinns* from the ones who had lost. There were cases in which *porkhons* sold *jinns* for a horse, a ram, and other animals. They did so, of course, in order to secure the right to treat specific diseases.' Here it is important to remind ourselves that *porkhons*' ability to conduct exorcisms was regarded as a sacred curative power: hence Yavbasarov's insistence that *porkhons* are in fact 'healers' (*tabib*).

---

<sup>24</sup> AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 18. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiki, Porkhani*. Yavbasarov Atadzhan. Perevodchik. Kipchak, 09.09.1946.

So far, we have observed how *porkhons* lived their life with the spirits. In fact, their curative powers depended entirely on transcendental beings who have chosen a particular individual as their home-body. Spirits could be good- or bad-natured. *Paris* tended to be good, our sources note, while *jinn*s were intrinsically evil. There are other terms that locals used to group spirits into well-defined categories; one of these is the ‘devil’ (*shayton*). A certain Mustafaev,<sup>25</sup> an ‘inspector for the affairs of the Muslim faith’ in the province of Kungrad, told Knorozov that devils are of two kinds: one wanders in different places and he makes a sound like an echo; if one responds to him, one’s mouth will be immediately disfigured. The other type of devil first manifested itself to the saint (*hazrat*) Adam Ota in the guise of a goat. Adam Ota slaughtered it and ate it. Since then that type of *shayton* has been living in people’s stomachs. *Porkhons* can heal people who are possessed by such devils and they do so usually by organising a séance. Mustafaev claimed to have seen one such *porkhon* dressed in women’s clothes (see above) during a séance when he was ten. The *porkhon* was an itinerant healer: he rode a horse from one nomadic encampment (*aul*) to another; but he was killed and thrown into a pit face down. This account is, once again, important for our purposes, for it clearly shows how a CARC representative, someone referred to as an ‘inspector,’ and most probably a self-proclaimed atheist, took seriously local narratives about the supernatural.

Mustafaev’s story about the devils is particularly interesting, for it blends a range of different narratives about the prophetic figure of Adam: on the one hand, it evokes Biblical traditions that percolated into the Qur’an (the notion of Adam as tempted by the devil in the Garden of Eden, while the devil is identified as a *jinn* which did not bow before Adam as ordered by God); on the other, it embodies local folklore where Adam is loosely associated with the notion of

---

<sup>25</sup> AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 21. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiiki*. Beliefs VI. Healing practices: *Porkhons*. The informant is Mustafaev, an inspector for the affairs of the Muslim faith in the Kungrad region. Kungrad, 09.10.1946.

ritual sacrifice. It is important here to remind ourselves that this Islamically-informed narrative came from an informant who served the Soviet state as a commissioner for religious affairs. By dint of his office, he was expected to dismiss such narratives as superstitions. Mustafaev instead chose a different course of action. By offering an eye-witness account about a *porkhon* who cured people possessed by devils, he accorded to beliefs and healing practices associated with said spirits the peculiar status of truth.

Let us now proceed to look at the rituals performed by the *porkhons* when they cast out evil spirits. Knorozov tells us that on 8 September 1946 he visited one *porkhon* by the name of Urazbaev who at that time was employed as a guardian of the trade department (*raitorg*) in a collective farm located in the district of Kipchak, an agricultural area on the left bank of the Amu Darya, halfway between Urgench and Nukus. When they met, Urazbaev was wearing a white shirt with no collar and white trousers rolled up to the knees, and he was barefoot. He sported a skullcap (*tiubiteika*) on his head. He was an elderly man with short moustache and a beard. The Uzbek translator explained to the *porkhon* that Knorozov was his fellow-worker, that he was sick and that he often suffered from seizures. At first, the *porkhon* recommended that Knorozov should see a doctor (*dukhtur*), at which point the translator replied that unfortunately doctors were unable to understand what afflicted the ethnographer; hence, the choice to resort to a *porkhon*. Determined to deflect the request, Urazbaev made another attempt and asked why Knorozov did not see other *porkhons*, for ‘there are plenty of them in Kipchak’ – this itself an interesting remark suggesting the social pervasiveness of exorcism at the time. The translator shrugged and explained he did not know anyone else. Left with no other choices, Urazbaev agreed to treat Knorozov. He brought the ethnographer to a darkened corridor (*daliz*) and made him sit on the floor in the middle of the room. In his field diary, Knorozov noted that the door leading to that room had been left open and that an eight-year-old boy peered into it and watched the entire séance. At some point, Urazbaev said that he could sense that a spirit ‘had hit’ (*jinn urgan*), i.e., possessed Knorozov. At the beginning, the *porkhon* drank

water from a cup; then he poured water with salt and pepper into it. He drank it and then sprinkled it on Knorozov's face, on his crown and neck, and then all over his body: the belly, and the palms of Knorozov's hands which the *porkhon* kept outstretched, his legs, and his face once again. After that, he pressed Knorozov's head with his palms, starting from the face and crown, and then the temples. Then he forcefully hit Knorozov's shoulders four times with his palms and then another eight times with less strength; and with this the treatment ended.

The exorcist invited Knorozov to come again the next day, explaining that the first séance should help a little and that next would come a treatment with fire. Around noon on 9 September Knorozov went to see Urazbaev again. This time, Urazbaev brought Knorozov to another room and placed him on a mat in the middle. Then he soaked a piece of fabric in cotton oil, took it with burning tongs and set it on fire. He waved the torch three times around Knorozov's head, nearly touching his face. 'I couldn't see anything', noted the ethnographer:

He raised my left hand and passed the flame beneath my armpit; he did the same thing with my right hand. He then waved the flame above Yavbasarov [the Uzbek translator] and muttered something, and it seemed he was inviting us to spit. Then he took the torch that was guttering out from the room, most probably out into the street. When he came back, he poured water into a cup, added salt and pepper, took it to his mouth and [by spitting the liquid] he sprinkled my face, my crown and neck and again the face. He once spat on Yavbasarov, then brought the cup to my mouth and quickly took it out of the room. Later I realised that I should have spat in it in order for the spirit (*jinn*) to come out. He came back and, without taking off my cap, he pressed with all his strength first my forehead, then my crown, and the temples. Then he hit me on the spine eight times with his palms. Then it was Yavbasarov's turn. He pressed him on the temples with his finger, and he made him a 'massage' by placing his palms

on his head and taking the skin on his back into folds. With this the treatment ended. I asked him what had happened to me. He replied that clearly a *jinn* had hit me and that most probably I had had an unpleasant encounter. I confirmed that something of the kind indeed had happened to me. According to him, if I had not been scared nothing would have happened to me. I asked him why he became a *porkhon*. He replied to this question by explaining that he saw a *jinn* in a dream who ordered him to become a *porkhon*. [He added that] he had control over some *jinns* and *paris* and that he was not afraid of visiting the places infested with *jinns*. He claimed that *paris* are associated with whirlpools and they can terrorize (*porazit*) a man and [explained that] a *porkhon* cannot heal a man who is hit by a *pari*.<sup>26</sup>

We shall return later to the image of the exorcist spitting into the face of the sick. For the moment, let us note that the practice of hitting the sick itself has something of a long historical pedigree, a ritual act of casting out the evil spirit, which is recorded in Sufi hagiographic literature. Perhaps one of the most powerful accounts of such a practice comes from the second half of the 16th century, as recorded by one Ḥazīnī, a Yasavī sheikh from Hissar, in the work *Jāmi‘ al-murshidīn*.<sup>27</sup> Reading this early-modern account will help us appreciate how the Sufi practice of hitting the sick to cast out an evil spirit lived an afterlife in the Soviet period:

In Khorasan there was a holy man (*pīr*) celebrated for his asceticism and known for his rebellious exploits, his stories were told everywhere and his name was Bāb Māchīn. He could fly in the air and rest where he pleased, so when he

---

<sup>26</sup> AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 21. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiiki*. Porkhan Urazbaev. Kipchak, 08.10.1946.

<sup>27</sup> The source has been described by Devin DeWeese, “Sacred Places and ‘Public’ Narratives: The Shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavī Šūfī Order, 16th-17th Centuries”.



heard about the virtues of that man of exalted power [Aḥmad Yasavī], Bāb Māchīn became ebullient with fervour and, even if it was prohibited to him, he set out for [the region] of Turkestan. When he reached the city of Yasī, he came to His Excellency the Sultan of the Shaykhs [= Aḥmad Yasavī] and began to cause trouble. Immediately, [Aḥmad Yasavī] told him: ‘You are the one who led astray the people’ and the Sultan ordered that they tie him to a pillar. [Then] Ḥakīm [Ata] and Salmān flogged (*darra*) him five hundred times. [Bāb Māchīn] remained silent. But when they flogged him once more, he cried: ‘Allāh Allāh: enough!’ He repented and said: ‘Truth rests with grace, it is what best counteracts what is foolish. If you say that I came [here] having deviated from the right path, [you are right, for] I myself knew that I was in error.’ They asked him why five hundred lashes could not make him cry, but one lash did. He explained that there was a demon (*dīv*) on his back who misguided him in every respect; [only] after five hundred lashes had that demon fled away. One lash reached Bāb Māchīn and hurt him. When they checked his back, there was only the sign of one lash.<sup>28</sup>

The legendary narrative dwells on the ritual beating of the possessed: the demon is hit, not the sick, and according to the same logic, the *porkhon* hits the *jinn* who inhabits the body of the possessed.

Knorozov reminds us that not only men served as *porkhons* in Khorezm after WWII: so too did women. His notes indicate that he once met with an elderly mullah in the town of Manghit, south of Kipchak, who told him about one Shukur Sapaeva who could tell fortunes with the help of a mirror (*oyna*). The mullah also told Knorozov that Shukur Sapaeva could not cure the sick from chronic malaria, but that she could heal a sudden type of malaria caused by

---

<sup>28</sup> Ḥazīnī, *Jāmi‘ al-murshidīn*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. Orient. Oct. 2847, fol. 73a-73b.

the evil eye. The ritual required that she walked around the sick by beating on a drum and singing. Knorozov recorded her invocations:

<i>Olam-boshi bismillah</i>	Ruler of the world, ‘in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate’
<i>Bismillahdan bashlayman</i>	I begin from the expression ‘in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate’
<i>Qyshda yurgan qirq mullo</i>	Forty mullahs went in winter
<i>Oyda yurgan o’n mullo</i>	And ten went in a month
<i>Oilaneshin kelinlar</i>	Oh home-sitting maidens,
<i>Minga madad beringlar</i>	Give me help!

Further, Knorozov noted down that this young lady was married to a tractor-driver, that she did not inherit her magic curative powers from her parents, and that she began to cure the sick during the Second World War. The description of the séances during which she cured the sick are also revealing, for they point to a plethora of Sufi practices attested prior to the colonial and Soviet periods. The ethnographer indicated that the *porkhon* came to the house of the patient and stayed there for four or five days where she led a séance for one hour each day. During the séance she played the drum and hit the sick on the spine with a knout, walked around him, clapping her hands and repeating ‘*uf-a-o.*’ After the treatment the owner of the house sacrificed a goat and the *porkhon* smeared the patient with the blood of the animal and ate the meat.<sup>29</sup> Once again, the treatment was referred to as *jar*, a reminder of the Sufi origin of these practices.

Knorozov never met Shukur Sapaeva. Nonetheless, he had the chance to observe a woman *porkhon* in action. Her name was

---

<sup>29</sup> AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number] *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiiki*. Sabir. [Town of] Manghit, 03.09.1946.

Oghyl<sup>30</sup> and she came to the house of Knorozov's translator to treat another Soviet anthropologist, Klavdiia Zadykhina (1907-1969).<sup>31</sup> She sat down and started hitting a casket in lieu of her tambourine, with which she usually summoned the spirits. She did so by singing a song 'in a monotonous voice:'

*Bismillahdan boshlayman* I begin from the expression 'in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate'

/ Hits -- 1 -- 1

*Olam-boshi bismillah* Ruler of the world, 'in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate'

*Qur'on-boshi bismillah* Author of the Qur'an, 'in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate'

/ Hits -- 1 -- 1

She proceeded to list various 'saints' (*sviatye*) such as the Prophet Muhammad, the 12th-century master Ahmad Yasavi and one of his most important disciples, Hakim Ata. The séance continued for about 15 minutes with almost no acceleration in pace. Then Oghyl told Zadykhina the following: 'two people are waiting for you, one of them will provide for you (*qozon boshi*). You lost something here while working; the person who took it is going to return it to you. Your disease is not deeply rooted, not inside the body, but shallow, between the skin and the flesh. You need to calm down, for you worry a lot about meaningless words. You will soon have a son, because

---

<sup>30</sup> AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 22. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiiki*. Porkhan Oghyl, 41 years old. Kungrad, 09.10.1946.

<sup>31</sup> See Mariia Ianes, "Klavdiia Leont'eva Zadykhina – ètnograf, issledovatel' Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana. K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," *Antropologicheskii forum* (2007/7), pp. 455-460.

when I was playing, I saw that the nipple of your right breast was hanging below the other.’ At this point in the proceedings, Knorozov noted that during her *séance* she was sitting with her eyes closed. Then Oghyl wrapped two reeds with cotton wool, soaked Zadykhina’s handkerchief in oil and made a torch. Taking a chicken with them, they went out into the street: Zadykhina sat down, and Oghyl waved the torch three times around her head, according to a ritual pattern which we have already encountered above, when Knorozov was treated by Urazbaev. The reeds accidentally caught fire and they had to be thrown to the ground. Oghyl made Zadykhina jump over the fire three times and spit on it, after which she began to hit her on the sides, head and chest with the chicken. At the end, she forced her to spit on the chicken, after which Zadykhina and the *porkhon* fled in opposite directions. Oghyl was dressed in a shirt and an old camisole. She had a white scarf on her head and she had galoshes on her legs. On the right hand she wore a bracelet, and on the left a ring. For the *séance*, she took 30 roubles.

We have learnt from Knorozov’s ethnography that there existed collective rituals of exorcism which were guided by several *porkhons*, a notion which is redolent of religious practices, i.e., *zīkr*, attested in the earlier periods. But how could this happen under Soviet rule? And what did a Soviet-era *zīkr* look like? On 19 September 1946, Knorozov had the unique opportunity to attend one such event held at the cemetery of Mazlumkhon Suluu, a major burial complex in southern Qaraqalpaqstan, which includes the famous shrine of Shamun Nabi. The outstanding significance of the Shamun Nabi shrine as an object of worship is clearly attested in the 19th century by both local<sup>32</sup> and foreign authors.<sup>33</sup> It also figures

---

<sup>32</sup> *Firdaws al-iqbāl: History of Khorezm*, p. 180.

<sup>33</sup> In 1876, the Shamun Nabi shrine was described by the Russian Orientalist Alexander Kuhn, who passed by the hill while exploring the province of Kho’jayli. See Alexander Kuhn, “Ot Khivy do Gazavata,” *Turkestanskii Sbornik* (122), p. 217.

prominently in a shrine guide<sup>34</sup> and in a shrine catalogue crafted in 1961 (see Chapter Three), both of which offer a rich overview of Muslim holy places in Khorezm as well as the Sufi narratives and religious practices associated with them.

Sufi narratives about Shamun Nabi can vary considerably. However, what Knorozov could record from a local sheikh was that Shamun Nabi had been a wrestler (*polvon*), who lived long before the Prophet Muhammad and fought the unbelievers. He came from Arabia, a feature common to many saints of Khorezm as we have seen in Chapter Three, with a companion and settled on this hill. Nearby in a fortress lived an infidel *polvon* named Gyaur, with whom he often fought. Gyaur saw Shamun Nabi's wife, fell in love with her, and dug an underground passage to the saint's dwelling. The unfaithful wife used the passage to meet Gyaur while her husband was away. One day Shamun Nabi, having returned home, did not find his wife, went in search of her, stumbled upon the underground passage, and through it got into Gyaur's castle, where he found his adversary with his wife. Gyaur began to fight Shamun Nabi. His wife threw a handful of millet at her husband's feet, causing him to slip and fall to his knees. At that moment, Shamun Nabi's dog bit Gyaur and diverted his attention. Shamun Nabi's wife tried to bind her husband with ropes to put him at the mercy of Gyaur, but the saint broke them all. By chance, she learned that he could not free himself if bound with hair from his own beard. In this way, Gyaur managed to kill Shamun Nabi. As the story goes, the saint was so big that his legs were chopped off before burying him.

---

<sup>34</sup> This text has been recently described by Devin DeWeese, "Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The "Description of Kh-wārazm" and the Experience of Pilgrimage in Nineteenth-Century Central Asia."



Figure 4.2 The Mizdahqan hill. Photo by Viktoria Bots, 2018.  
© Bakhtiyor Bobojonov



Today the cemetery where Knorozov visited the Shamun Nabi shrine is known by its ancient name Mizdahqan<sup>35</sup> and it is located 8 km from Kho'jayli along the road leading from the city south-west towards K hneurgench in Turkmenistan. When one approaches it by car, one is immediately impressed by the extraordinary number of tombs built on that hill. In fact, the Mizdahqan burial area looks like a citadel of the dead. But how did it look like when Yuri Knorozov visited it back in 1946?

The upper part of the hill is covered with tombs and they mostly belong to Uzbek families. All the territory around the hill, meanwhile, is dotted by graves of Qaraqalpaq and Qazaq tribes, mainly Aday and Tabyn. Again, on the top of the hill, on its westernmost part, one finds the Mazlumkhon Suluu shrine, a semi-underground mausoleum decorated with turquoise tiles, which gave its name to the hill and cemetery. Towards the easternmost part of the hill there is a mound called Jumart Qasab with smaller burial element on the slopes. Its top looks like a rounded platform with the remains of burnt bricks and pottery. If one follows the path that cuts across the cemetery, almost at the centre of the latter, there is a long, rectangular mausoleum with a high entrance portal and seven domes in a row. Inside, the mausoleum is divided into seven separate chapels, and under their arches lies a gigantic 27-metre-long tomb of a saint known as Shamun Nabi. This is the most revered of all the shrines in the Mazlumkhon Suluu burial complex. All the roads leading to the Jumart Qasab hill converge upon it, and people visit it before they visit any of the other shrines. They make their devotions by kneeling on the threshold, touching the ashes with their fingers and running their palms over their faces. Then they listen to the sheikh's prayer and give him offerings. The bushes near the mausoleum and the lower part of the pole (*tugh*) are hung with many colourful

---

<sup>35</sup> See *Firdaws al-Iqbāl*, fn.593.

shreds left by visitors. There is a paraffin burner on the tomb, in place of the traditional lamp (*chiragh*). It is usually infertile women who come here to worship the saint and request his intercession. They circumambulate the shrine three times and then, guided by the *porkhons*, roll down the rocky slope of the Jumart Qasab mound. According to informants, people had recourse to Shamun Nabi in the past at times when there was a danger that their cattle would die, and the cattle were driven around the Jumart Qasab mound, where a wide path is still preserved today.<sup>36</sup>

The devotional practices which Knorozov encountered on the occasion of his visit to the shrine did not constitute anything exceptional. In fact, the shrine continued to attract visitors throughout the Soviet period, in spite of atheist propaganda and various waves of violent secularist policies. Indeed, the number of pilgrims which CARC commissioners and propagandists observed every time they ‘checked’ the site was so high that in May 1966 a special commission stage-managed the opening of the Shamun Nabi tomb to prove that no one had been buried therein.<sup>37</sup> A Qaraqalpaq sociologist who attended the event reported that the performance organised by representatives of the propaganda department of the Uzbek Communist Party deeply undermined the religiosity of the local believers. He claimed that people from a collective farm nearby stopped performing the pilgrimage to the shrine between 1967 and 1968, that in 1970 during the Feast of Sacrifice only 45 people showed up, and that throughout the whole province of Kho’jayli the ulama began to

---

<sup>36</sup> My rendering of Yuri Knorozov’s encounter with the Mazlumkhon-Suluu cemetery aggregates and synthesizes materials taken from three different sources. The first two are unpublished and can be found in AIEA RUS, fond Knorozova, Album, l. 20; private papers, ll. 47-49. The third is published as Iu.V. Knorozov, “Mazar Shamun-Nabi (Nekotorye perezhitki domusul’manskikh verovaniĭ u narodov Khorezmskogo oazisa),” *Sovetskaia ětnografiia* (1949/2), pp. 86–97.

<sup>37</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 30, d. 458 (*Otchet, spravki partyinykh komitetov, drugikh organizatsii po atesticheskoi rabote*), l. 46.



avoid talking about Shamun Nabi.<sup>38</sup> This was, once again, wishful thinking. In fact, we know that this ostentatious profanation of the tomb did little to dent public belief and religious activities at the site. In 1971, the propaganda department of the Uzbek Communist Party had to face the grim reality of a significant number of pilgrims gathering at the place, including children from the local schools.<sup>39</sup> Following a resolution issued in December 1973,<sup>40</sup> the shrine complex was registered among the monuments of cultural significance which were to be supervised by the Uzbek Ministry of Culture.<sup>41</sup> In 1977 Qaraqalpaq propagandists noted that the shrine remained an object of assiduous devotion: ‘that this site is often visited is evidenced by the fact that there are stones left by pilgrims everywhere around the shrine.’<sup>42</sup>

When in September 1946, Knorozov visited the Shamun Nabi shrine, he could also attend a collective séance of exorcism, namely a *zikh* led by several *porkhons* who treated a group of people and liberated them from the *jinn*s. Rich in detail with vivid illustrations of how the *porkhons* operated and dotted with references to Sufism, Knorozov’s account is key to appreciating the social significance as well as the sheer magnitude of the religious event.<sup>43</sup> The Soviet eth-

---

<sup>38</sup> Zh. Bazarbaev, *Opyt sotsiologicheskogo izucheniia ateizma i religii* (Nukus: Karakalpakstan, 1979), pp. 94-95. Ironically, having misread Bazarbaev’s work, Bennigsen and Wimbush reported that ‘local authorities ordered that the shrine be opened and destroyed.’ See Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1985), p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 22, d. 598, l. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Postanovlenie pravitel’sтва Uzbekistan no. 539 ot 21/XII/1973 “Ob utverzhdenii spiskov arkhitekturnykh, istoriko-khudozhestvennykh, i arkeologicheskikh pamiatnikov, priniatykh na gosudarstvennuiu okhranu respublikanskogo naznacheniia,” Archive of the National Agency of Restoration, *Kadastronoe delo “Shamun-Nabi”* (Tashkent, 2005), l. 6.

<sup>41</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 24, d. 186 (otchet, spravki po ateisticheskoi rabote, 1974), ll. 26ob-27.

<sup>42</sup> QPA, f. 1, op. 30, d. 458, l. 46.

<sup>43</sup> This account has been published posthumously in Iurii V. Knorozov, “Shamanskii zikh v podzemel’e Mazlumkhan-sulu,” *Étnograficheskoe obozrenie* (1994/6), pp. 91-96; the present section draws extensively therefrom.

nographer explained that the *zikh* took place every week during the night from Thursday to Friday with 400-500 people attending. Most of the participants came from the neighbouring villages, within a radius of 20 km away from the Mazlumkhon Suluu cemetery. Knorozov reported that women came in groups of three to six with offerings (bread and pancakes, grapes, melons and peaches). The first thing they did was to visit the Shamun Nabi shrine: they knelt down and touched the threshold with their foreheads, then touched the ground at the threshold with the fingers of both hands and ran them along the forehead and eyebrows, from the middle of the forehead to the temples. The women were welcomed by Sheikh Shabanbay Qurbaev, a Qazaq in his mid-thirties, who sat inside the mausoleum near the door. He sang a prayer which most probably was meant as a blessing, after which the women reciprocated with offerings which they placed on the tomb of the saint. After praying at the shrine of Shamun Nabi, the women moved to the sheikh's house, drank tea prepared beforehand, and indulged in conversation. After a while, the sheikh took the offerings from the tomb to his storeroom, and distributed some of them among those who were present. At some point, noted Knorozov, came a *porkhon*, a tall Qaraqalpaq with a tambourine, which he hung on the wall in the sheikh's house. Under his guidance, the three women, accompanied by another *porkhon*, climbed up the Jumart Qasab hill. Once they reached the top, the Qaraqalpaq *porkhon* tied a white sash around the waist of one of the women, bade her lie down on the ground and then pushed her down the hill. Having rolled down to the bottom of the mound, she was picked up by another *porkhon*. Then came another assistant of the sheikh, one Akhtalyk Qudaibergenov, a Qazaq in his forties who lived in the cemetery, and led a similar ritual. Qudaibergenov told Knorozov that he had become a *porkhon* several years earlier and that he had practised first in Bukhara and Samarqand. He had also spent eight years (from 1933) in prison (in Siberia and the Far East), where he met a number of Central Asian exorcists, deported due to a crackdown on mullahs. His grandfather too was a *porkhon*, he said, who 'worked' with fire; his father was the most important *eshon* in Kho'jayli. Qudaibergenov's outfit was entirely modern. He

was dressed in white trousers and a corduroy jacket with a zip fastener. He had military boots at his feet. He sported a fox hat on his head and wore goggles against dust. He moved and talked slowly, as if apathetic and detached. He must have looked like some kind of spaceman. The other *porkhon* who had turned up with a tambourine at the sheikh's house had a slightly less intimidating demeanour. A 36-year-old Qaraqalpaq from Kho'jayli, he was dressed in corduroy trousers and a military tunic. He was polite, and he gently guided some women to pray at the graves of their relatives.

By evening Qudaibergenov had become unrecognisable: from a lethargic moonwalker, he had turned into an acrobat who jumped around, clapped his hands and made a peculiar noise with his mouth, which Knorozov described as a sort of *khkhkho* when inhaling and a *kshshsh* hiss when exhaling. In the sheikh's room Qudaibergenov approached a middle-aged woman who was sitting. He grabbed her hands and began to move them apart and upwards. After 15 seconds, she fell to the floor with a groan. The *porkhon* sat her down, lifted her by the shoulders and made a distinct whiplash-like sound in front of her face, after which she regained a perfectly normal look.

It was already 8.30 in the evening when the Qaraqalpaq *porkhon* took his tambourine off the wall and began to run his fingers over it, testing the sound. He lightly dried it by the fire, and told Knorozov, in Russian, that the sound tended to be deafening in wet weather. At the sheikh's signal, everyone left the house: they had to go to the underground Mazlumkhon Suluu shrine. Holding up a lantern, the sheikh led the procession in the dark. When they arrived in a large cave, Knorozov recounted, everyone sat down on their heels in an irregular circle. The sheikh hung the lantern on the wall. There must have been between 100-120 people attending. Most of them were women (c. 80%), children and infants (boys and girls) of different ages, infants (about 15%), and very few men, almost all of them elderly. Women were predominantly young (20-35 years old). This gender imbalance can be explained by the fact that Knorozov was visiting Uzbekistan in 1946, at a time when many men had not yet returned home from the war.

Five *porkhons* sat in a small circle surrounded by the crowd. The Qaraqalpaq *porkhon* recited a short prayer, which ended with the word *omin* ('amen'). Those present repeated the amen simultaneously while raising their hands. Then Qudaibergenov slowly began to strike the tambourine. He sang a song which mentioned various saints, including Shamun Nabi and Mazlumkhon Suluu, and repeated many of the usual formulae which Knorozov had noted elsewhere too (*olam boshi bismillah*, for example). The tempo of the tambourine's beats and the song quickened gradually. With the first beats, the old *porkhon* stood up and after a while began to wander slowly back and forth, uttering at first softly, and then louder, short, broken sounds, like wheezing and growling every time he came out. Soon Qudaibergenov began to move in circles, leaning his body to different sides, and waving his arms. He then produced a hissing sound like a *kshsh* when exhaling and a hoarse sound when inhaling. Two other *porkhons* took hold of each other's shoulders, standing side by side, and began to bend their bodies forward rapidly, making a wild hissing sound at each movement.

After several minutes, the young Qaraqalpaq *porkhon* put down his tambourine, stood up, and joined the others. He placed the back of his hand on his mouth and produced a grating sound like *kho*. Knorozov was particularly struck by the fact that the *porkhons*' behaviour differed considerably from that of one another during the *zikh*. Qudaibergenov, for example, stood barefoot, with his head wrapped in a white shawl, wearing white trousers and a velvet jacket, over which he put a white shirt without a belt. With a tense expression, a distorted grimace on his face and covered in sweat, he ran along a row of people who were sitting as if looking for someone among them. Tilting his torso at a sharp angle and making various movements with his hands, most often rolling up his sleeves or putting his hands to his face, he kept producing a disturbing hissing sound when he breathed in and out. Sometimes he would utter single words quickly, pulling the white shawl off his head and waving it around. Sometimes it seemed that he had found the right person: the first was a middle-aged woman he had already treated before the *zikh* at the sheikh's house. He stopped in front of her, then put

his hands on her shoulders and began to sway her to the rhythm of his sounds. After a few moments, she began to repeat his motions. Then he lifted her back onto her feet and drew her into the *porkhons'* circle. Otherwise, he stopped before other women, began to sing, hugged them, and rocked them back and forth in rhythm with his singing. Knorozov noted that the woman who was brought into the *porkhon's* circle eventually fell down in exhaustion with a moan that curiously conveyed a sense of both suffering and bliss. Qudaibergenov dragged her away and sat her down; holding her head, he leaned close to her face and twice or thrice made a peculiar sound, like a whistling whip, after which the woman instantly returned to her normal look.

Shortly before the end of the *zikr*, Knorozov noted, something rather remarkable happened. Qudaibergenov took an axe, bared the left part of his chest and swung the axe several times. Screaming *alla-hoo*, he struck his chest with the blunt end of the axe across his heart so hard that a roar reverberated through the whole cave. He gave himself about twelve such blows, dropped the axe and started running in circle again: what an impressive scene! Then he took the axe again and struck himself 12-15 times. Nor was this all: he put the sharp end of the axe on his diaphragm, and the sheikh, who was standing quietly close to the circle as if he were the director, swung the axe eight times with all his strength.

Slightly horrified by these excesses, Knorozov turned his attention to the young Qaraqalpaq *porkhon*, the one wearing corduroy trousers. He had stood in one place for a long time doing nothing other than producing a grating sound, by putting the back of his hand to his mouth, and rocking his body in all directions. All of a sudden, he too bestirred himself. He ran frantically along the people sitting; he stopped in front of a woman, sat in front of her and started to sing in a beautiful, melodious voice. When he finished singing, he spat into the woman's face and whistled, hit her on the shoulder and on her back two or three times – a procedure which, as we have seen, signalled that he was casting out an evil spirit. Several times, he led women in the *porkhons'* circle and twirled them in one place like a whirligig, or made them repeat their movements

with body bending and emitting a scream. When the woman became semi-conscious and stopped, wobbling, he would quickly lead her back to her place, fanning her and patting her on the shoulder. On two occasions he, like Qudaibergenov, struck himself on the bare chest with the blunt end of the axe, after which he fell into a state of exhaustion and stood still for some time.

In addition to these two presiding figures, Knorozov noted, there was another *porkhon*, a 55-year-old Qazaq who was short and stout. He too was rather intimidating, for he sported a black cap, white trousers and white jacket, and held a whip in his hand. He walked slowly, eyeing people like a beast and repeating the same *khkhk-ho*-sound, like a growl. Sometimes he would stop in front of some women, let out a longer and gruffer sound, whip them and drag them by the scruff of their neck into the circle of the exorcists. At one point he threw himself on a woman brought into the circle by another *porkhon*, picked her up and threw her to the stone floor with violence. He repeated the same thing with a 12-year-old girl, at which point Qudaibergenov began to wrestle with him, most probably in an effort to bring him back to his senses. Qudaibergenov was able to throw him down. When the Qazaq got up, Qudaibergenov headbutted him.

Finally, Knorozov reported that many fell into some kind of ecstatic state. He saw the 12-year-old, for example, spinning and dancing on one leg, quickly bowing down and screaming a *kho* sound. She repeated the movements of the *porkhon* who stood in front of her. When she reached the point of utmost exhaustion, the girl raised her arms. Then all of a sudden her movements slowed down until she became motionless and exclaimed *bismillah!*, after which her voice turned into a groan and she fell face up on the floor. Then the *porkhons* dragged her back to her place, whistled in her face, and hit her on the shoulders, and after a while she reappeared in the circle. Besides Qudaibergenov, the stout Qazaq *porkhon* did a lot of work with her; besides the usual movements of the body, the *porkhon* made her run by shouting sharp orders: ‘come here, go there!’ (*unga! munga!*), he said with equally sharp gestures of his hand that brandished a whip.

When the sheikh read a prayer, everyone sat with their palms turned upwards: this was the sign that the *zikh* was coming to an end. After the prayer, the sheikh removed the lantern from the wall and headed for the exit. Everyone followed him. The *zikh* had lasted two hours. The women sat in the sheikh's house all night and began to disperse at dawn. 'By 8 AM,' wrote Knorozov, 'there was no one left at the cemetery, except the sheikh and Qudaibergenov, who became lethargic and apathetic again.' Nobody seemed inclined to talk about the *zikh*. Somehow Knorozov managed to find out that the sheikh considered himself to be the one in charge. In particular, he felt responsible for the those who attended the séance of exorcism and thus wanted to ensure that nothing bad happens to anyone during the *zikh*. Qudaibergenov, meanwhile, was clearly the most important among the *porkhons*. He explained to Knorozov that the other *porkhons* came at his invitation, except the Qazaq one, of whom Qudaibergenov said that 'he was not a *porkhon*, but a monkey!' Although Qudaibergenov claimed that he did not remember anything, he explained to the Soviet ethnographer that he had head-butted the Qazaq *porkhon* for violating the rules of the *zikh*. Then he added that in order to become a *porkhon*, one must be possessed by the spirits (*arvoh*) and acquire experience under the guidance of an experienced exorcist. 'When the disciple becomes sufficiently knowledgeable,' Qudaibergenov commented, 'he makes a gift (*sadaqa*) to his teacher, receives a blessing (*potia* < Uzb. *fotiha*) from him, and from that time he is considered to be an independent *porkhon*.'<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Knorozov, "Shamanskii zikh v podzemel'e Mazlumkhan-sulu."

## Healing the Possessed around Urgench

As we shall see in this section, the situation we have observed through the lens of Knorozov's ethnography did not change much in the 1950s, in spite of a renewed attack against religion immediately after the death of Stalin<sup>45</sup> and the violent secularist policies of the Khrushchevian period. Here I shall focus most of my attention on the unpublished ethnographic materials of Gleb Snesev (1910–1989), a prolific Soviet anthropologist who devoted most of his life to the study of Muslim communal life and religious rituals in the oasis of Khorezm after the Second World War.<sup>46</sup>

The scion of a Russian family of priests and scientists, Tsarist military officers and accomplished Orientalists,<sup>47</sup> Snesev found that his eminent family associations placed him in bad odour with the Soviet establishment. Uzbekistan and political propaganda gave him, however, the opportunity to 'escape' from Moscow in the 1930s. Khorezm, in particular, was his ticket to a larger world: as he joined the ranks of the Soviet Great Khorezmian Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition in the 1950s, Snesev began to enjoy unprecedented freedom, and to collect a monumental amount of data on Muslimness in the region.

The initial observations that Snesev made upon arrival in the region strike the historian of Soviet cultural life as extremely original. During his first stint in Central Asia in the 1930s – that is, at the height of state violence against Islamic institutions – Snesev warned atheists that 'the absence of [apparent] religious worship can in no way be taken to characterize the degree of vitality of

---

<sup>45</sup> I have here in mind the resolution of the central committee of the Communist Party issued on 7 July 1954, which denounced the weakening of scientific-atheistic propaganda against religious communities. See Sergei S. Alymov, "G.P. Snesev i polevoe izuchenie "religiozno-bytovykh perezhitkov"," *Ètnograficheskoe Obozrenie* (2013/6), p. 75.

<sup>46</sup> A biography of Gleb Snesev can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>47</sup> Snesev's father, Pavel Evgen'evich, was a famous psychiatrist, and Gleb's uncle, Andrei Evgen'evich, was an officer of the imperial army active in Central Asia, as well as an Orientalist, see *ibid.*



[Muslim] religiosity. Often, even where neither a mosque nor an imam is visible, or when a holy site in the guise of a shrine, a sacred tree, or a stone does not manifest itself, religiosity among the population still remains firm.’ Having noted how state authorities cracking down on Islam stolidly operated by the book and therefore confined their attention solely to mosques as places of congregation for worship, Snesarev suggested that Soviet atheists were hampered by their ignorance of actual Muslim beliefs and practices, and he openly criticised the inefficiency of anti-religious activities. These latter, he wrote, ‘rarely addressed such ancient beliefs as [...] the faith in [the power of the] spirits, healing [practices] or the cult of sacred trees.’<sup>48</sup>

Having understood that Muslimness permeated society in Uzbekistan beyond the cramped confines of the mosques, and in spite of violent secularist policies, Snesarev turned his attention to places where people congregated for religious purposes other than formal worship. Here below the reader will find one of his first attempts to record a healing ritual led by an elderly exorcist. The séance, or *jahr*, took place in the vicinity of Khanqa, a major urban centre on the left bank of the Amu Darya, c. 20 km south-east of Urgench. The shrine in question was the *mazar* of Gulli Biy, a devotional complex which included, together with a domed shrine, a cemetery and a small settlement with houses where the shaykhs who tended the grave of the saint lived. ‘The cult of Gulli Biy was entirely female,’ Snesarev tells us, ‘for the pilgrims as well as the sheikhs were all women.’<sup>49</sup> The object of devotion too was a woman: the name Gulli Biy means ‘Flowery Lady’, and is reminiscent of a broader aggregate of Sufi narratives dealing with the image of the ‘virgin’ (*qiz*).<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Alymov, “G.P. Snesarev i polevoe izuchenie “religiozno-bytovykh perezhitkov”, p. 73.

<sup>49</sup> Snesarev, *Relikty domusul'manskikh verovaniĭ i obriadov u uzbekov Khorezma*, p. 261.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* The theme of the ‘virgin girl’ who becomes a Sufi master is to be found elsewhere in Central Asia and borrows elements originating from writing traditions from at least the early modern period. See Aziza Shanazarova, “The Making of Qīz Bibī in Central Asia’s Oral Shrine Traditions: From the Great

As we shall see in the account that I offer here below in translation, the séance was led by a female exorcist who was identified as *biy-khalpa* (<*khalifa*),<sup>51</sup> who was helped by her own disciples known as *supi* (<*sufi*).<sup>52</sup> This is what Snesev noted down of that encounter with the exorcist:

23 August 1956. It is 4 in the morning. Together with G.S. Kurmutullaeva and a group of women, I hit the road in a GAZ 69 to perform pilgrimage at the shrine of Gulli Biy, 7-8 km north of Khanqa in the direction of Urgench. Along the road, [I notice] several imposing houses built in the old style where the descendants of Gulli Biy live. Abutting upon these very houses are the premises of the shrine of Gulli Biy, with cupolas. The car stops [close to the shrine]. The pilgrims proceed along a pathway, ambling [through the fields] into a village. There, a hundred steps away from a factory (*kombinat*), the pilgrims enter a house where the 107-year-old descendant of Gulli Biy [named Aisha Biy] lives. In the outer courtyard pilgrims perform the circumambulation of a huge elm-tree and then enter the house. In the penumbral atmosphere of the portico Aisha Biy and her entourage met everyone. [...] [Aisha Biy] muttered something; a person sitting next to her explained that she's talking with her own *pirs*, [i.e., spirits].<sup>53</sup> Then she fell into ecstasy: *astaghfirullah* ('I seek forgiveness in God'), *allahu akbar* ['God is the greatest']—these were the words that I could distinguish from what she said—*haqq, hu* ['He is God'] she repeated. In a frenzied sort of state, she tried to stand up, but then nearly fell. At the end of her

---

Lady to a Fourteen-Year-Old Virgin," in Chiara Formichi (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 94-108.

<sup>51</sup> On the female title *khalpa* and its usage in Khorezm in the 1990s, see Kleimichel, *Halpa in Choresm (Ḥwārazm) und Ātin Āyi im Ferghanatal. Zur Geschichte des Lesens in Usbekistan im 20. Jahrhundert*, i., pp. 10-17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion on *pirs* in relation to *khalpas*, see *ibid.*, p. 271.

conversation with her *pirs*, she got tired and shook her arm at us saying: ‘get out!’ [While talking to the spirits] a few times she burst into an: ‘at your service! (*qulluq*)’ [...] At this point the benediction began. Momojon, our landlady, came close to Aisha Biy; she kneeled before the old lady. [Aisha Biy] took her head with both hands, patted her, embraced her and finally spat into her face. She did the same thing to Momojon’s daughter, Gulchehra (a schoolgirl); and to Tokhtajoy, the teacher of the school for adults (who was pregnant and suffered from miscarriage at the hospital, undergoing great distress, and now is pregnant again and afraid). After the benediction, Sharipa’s daughter, Munavvar, a schoolgirl, came to Aisha; then it was the turn of two other women and a certain Durka Momo. [...] One Tokhta Opa persuaded her four-year-old daughter to get closer to Aisha Biy with a five-rouble banknote in hand. But the girl was scared and did not go. The old Aisha Biy looked frightening. After all this ritual with Aisha Biy, all the pilgrims moved on to the shrine and sat at another house. There they met another *biy*, another very old woman, who looked authoritative. They drank some tea and then moved on to a grave with this *biy*. In the premises [of the shrine] there are three graves. [...] Vapo Eshon, Gulli Biy’s father, and her grandfather are buried here. Gulli Biy is buried in a separate grave. In the house live the descendants of Gulli Biy. Incidentally, here they call her ‘Qiz Biy,’ [because] she was a virgin; she did not have children. Everyone here says so. I would like to emphasize the following: (i) In the evening (in this house) they perform [rituals called] *jahr*. Today there won’t be any [such ritual], because there are few people. (ii) There are special *supis* for this ritual. The *supis* live in houses nearby and in the *kolkhozes*. All the *biys* who live here are the *supis* of Gulli Biy. All the *supis* are women. (iii) Aisha Biy is in contact with her *pirs* all the time. Some talk to her; some choke her. (iv) In one of the small courtyards close to the grave there is an old elm-tree, from which percolates some

kind of liquid into the ground. The pilgrims call it ‘a natural spring’ (*buloq*) and they rub their faces with its mud.<sup>54</sup>

When read against the background of earlier sources detailing Muslim religious practices in Khorezm, Snesev’s account comes across as redolent of Sufi traditions and what we may term the Sufi vocabulary of the sacred. Snesev is clear about the prominence of hereditary lineages (*avlod*) in Soviet Uzbekistan. These were groups tracing their agnatic genealogy to a saint or holy man as well as constituencies based on a lineage of initiatory transmission from a master and sharing disciplinary practices, which coalesced to form a shrine community; and they did so according to a pattern which must sound familiar to anyone working with material on Sufism from earlier epochs.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the vocal repetition of God’s names (*haqq / hu*) performed by Sufis at the shrine of Gulli Biy, the healing practices carried out by descendants of saints, the recitation of the opening sura of the Qur’an (*fotiha*), the ecstatic state of the exorcist, the term *pir* used to denote the spirits that possess her, her hitting the sick persons and her spitting into the face of the visitors to cast out the evil spirits - taken together, these elements offer a vivid echo of what we encounter in earlier Sufi texts.<sup>56</sup>

A few years later, in 1961, Snesev was in Khiva when he heard the story of another exorcist, a woman living in Gurlen, a major urban settlement situated on the left bank of the Amu Darya c. 50 km north-west of Urgench. The woman specialised in treating people affected by the evil eye. This is how Snesev’s informant referred to her:

---

<sup>54</sup> AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkhologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1956 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 104 l. 145.

<sup>55</sup> DeWeese, “The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia: Descent Groups Linked to Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi in Shrine Documents and Genealogical Charters.”

<sup>56</sup> DeWeese, “Shamanization in Central Asia.”

We have a *porkhon* in Gurlen and she is a woman. Her name is Sapar Taub and she is called a *sugchi* [lit. ‘who frees from the evil eye’]. *Porkhons* is the general labelling, but not everyone can be a *sugchi*, only the skilful ones. These *porkhons* cast out the *jinn*, [and this is how they do it:] they take flour, stir it with ashes and make a dough. Then they make *tutuk*, i.e., three sticks wrapped in cotton wool [which will serve as] candles. They [proceed to] soak the cotton wool in oil and then the dough is used to make a base into which to stick the *tutuk*. [The *sugchi* usually] takes an iron basin or a cup, pours water in it and glues the dough with the *tutuk* in the middle of it, that is in the water. Then the cup is placed on the patient’s forehead and a silver coin is placed into the cup. Then she takes a pot and covers it with a thin layer of cotton wool. She lights the *tutuk* and then covers the top of the cup with the overturned pot. The cotton wool catches fire, [and this produces a reaction so that] the pot draws water [into itself], and [this movement] produces a whistling and squelching sound. [At this point] everyone says: ‘That’s how the healthy one pulls the evil eye (*sug*) out of the sick one!’ The *porkhon* hits the pot saying: ‘Pull! Pull!’ When there is no more water left, the pot is hard to pull off, and this is considered a good sign. This is what the *porkhon* does next: After the forehead, she puts the cup on the head and from there she pulls out the evil eye. Later the cup is placed on the chest, then on the knees and on feet. ‘She cast out the evil eye!’ (*sug chikardi!*), they say, which means that the *séance* is over. After casting out the evil eye, the *porkhon* immediately makes a fire (*olov*) and begins to hit the sick person on the back with her hand, saying: ‘go away! go away!’ (*qoch! qoch!*) ... She does this three times and asks: ‘Have you survived?’ ‘Yes, I have survived!’, replies the patient (three times) while spitting on the fire. [Also,] the *porkhon* hits the patient with a chicken as well or with a black hen or a yellow goat. In Khiva there was a famous *sugchi* whose name was Chinana. I remember that when I was a boy, they used to scare me with her image.

People come to the *sugchi* in Gurlen every day and hour by carriage. She is a rich old woman. A month ago, she was performing the [ritual with the] fire in the house, and once the séance was completed, she threw some ashes in the yard. The haystack in the yard caught fire and so did a carriage and other constructions near her house. People there laughed and said: ‘Let everything burn down!’ An old man who suffered from rheumatism lived with the *sugchi* for the whole summer. He was at her service (*khizmat qildi*): he carried wood and water, and kept things clean for her. Everyone made fun of them; they were in love, they said. During a séance, she took him to the cemetery to an open grave and made him climb into it, so that the evil spirit (*ajina*) who had possessed him would remain in the grave. The old man was afraid to climb into the grave, so she kicked him in the buttocks to force him into the place. But he did not get into the grave and fell unconscious.<sup>57</sup>

In this account, Snesev does not offer much in the way of an explication of the sacred dimension of Muslim exorcism. He does, however, dwell on the mechanics of the healing ritual. As we have seen, the proceedings of the séance included functional aspects which we have encountered elsewhere: spitting into the fire, beating the patient on the back, and sacrificing an animal (a chicken or a goat): these are all details that had previously been recorded by Knorozov fifteen years earlier. More importantly for our purposes, however, is to note that from Snesev’s diary it transpires that the exorcist was fully integrated into the social texture of Gurlen and that her activities were known to the public.

Sacrificing animals was a way of summoning magic curative powers, and it was an integral part of the treatment for all sorts of health problems. In 1956, once again in Khanqa, the Russian

---

<sup>57</sup> AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1961 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 10, ll. 31-33.

ethnographer met one Oyjon, a young lady aged 31 who told him that during her pregnancy, she started to suffer dizziness which made her often fall over. She then resorted to a mullah who was also an exorcist. Having diagnosed her with the [so-called] ‘hare’s disease,’ he wrote a prayer (*duo*) and gave it to Oyjon. He prescribed her, however, not to carry the prayer about her person, for it would have been a burden to the foetus. He suggested instead that she should place it high in a corner of her house so that the children couldn’t reach it. He furthermore instructed Oyjon to have either a hen or a rooster ready by the time she delivered the child. The idea was that if she bore a baby girl, a rooster should be cut on the mother’s shoulder immediately after childbirth, so that the animal’s blood could run down her body; if she gave birth to a baby boy, meanwhile, she should perform the same ritual, but with a hen. Oyjon recalled that when she gave birth to her son, a hen was placed on her shoulder and someone cut its throat. She lost consciousness and lay down. The next day she woke up healthy and the hare’s disease was gone, she said.<sup>58</sup>

Snesarev’s interlocutors tended to show a blasé attitude about exorcism in Soviet Uzbekistan, which should push us to call into question facile assumptions that people’s lifestyle had somehow become universally Sovietized: ‘He who is destined to become an exorcist (*folbin*) has already had sickness beforehand; usually it’s like typhus,’ explained one Sharipa Sultonova, a 63-year-old resident of Khanqa. People explained to Snesarev that the calling to become an exorcist manifested itself in specific ways, and that there were signs that made such a calling visible. ‘[One loses consciousness:] a woman could run out naked into the street, leave her children and go somewhere [without bothering much about the consequences],’ continued Sharipa. ‘Also, exorcists are unusually clean, and constantly wash their hands; they also pour water into a cup and

---

<sup>58</sup> AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaiia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1961 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, l. 131.

look into it [as a ritual of divination].'<sup>59</sup> Sharipa was adamant about the fact that becoming an exorcist was physically challenging, indeed a sort of ordeal, for the *paris* forced the candidate to accept her predestination and become a *folbin*: '[they threaten you by saying something like this]: 'if you don't accept us, we will make you blind, or lame! We shall cripple you, and in the end, you will die!' If one does not agree to become an exorcist, one is taken to a river and drowned or forced to hang oneself.' At this point Snesev's informant goes on to explain what can happen if one refuses to deal with the transcendental world. Sharipa's account is rather ghastly. 'Oh, and there was that case ... there was a barber, someone who had worked for many years and one day, all of a sudden, he tried to slit his own throat with a razor. His son walked into the shop at that moment and rescued him. He was hospitalized, but he went mad. They said he did not want to accept the command of the *paris*.' Sharipa also knew that someone lost her life because of the unbearable torments coming from the *paris*: '[Yes, that was the case of] Ulli Biy's daughter who died because she did not want to become a *folbin*. On the day when *sumalak*<sup>60</sup> was being boiled up, they summoned her and sent for firewood. Suddenly, she saw a big fire. It was a *pari* who appeared to her in the guise of fire. She was frightened, during the conversation with the *pari*. She took a cup of water, looked into it and said: 'I won't ever accept you; I won't ever accept you!' In the end this young woman died.' Faced with such a gruesome narrative, Snesev asked Sharipa rather naively if things for an exorcist get better if one comes to term with one's destiny and accepts the calls of the *paris*. Sharipa answered in the negative, explaining that to be an exorcist is to live with the spirits all the time: 'it is a profession; truly, like a job.' But when one finally accepts to become an

---

<sup>59</sup> A similar ritual of divination, which required that someone looked into the water to identify the culprit in a case of theft, was recorded in Khiva in 1917, see Paolo Sartori and Ulfat Abdurasulov, *Seeking Justice at the Court of the Khans of Khiva (19th- Early 20th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 134.

<sup>60</sup> A traditional dish made of wheat seeds which is usually prepared to celebrate Nowruz, the new year according to the ancient Iranian calendar.



exorcist, then one has to undergo some kind of initiation, explained the informant. ‘One usually goes to a shrine and asks a mullah for a benediction. Then they take the tambourine and start to work.’<sup>61</sup>

Dotting the field notes of Soviet ethnographers are observations about spirits’ tangible presence in the world of humans. Not only do they talk to the exorcists, but they also visit the uninitiated in all sorts of ways. It does not come as a surprise then that one Qurbon Opa, Sharipa’s daughter and a young school teacher, explained to Snesarev that ‘*paris* appear to the exorcist in the form of a dove (*kaptar*),’<sup>62</sup> an animal particularly dear to the *porkhons*, as noted also by Knorozov.<sup>63</sup> The notion that *paris* could morph into doves owes to a tradition most probably transmitted across oral and written mediums. In a later version of the 16th-century narrative about Bāb Māchīn, which we have reviewed above, we find that a dove flies out from his armpit after he has been hit five hundred and one times by the disciples of Ahmad Yasavi.<sup>64</sup>

Spirits could be everywhere, and could inhere in everything. It was mid-August 1956 and Snesarev was staying at the house of one Momojon Avazova. His unpublished notes tell us that he began an interview by telling his host that a black cat had run into his room at night. ‘It was, of course, a spirit,’ exclaimed Momojon. ‘After all, yesterday was *juma oqshom* and that was the spirit of my husband who came to visit us.’ In local parlance *juma oqshom* (‘The Night before Friday’) refers to a customary ritual that people used

---

<sup>61</sup> Sharipa Sultanova, her daughter Kurban, and Bibijon Auliia Momo, Khanqa, 24.08.1956, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaiia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1961 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, ll. 155-156.

<sup>62</sup> Qurbon Opa, 25 years old, daughter of Sharipa Sultanova, Khanqa, 24.08.1956, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaiia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1961 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, l. 154.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Fairies always fly away in the form of a blue dove (*ko’k kaptar*) and that is the reason why we don’t shoot at pigeons,’ AIEA RUS, f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 18. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroi, Porkhani*. Informant Atadzhan Iavbasarov, perevodchik. Kıpçak, 09.09.1946.

<sup>64</sup> Necdet Tosun, “Ahmed Yesevî’nin Menâkıbı,” *İLAM Araştırma Dergisi* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Ocak-Haziran, 1998), pp. 7381. I owe this reference to Devin DeWeese.

to practice at home to welcome the spirits of the dead,<sup>65</sup> a ritual that we can observe in Uzbekistan to this very day on a Thursday evening. In Gandumkan, a settlement just outside of Khiva on the road to Urgench, one Saurjon told Snesev that ‘after a person dies, his spirit (*ruh*) comes to us. That spirit is in search of something. One cannot see it [in real life], but one can see it in a dream. Whoever dies, her spirit comes always [to us] not just for a limited period of time. It can also come in the form of a person ... You can see them in dreams.’<sup>66</sup> Others explained that it was crucial for the proceedings of the *juma oqshom* to recite a prayer for the spirits of the dead. ‘To keep the spirits happy is important,’ held Sadriddin Salimov, a 42-year-old teacher who explained to Snesev that ‘when the spirit of an ancestor comes [to visit], it stands in the corner of the room, waits and watches. It [wonders whether] it will be forgotten or not. If one cooks pilaf or makes the ritual of ‘letting out the smoke’ (*is chiqarish*), [then the spirits] leave joyfully, otherwise they leave hurt, crying.’<sup>67</sup> Also, when trying to please the spirits, it is important to keep in mind, as explained by one Sher Baba, that ‘if we forget to mention them [in our prayers], they get offended.’ This concerns especially the spirits of people who died without offspring: ‘they are always angry and so they bring harm to passers-by and to people in general. A prayer should be recited to prevent them from doing harm.’ Sher Baba proceeded to note that such *arvoh* appear disguised as people we know: ‘they may even come in the form of a neighbour or a friend [...] They wander around, sometimes enter our

---

<sup>65</sup> Odamboi Bobojonov, 30 years old, master ceramist (*naqqosh*), Khiva, 20.05.1966, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 14, l. 51. See also, Gleb P. Snesev, “Shamany i “Sviatye” v Srednei Azii,” *Nauka i religiia* (1976/12), pp. 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> Saurjon, 70 years old, Gandemian, 17.05.1966, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 14, l. 39.

<sup>67</sup> Salim Sadriddinov, Dzhumurtau, ‘Krupskaia’ collective farm, 23.06.1956, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1956 g., G.P. Snesev, papka 14, l. 28.

homes. In general, they are harmful. So, when passing through the cemetery one should say a prayer. One tractor driver was ploughing near a cemetery, and he took a nap; after that, he was ill for ten years. He sought the help of a *porkhon*, but he died recently.<sup>68</sup>

Some Uzbeks like Sharipa had a somewhat categorical approach to demonic spirits. 'There are those which visit us in the guise of cats and dogs. They can bite; but if they don't, it means that you are good and that they love you. The *albasti* is different. She has long hair and likes horses.' Momojon was also present at the interview and when the conversation touched upon the topic of the *albastis*, she took the lead: 'My brother,' said Momojon, 'saw his horse galloping at night, with foam coming out of its mouth. The animal was covered in sweat and its mane was braided. On the horse sat an *albasti* with long hair. My brother got hold of the horse and stopped it. Then he saw a coin in the mouth of the *albasti*. 'Give it back to me,' he said, but the *albasti* refused to give the coin back. Then my brother threatened the spirit: 'If you do not give it back, I will cut off your tongue.' The *albasti* threw the coin away. My brother took it, [and the spirit said:] 'If you keep quiet about the coin, you'll be rich.' But he talked a lot about it and died.'<sup>69</sup> As recorded in Snesarev's field notes, Momojon's account is of great significance, for it dovetails with what we know about the *albastis* from other Soviet ethnographic literature where the demon appears in the guise of a woman with long (usually blonde) hair and with falling breasts which it usually throws around the shoulder. It is known mainly for tormenting new-borns, from whom it usually steals organs (the liver or the heart, for example). Like *paris*, however, they can be subjugated by the Muslim believer. The latter must either cut a lock

---

<sup>68</sup> Sher-baba Matchanov, 84 years-old, Khanqa, Sara-Poyon, 19.05.1966, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskaa otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, ll. 15-16.

<sup>69</sup> Momojon Avazova, Sharipa Sultanova, 63-years old, 17.08.1956, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskaa otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, l. 81.

of hair and hide it in a Qur'an or else steal from *albasti* a special booklet or a coin.<sup>70</sup>

We have interrupted Momojon in the middle of a story about her brother encountering an *albasti*. At that point, she went on to explain that, among evil spirits, *jinn*s differ from the *albastis*. 'Jinns are found in holy places, in old mosques, in old buildings and where there is donkey and horse dung; they swarm around in these places.<sup>71</sup> If you step on such a place, there will be harm.' It was now Sharipa's turn to enter in conversation with Snesev with a grueling story: 'When she was 13 years old, my daughter urinated in a house [which stood] in ruins without a roof, and the *jinn*s did her harm. They must have been dwelling there and she stepped on their feet. Her tongue got swollen, her teeth became black and her eyes began to bulge, right there on the spot; the *jinn*s punished her. A mullah said this would happen to her two more times. After the second time, she would still have a chance to recover, but when it happened a third time, she would go blind and deaf or have her legs cut off, and she would die. The mullah even predicted when this would happen. On the appointed day, she died. She had seizures. She died when she was 18 years old.' The two women regained

---

<sup>70</sup> For an excellent summary of Soviet ethnographic material devoted to the subject, see Vladimir N. Basilov, "Albasti," in V.Ia. Petrukhin (ed.), *Istoriko-étnograficheskie issledovaniia po fol'kloru: Sbornik statei pamiati Sergeia Aleksandrovicha Tokareva* (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 1994), pp. 49-76.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, this aspect of Snesev's account is reminiscent of the content of a Persian-language talisman now extant in the holding of a museum in Samarqand. The talisman says that when Solomon the saint encountered a demon (*dīv*) and asked the latter what her name was and where she lived, the demon replied: 'Oh God's Prophet, they call me with one name, i.e., Umm al-Šibyan, or with another name, i.e., *albasti* and my place of dwelling is in the ruins and houses, (*kharabahā va chahār-dīvārḥā*), and another dwelling of mine is in the water (*dar miyān-i ḥawẓ*), and where I stay the most is in animal stalls (*dar khwābgāh-i charpāyān*),' see Samarqand Museum of the History of the Culture and Art of the Peoples of Uzbekistan, doc. 718. The record has been described in Welsford and Tashev, *A Catalogue of Arabic-Script Documents from the Samarqand Museum*, p. 520. The notion that evil spirits and demons are usually to be found in buildings fallen in disrepair and among animals is ubiquitous in Soviet ethnography, as we have seen.

some optimism only after noting that the only sure indication that a place is not infested with *jinn*s is if there are lambs around. The lambs, they argued, are ‘angels’ (*parishta*) and they are believed to come from the paradise. It is for this reason that at the bazar men stroke them: they bring good fortune.<sup>72</sup>

### **Momokhol and Her Spirits: An Exorcist in Surkhandarya**

We now leave Khorezm and move to the southernmost corner of Uzbekistan, in Surkhandarya. In the village of Shurob, an agricultural settlement from where one can see the Amu Darya flowing into the territory of Afghanistan, there lived an exorcist by the name of Momokhol. We know about her because in 1981 the Soviet ethnographer and specialist of shamanism Vladimir Basilov recorded an extensive interview with her.<sup>73</sup>

Born in 1908 into a family belonging to the Qunghrat tribal group, Momokhol got married at the age of 20. She was betrothed to her future husband at the age of 13, though her father did not marry her off for another seven years, waiting for her husband to be able to pay the bride price. Momokhol was eight years old when her maternal grandfather Alim Bakhshi died at the age of 84. Alim Bakhshi was a storyteller of undisputed fame. He not only told and sang epic poems (*doston*), but he also composed poetry of his own. He once wrote a poem about a train, something that he had never seen before. He played various types of tambourines. He must have

---

<sup>72</sup> Momojon Avazova, Sharipa Sultanova, 63 years old, 17.08.1956, AIEA RUs, Khorezmskaia arkheologo-étnograficheskaia ékspeditsiia no 8, Uzbekskii otriad 1966 g., G.P. Snesarev, papka 14, ll. 82-84.

<sup>73</sup> Vladimir N. Basilov, “Dukhi Momokhol,” in N Palagina (ed.), *Étnicheskaia istoriia i traditsionnaia kul'tura narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Nukus: Karakalpakstan, 1989), pp. 138-149. The present section draws extensively from this article.

been a joyful character, for Momokhol recalls how he sang while walking behind the plough.

Alim Bakhshi became a storyteller after meeting with Khizr, the saint.<sup>74</sup> In a dream, Khizr pointed his finger first at Alim Bakhshi's forehead, then under his lower lip and asked: 'Should I [spit onto] your forehead or into your palate?' Alim Bakhshi chose the latter, so he replied: '[Spit] on my palate!' The saint spat into his mouth and disappeared. According to Momokhol, if Alim Bakhshi had chosen his forehead, he would have become a rich man. Instead, she recounted, he chose the fate of a singer-songwriter, she said. Interestingly the theme of Khizr appearing to Momokhol in a dream and spitting onto his palate is reminiscent of earlier hagiographical literature, according to which the saint Hakim Ata began to recite poetry only after Khizr spat into his mouth.<sup>75</sup>

But the encounter with Khizr brought also something else: it put him into contact with forty powerful spirits called *chiltan* that made him sing, augmented his physical strength and endowed him with inspiration. They dictated everything he sang, basically. In return, Alim Bakhshi offered his earnings to the spirits. This meant that he did not keep the money for himself, but instead distributed it among the children in the village. He would buy the children fruits or ask his wife to cook for them. And from Alim Bakhshi, Momokhol inherited the spirits.<sup>76</sup> 'My grandfather's *chiltans* possessed me (*boboming chiltanlari meni kelib ushladilar*),' she said, while taking hold of the collar of her blouse to show how it happened. When she reached the age of 27 and was already a mother of three, she fell ill and became afflicted by an excruciating pain in her leg that impaired her ability to walk; she was carried out of the house on a blanket. The family invited an *eshon* who lived in their village to

---

<sup>74</sup> See footnote 59 at page 121.

<sup>75</sup> Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, p. 90.

<sup>76</sup> A similar case of a female healer inheriting her uncle's spirits has been recorded by Annette Krämer in Samarqand in her *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel: Studien über Frauenälteste (otin und xalfa) im unabhängigen Usbekistan*, p. 101.

heal her with prayers. That night she had a nightmare. It was as if a man with a single lock of hair on his head was standing beside her. In the dream an old man gave her a hatchet and said: ‘Cut off his [= the *eshon*’s] head.’ She cut it off, and then carried the head till dawn, taking it by the lock of hair and throwing it over her shoulder; it was not heavy for her. Later, Momokhol told the *eshon* about her dream. The *eshon* frowned, bit his lip, and shook his head anxiously. ‘You have taken [the task] upon yourself, daughter (*olibsiz buyingizga, qizim*),’ he said, meaning the burden of the exorcist. He recited the prayers and her legs regained the strength they had lost.

Years went by. Momokhol gave birth to many more children, four of which died prematurely; so much for the achievements of the Soviet Union and its modern health system! ‘It must have been God’s will,’ so she explained their deaths for herself: ‘Allah has taken [them]. God needs this death. A true servant of God does not die. That is my fate.’ Meanwhile she recalled having another important dream. She saw an old female healer, a *momo* who held a tambourine with ringing pendants in one hand; with the other hand, she got hold of Momokhol by the collar of her shirt and said: ‘Either you take this tambourine from my hands and begin to work, or you will be childless; I have the strength to take your three other children as well. I’ll make you go out to the people with this tambourine.’ Momokhol did not reply to the *momo*.<sup>77</sup>

While the meaning of the dream is rather straightforward and can be easily interpreted as an invitation to operate as an exorcist, Momokhol ignored it and after a year she fell ill again. Her eyelids became swollen and began to droop, which caused her eyes to close; her legs too were paralysed, a recurrent feature of interactions with demons and spirits, especially around pregnancy. At this point Momokhol was forty years old and she turned to another exorcist (*polchi* < *folbin*) who explained to her that her only hope was her grandfather’s forty *chiltans*; she had no other option than

---

<sup>77</sup> The Uzbek term *momo* is used broadly to refer to female saints, see Dağyeli, »Gott liebt das Handwerk« *Moral, Identität und religiöse Legitimierung in der mittelasiatischen Handwerks-risāla*, p. 257.

to be at their service (*qirq chiltanning khizmatini*). At this point, we come across the miniaturized account of a ritual reminiscent of what Snesev had recorded in the 1960s. Whereas in Khorezm to become a *porkhon* one had to secure the benediction of a mullah at a shrine, here Momokhol was invited to seek acceptance from the representative of a saintly lineage. The ritual consisted of ‘taking the hand’ (*qo’l olib*) of an *eshon* – something reminiscent of a practice of Sufi initiation, when a master formally accepts his disciple. Finally, the exorcist explained to Momokhol that she was sick because her spirits were displeased: ‘The *chiltans* told me that you are more afraid of your own son than of the spirits themselves,’ he said. This was a clear message: there was nothing wrong in her becoming an exorcist, and she should not be ashamed of it. Once he learnt of this, her son reassured Momokhol and encouraged her to follow up on her calling. Then Momokhol made the tambourine herself, with an old sieve. She took off the net and stretched an elk skin over the rim. She then invited an exorcist (*bakhshi*) who lived in one of the neighbouring villages to perform the ritual. Determination made her resourceful. She went to his village, bade the *bakhshi* sit on a donkey, and drove him to her place. He was a powerful exorcist who could read the future by looking at a 20-kopec coin. It was time for Momokhol’s first séance, i.e., a *zitr*. A large number of people gathered to form a circle. The *bakhshi* played his tambourine and so did Momokhol; he spat on her tambourine and said: ‘Now take the *eshon*’s blessing so that you can become a strong healer.’

Thus, in the late 1950s Momokhol became an exorcist. At the end of the 1970s, she acquired another ritual object: a whip (*qamchi*). Momokhol had three dreams in which someone gave her a whip. At first, she saw herself riding an unbridled horse that was taking her somewhere. Suddenly, her maternal uncle (son of Alim Bakhshi) got in the way, stopped the horse, and said: ‘Get off! Where are you going? You still have children [to take care of]. He took off the bridle from the horse and gave it to her. The horse ran away. Then the uncle gave her a whip and thundered: ‘Take charge of your children! (*bolalaringa egalik qil!*)’ Momokhol has her own reading of this dream: the horse was a ‘demon’ (*dev*), which was trying to



drive her away. In fact, on the same day when she saw that dream, she had treated a sick boy by performing a *séance*, and the demon was presumably taking revenge on her for having healed him. He wanted to kill her, claimed Momokhol, but the spirits protected her. Another time she saw in a dream her late mother, who said that another uncle had given Momokhol a whip. In the third dream, she bought a whip for 15 roubles from an old neighbour. Immediately after this last vision, Momokhol's eyes began to hurt and she sought help from another exorcist who predicted a terrible event: 'Your forty *chiltans* have offered you the whip three times. If you do not take it, you will go blind. The *chiltans* will take your eyes and you will walk with a stick.'

Her inquiries led her to a man who had preserved a whip that once belonged to an *eshon*. Momokhol persuaded him to give her the whip, but he did not want any money. However, Momokhol was adamant that in a dream she had been told to pay fifteen roubles for it. And so, the owner accepted the money. Acquiring this sacred instrument required a sacrifice to honour her spirits. On this occasion, Momokhol had a dream where an acquaintance sold to her a kid of grey colour for 25 roubles. She bought a similar kid at the market for the ritual meal. She told the vision to a *polchi* who advised her to consecrate the whip to an *eshon*. So she did: Momokhol visited the *eshon* from which she had received a blessing and he spat on the whip.

Broadly speaking, noted Basilov, Momokhol's own understanding of the *chiltans* differed little from what exorcists usually say about their spirits. She claimed that her *chiltans* were saints, guided by the invisible prophet Khizr himself, who brings happiness and boons. More specifically, however, Momokhol thought that *chiltans* rule over the world (*dunyoni egasi*) and that they are in conversations with God. Interestingly, Momokhol added that the *chiltans* are riparian creatures, which explains why they can also be referred to as the 'water people' (*odami obi*). In support of this latter characterization, Momokhol told Basilov the following Sufi narrative.

A Sufi mystic by the name of Mashrab<sup>78</sup> asked the king to give his daughter in marriage to him. Disliking the idea of declining the poor dervish's request, on the advice of his entourage the king stipulated that he would give him his daughter only if he could find two precious lamps (*jauhar chirogh*). Mashrab went to a river and shouted: 'Oh God (*Yo hu*)!' and then began to sprinkle water from the river onto the shore. The *chiltans* emerged from the water and asked why he was doing that, for the water was flowing back into the river anyway. Mashrab started to cry and asked the *chiltans* to help him marry the daughter of the king. The *chiltans* brought him forty precious candles out of the water.

As the story goes, explained Momokhol to Basilov, when the *chiltans* are revered they protect one from troubles, as do the spirits of one's ancestors (*ota-bobomizning arvohlari*). This is why she prepared a ritual meal for them, a practice recorded in many regions of Soviet Uzbekistan. She knew when it was the propitious moment to offer meat to the *chiltans*, for she felt discomfort all over her body (*badani sizadi*), a discomfort that disappeared immediately after the food was offered. When the food was laid on the table, candles were lit and stuck in a piece of clay placed on the plate, in a manner similar to what Snesev recorded in Khorezm. The ashes from the candles were dumped into a bowl of water and the water drunk as medicinal draught, for it is associated with the *chiltans*.

Interestingly, Momokhol flatly refused to dictate for transcription the texts of the invocations that she usually made to her spirits. She was convinced that doing so would incur their displeasure: they did not want to be bothered, she explained, and would punish her (literally 'they will hit me on my back - *orkamni tutadi*).

Momokhol's story stops here, but spirits meddling in the daily business of the believers continued to populate life in Soviet

---

<sup>78</sup> Bābā Raḥīm Mashrab (1657–1711?) was a mystic poet who wrote in Turkic. The information about him is mostly legendary, but it is known that he tried to become a student of the famous Naqshbandī Sufi from Kashghar, Āfāq-Khwāja (d. 1694).

Uzbekistan:<sup>79</sup> the presence of the transcendental tormenting the believers by bringing affliction which can only be cured by the exorcist with authority over other spirits is tangible. Perhaps one of the most vivid representations of this presence is the practice of building ‘houses for the spirits’ (*arvoh o’yi*, see figure 4.3).<sup>80</sup> In the early 1980s, the ethnographers K. Tajjanov and Kh. Ismailov recorded how the practice of erecting little shacks for the spirits of the dead was widespread among Uzbeks in the province of Chimkent, i.e., in southern Kazakhstan.<sup>81</sup> Dissatisfied because they were ‘ignored’ by the living, the spirits sent an illness (*arvoh kasalligi*), the only cure for which was to build them a house in a place of their own choosing where they could feel at home again. Stories about such rituals abound. We read, for instance, that a young woman called R.M. suffered since birth from an incurable paralysis of her legs. She turned to an exorcist who explained to her the origin of her disease: it was sent by spirits whose *makcham* at her former place of residence was left unattended. The next step would be to build a new *makcham* of traditional design inside her room. Her father did as instructed, and she was able to walk again. However, soon after the death of her father R.M. got married and moved elsewhere with her husband. Her parental house thus collapsed after a while, and with it the *makcham*. When farmers from a kolkhoz were assigned their land, R.M.’s daughter received a plot next to her grandfather’s house. However, after moving there, the young woman fell ill once again. The doctors said that her case was hopeless. She turned to one Mayim Tavup, an exorcist, who explained that the only way to

---

<sup>79</sup> L.A. Tul’tseva, “O nekotorykh sotsial’no-étnicheskikh aspektakh razvitiia obriadovo-prazdnichnoi kul’tury v Uzbekistane,” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1984/3), pp. 11-34; Sh.U. Ustaev, “Novyi god (navruz) v mifologicheskikh vozzreniiakh tadzhikov i uzbekov,” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1985/6), pp. 97-104.

<sup>80</sup> Snesev, *Relikty domusul’manskikh verovanii i obriadov u uzbekov Khorezma*, pp. 111; V.N. Basilov, “Teni sviatykh,” *Nauka i religiiia* (1964/9), p. 56.

<sup>81</sup> For complementary reflections on the public dimension of Muslim religiosity, which are based on the same ethnographic material, see Eren Tasar, “Pious Lives of Soviet Muslims,” in Chiara Formichi (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 305-308.



Figure 4.3 The house of the spirits (*arvoh o yi*), Köhneurguç, 1955. Collection Gleb Shesarev, not inventoried. © Archives of the Institute of Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

improve her health was to honor the spirits: A ram was slaughtered, a new *makcham* was built, and R.M. duly recovered. This is vivid illustration of how spirits entered the ostensibly modern space of Soviet collective farms!

There is little doubt that, as much as they may strike us as mere mundane manifestations of superstition, such rites were entangled with a highly meaningful discourse on Islamic sacredness and were therefore constitutive of Uzbeks' Muslimness in the Soviet period. Before the construction of a *makcham* began, said Mayim Tavup, she usually read a prayer: 'In the name of Allah, the most graceful and merciful, who took the four [holy] books and wrote the Qur'an. Let him bless the white house for the blood and soul of children, may God help me in my business. God is greatest' (*Bismillohi rahmoni rahim. Chor kitobni olganlar, kalomi-sharifni yozganlar, oq o'yni qutlugh-muborak qilsinlar, farzandlar qoni-joni uchun, men darbadarni ishini khudo o'nglasin. Ollohu akbar*). This was the same invocation that she pronounced before putting the first dish with sacrificial meat in the *makcham*.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

What is so surprising, the reader may well ask, about women living in rural areas in Uzbekistan who believed in the spirits during the period of Late Socialism? Even framing the question in this manner - assuming a world schematically divided into the domains of progress and backwardness - risks reproducing uncritically the Soviet discourse about modernization and reify its tropes: namely, that the educated are destined to distance themselves from religion while the illiterate remain necessarily superstitious. There is ample evidence to indicate that such a dichotomy is entirely unconvincing. A nuanced understanding of Soviet secularism, on the other hand,

---

<sup>82</sup> K. Tayzhanov and Kh. Ismailov, "Makcham – dom dlia dukhov predkov," *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1980/3), pp. 87-93.

is bound by necessity to do justice to the sources we have discussed here and must consider ‘the pattern of modern religious life under secularization [as] one of destabilization and recomposition, a process which can be repeated many times,’ as Charles Taylor reminds us.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, looking at instances of recomposition of religiosity in Socialist Uzbekistan is key to unpack the meaning of Soviet Muslimness. Take the following case, for example. In the summer of 1946, Yuri Knorozov came across the interesting story of one Shakhir Yusupov, an Uzbek who worked as guardian in the Sanaat collective farm in the district of Hazorasp. Yusupov had long enjoyed renown among the local population, for he was known as a skillful *baqachi* (‘frog-hunter’). Yusupov was a healer, but one of a special kind. He held that the cause of several diseases connected with debilitation was a frog that hides in the stomach of the sick and sucks all the human energy away. Confronted with a patient whose face was bright yellow, the *baqachi* determined that there actually were two frogs in this person’s stomach. The healing practice consisted of the following: he gave the sick person a small piece of raw meat to swallow. The meat was tied up to a silk string. As the patient swallowed the meat, the *baqachi* pulled back the string. When the end of the string reached the throat, he put his hand into the mouth of the patient and scratched it until it bled. Then he pulled the string with energy, ran out of the house, he tossed the purported frog into a hole that had been dug beforehand within the courtyard, covered it with dirt, and tramped it down. The presence of blood was of course explained by the fact that the frog resisted the pulling force of the healer and it clung to the patient’s throat. One may dismiss this account of healing practices as the quintessence of superstitious folklore; and this interpretive approach would be perfectly acceptable, for one is free to make anything one wants of someone else’s belief. For our purposes, however, what is historically significant is that

---

<sup>83</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 461.



this belief existed, and that it was entangled with the life of many Soviet citizens. Knorozov's ethnographic account concludes with a revealing observation. His interviewee was adamant about the fact that 'many men and women submit themselves to this healing practice. Among his [= Yusupov's] patients, there are also individuals who occupy positions of responsibility, including the commissioner of the Ministry of Justice for the region of Khorezm. Besides a meal offered at the house of the patient, [the *baqachi*] can be paid up to 500-600 roubles for two frogs. This is a real case.' Ironically, and to add a further layer of Soviet color to this story, Knorozov noted: 'the *baqachi*'s son, Ruzum Shakirov, teaches natural science at the local high school.'<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> AIEA RUS], f. 142, op. 8, d. [no number], l. 17. *Polevye zapisi Iu.N. Knorozov po temam: Verovaniia, Postroiiki*. Aliakberov Mustafa Khasanovich, N. Urgench, 26.08.1946.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### *Bureaucratic Anxiety about Muslimness*



## Introduction

On 7 April 1978, the Party executive committee of the Samarqand province convened a major meeting to discuss how to implement Article 52 of the new Soviet constitution issued just a year earlier. The article stated that ‘the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience – that is, the right to profess any religion or not to profess any, to practice religious cults or to conduct atheistic propaganda. Incitement of enmity and hatred in connection with religious beliefs is prohibited. In the USSR, church is separated from state, and schools from church.’<sup>1</sup> Famously, the recognition of the right to either profess a religion or to be an atheist as well as the separation of the church from the state had been an element of the Soviet constitution since the Stalin period, i.e., already in the first version promulgated in 1936. The Brezhnev redaction of the constitution introduced an important change: the prohibition against fomenting hatred on confessional grounds. Party members in Uzbekistan were of course deeply concerned by the new wording of the article. How were they to interpret it? Did it reflect a change of heart with regard to religion? Did it signal a new policy towards religions, one which was more protective of believers’ sensibilities after the damages inflicted by the Khrushchevian period? In fact, the addition to Article 52 meant none of this. In preparation for the meeting in Samarqand, Vladimir Kuroedov, head of the CARC offices in Moscow between 1960 and 1984, sent an explanatory note (*raz’iasnenie*) which clarified that the state perceived the need to protect itself and the integrity of the Communist project from the assault of ‘religious extremists.’ Many had begun to question the secular character of the Soviet state, and especially regarded the principle whereby religion could be taught only privately, that is within the narrow space of the family, as something anachronistic. Clearly, that was among Kuroedov’s concerns: ‘The legislation on cults also does not forbid children to attend churches together with

---

<sup>1</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 20, l. 32.

their parents and to attend worship services. Thus, the law does not prohibit teaching children religion, if [the necessary] rules are observed,' he noted. 'At the same time, the organization and systematic conduct of religious instruction to underage children is inadmissible and the perpetrators are liable to prosecution. These rules protect minors from forcible initiation into religion. This is the true humanist essence of the Soviet legislation: to protect the interests of children and their right to spiritual freedom.'<sup>2</sup> What Kuroedov's aseptic bureaucratise did not say was that in Moscow many knew that the war against religion had been already lost.

Reading today the proceedings of this meeting, one cannot help but imagine that the event must have been a moment of reckoning in Uzbekistan: CARC representatives at the national and provincial level, state prosecutors, and local Party members, all gathered around the new redaction of the Soviet constitution tasked with the exegesis of a cryptic text. The meeting morphed soon into a bureaucratic charade that amounted to a travesty of secularist ideology: they all lamented the rising tide of religiosity and agreed on the definition of an ostensibly new agenda, which amounted to strengthening atheistic propaganda. We have already seen that state organs ranging from CARC to the 'Knowledge' society had been advocating for more muscular measures on the front of atheism since the end of the Second World War. If 'Znanie cadres repeatedly decried religion's strength and atheism's weakness,'<sup>3</sup> as Victoria Smolkin has noted, one therefore wonders whether anyone truly believed that atheist education one day would deliver the expected results. On the other hand, the task of bridging the growing gap between state ideology and religiosity on the ground must have been daunting, for evidence about Muslimness was astonishing – at least, that is, to anyone who

---

<sup>2</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 20, ll. 32-37. On the 'humanistic' jargon adopted by Soviet bureaucracy with regard to religion, see Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion, and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism," *The Russian Review* Vol. 73 No. 22 (2014), p. 181.

was previously unaware of what had been going on in the localities. One activist noted, for instance, that ‘a great many young people want to study in religious schools. Whereas in 1976 there were nine students in Bukhara, in 1977 there were 200 applicants, and 100 of them were allowed to take the entry test. 90% of all applicants knew [how to read] the Qur’an. [...] 15 were Komsomol members, 33 were trade union members and more than 50 were involved in public life. How could these young people know [how to read] the Qur’an? This means that we have these schools, where children are taught illegally.’<sup>4</sup>

The resilient character of Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan produced what we may term a situation of bureaucratic anxiety – that is, a phenomenon whereby CARC commissioners and officials at different levels gave vent to their dismay at the sorry state of Sovietization as compared to the vibrant state of religiosity. Indeed, records tell us that every time they inspected the region, they discovered public manifestations of Muslimness which they had long been unaware of – or at least this is what they would like us to think. In March 1974, for example, one D. Erekeshev, a commissioner for Qaraqalpaqstan, reported unashamedly that in Tor’tqo’l ‘cemeteries and shrines are not under control. Taking advantage of the lack of surveillance [...], fanatics consider themselves masters of the situation.’<sup>5</sup> As we move eastwards, we find that in the summer of 1980 a CARC inspector sent to the region of Samarqand conveyed his frustration at encountering many youngsters who were proficient in Arabic and familiar with the Islamic scriptures. ‘Where do they learn to read the Qur’an?’, he marvelled, thereby repeating almost word for word the concerns expressed by his colleague at CARC just three years before.<sup>6</sup> If bureaucratic anxiety was the signature feature of the output of CARC and Party organs until the end of the USSR, then it means such organs clearly knew that the surveillance apparatus of the state did not function, and feared the

---

<sup>4</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 20, l. 45.

<sup>5</sup> QPA, f.1, op. 24, d. 186, l. 25.

<sup>6</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 56, l. 5.

consequences. In fact, one can confidently say that, at least starting from the 1970s, many pretended not to know that Muslimness had been hiding in plain sight for decades. Indeed, CARC commissioners and Party cadres at all levels turned a blind eye at the fact that unregistered mosque communities, for example, submitted reiterated applications for registration and that this had been going on since the 1940s; that underground Islamic schools recruited hundreds of students; that Islamic literature circulated without much difficulty, and that unregistered mullahs paid taxes on the money that they received for their religious services.

To blindly forge ahead with established bureaucratic practices was not easy for CARC, however. As Eren Tasar has pointed out, hardliners were everywhere and they too represented a force within Soviet bureaucracy. In 1979, a new document landed on the desk of the Uzbek bureau of CARC which came directly from the propaganda department of the Communist Party in Tashkent.<sup>7</sup> It was a classified memo that admonished CARC members that the time had not yet come for a truce with religion. 'Foreign propaganda has from time to time made slanderous claims about the situation of religion in the USSR, claiming in particular that the churches and mosques in the USSR allegedly had no freedom in their activities. But what is to be understood by this freedom? The separation of church and state and freedom of conscience does not, of course, mean that religious societies and their members are free to do as they please, without regard for the orders and laws of the country. In our socialist society, the existing laws on cults also place certain limits on church activities. But in setting these boundaries we have a fundamentally different approach than in bourgeois countries.'<sup>8</sup>

Designed as a wake-up call for Party organs in Uzbekistan, this memo in fact was something very different, for it rehearsed on the ideological principles of the Soviet state and drew boundaries in a cultural environment dominated by practices of tolerance: 'Built as

---

<sup>7</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 60-78.

<sup>8</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 62.

it is on the basis of Marxist-Leninist teaching, our state can neither morally nor materially support religion. While the state can tolerate religion, the founders of Marxism-Leninism nevertheless stressed that religion is incompatible with the worldview of the working class.’<sup>9</sup>

There was also a lot of wishful thinking in this document, for it alluded to the accomplishments of Sovietization in the sphere of atheism which, as we know, were far from real:

In carrying out the instructions of the central committee of the Communist Party, state authorities have strengthened the rule of law with regard to believers and the church. The activities of the clergy and religious associations have now been transferred to the believers themselves and the clergy have lost the opportunity to expand and improve churches on their own, to build and buy houses, to acquire transport, and to use the money of the believers to strengthen and spread religion and to revive churches and monasteries that were not supported by the population. The ministers of religion were transferred to fixed salaries as hired workers and deprived of many sources of personal enrichment, which reduced their material interest in increasing the number of religious rites performed. This was particularly true of the Orthodox Church. All this, combined with the deepest socialist transformations, the mass involvement of the population in the process of communist construction, the greatest achievements in science and technology, and the brilliant successes in the scientific and atheistic education of workers, has intensified the process of supplanting religion and weakening its role in the life of our society.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 62.

<sup>10</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 65.

That hardliners fell once again back on the empty verbiage of state propaganda and its purported successes is particularly arresting, for it points to the inability of Party organs to adjust to changing circumstances. It is true of course that Soviet bureaucratism was hypernormative. Equally, one wonders whether officials were aware of the fact that records such as these had little performative agency. Indeed, when read against the background of the avalanche of records pointing to Muslimness as a significant feature of Uzbek society, the next statement comes across as rather amusingly wide of the mark: 'Religion no longer plays a significant role in believers' everyday life. As a rule, they do not know the scriptures and do not even understand the words of the church service; they go to mosques and churches and perform religious rituals out of habit, out of tradition. People hope less and less for a heavenly afterlife, and [instead] try to make a better life for themselves on earth. They do not rely on the grace of God, but rather on their own strength and the achievements of science and technology.'<sup>11</sup>

While belief in Communism was no doubt a real thing in life, and it clearly informed this memo, the author was nevertheless well aware that religion was not dead: 'However, along with the weakening of the church, it should be borne in mind that due to a number of socio-economic and historical reasons, a considerable part of the Soviet people still remains under the influence of religion to a greater or lesser extent, continues to attend mosques and synagogues and observes various religious rituals. It would be a mistake to underestimate and overlook the activities of religious organizations and groups, no matter how small they are. Moreover, their network is still large.'<sup>12</sup>

But when the memo zoomed in on the situation in the localities, belief in the success of Soviet secularist policies and the spread of atheism in Uzbekistan appeared to crumble into pieces: 'In the region of Samarqand this year during the celebration of [the end of]

---

<sup>11</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 66.

<sup>12</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 68.

Ramadan, we found more than 50 places where prayers were conducted [illegally]. In 1966, in the territory of the Kalinin collective farm in the village of Bakhshibay [in the vicinity of Samarqand], with the connivance of the chairman Tursunov and the secretary of the Komsomol Doniyarov a new mosque was built. In the regional centre of the Bulungur district [in the province of Samarqand] a new mosque was constructed already in 1967 [...] We can say assuredly that a similar picture can be observed in most districts of the republic. Observations show that the local authorities tolerate the activities of unregistered religious communities and the clergy.’<sup>13</sup>

Party members, and especially propagandists, in Tashkent were, in other words, pointing their fingers at a situation where, without the deterrence of prosecution, Muslims could basically do as they please: ‘As a result, there are no complaints from believers that the authorities do not register them or restrict them unlawfully. While monitoring the observance of the legislation on cults, [we found out that] it is extremely rare that collective farms, activists or members of *mahalla* committees uncover and suppress unlawful behaviour.’<sup>14</sup>

What emerges from this memo crafted by the propaganda department of the Communist Party is that Uzbek society appears not to have been particularly willing to engage in practices of denunciation (*zhaloba*). Refusals to denounce one’s neighbours reflected most probably tacit acts of resistance to the Soviet state that had used the tool of denunciation to undermine solidarity and engender compliance through widespread suspicion and fear. Was the lack of denunciations a sign that Muslimness was tolerated across the board? In fact, not only members of the same mosque or shrine community, but also representatives of the state with Party membership were unwilling to inform on their neighbours for violating the law on religion. The memo clarified that there was something deeply wrong with the ways in which many had embraced ‘a conciliatory attitude towards religion’ (*primirencheskoe otnoshenie k religii*),

---

<sup>13</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 68.

<sup>14</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 68-69.

thereby abdicating the Leninist principle of a persistent struggle against people's religious beliefs. In referring here to 'a conciliatory attitude', propagandists in Tashkent meant that religious rites were often performed 'by members of the intelligentsia, the Komsomol and even Communists. They set a very bad example. You remember how harshly Lenin spoke about the philistines and liberal intellectuals who pusillanimously fight against religion, forget their task, and put up with the belief in God. We must shape public opinion towards such people, and condemn acts which denigrate the title of a Party member. A conciliatory attitude towards religion is incompatible with the title of Party member. The programme and constitution of the Party require every Communist not only to renounce religion, but also to fight resolutely against religious prejudice and superstition. Anti-religious work is not only lectures, but a heart-to-heart talk with the individual, a condemnation of tolerance of religion, and leading a good personal example. Every Communist and Komsomol member, every scholar and conscious intellectual must be a militant and an atheist always and everywhere, in the family above all.'<sup>15</sup>

The people who crafted this document offered some stark statistics. In Tashkent, for example, '33% of those who married Islamically following the procedure of the *nikoh* were members of the intelligentsia (researchers of the Academy of Sciences, postgraduates, students and lecturers at universities and schools), 29% were industrial workers, and 11% were trade workers. In the mosques of the province of Andijan, 1,350 young men and women performed the religious rite of *nikoh*. Among those who married in the mosques were 76 teachers and professors, 83 students of secondary and higher educational institutes, 40 doctors and 85 other specialists and employees of enterprises and institutions.'<sup>16</sup> By offering these figures and providing such examples, our propagandists were in fact

---

<sup>15</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, ll. 71-72.

<sup>16</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 72.



questioning the very project of the Sovietization of the mind and soul in Uzbekistan.

In this chapter, I shall explore how from the second half of the 1970s realities on the ground about Muslimness led to a situation of bureaucratic anxiety, which I have outlined above, and which reached a tipping point in the early 1980s when, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the occupation of Afghanistan, Soviet officials opted for a new tack. From that moment onward, the state embarked upon the registration of mosque communities, a bureaucratic procedure which amounted to conferring legal status upon individuals and parishes that had been operating in plain sight for decades. I shall proceed by examining CARC bureaucratic output and especially by tracing the history of various mosque communities in the region of Samarqand. To this effect, I shall read the records produced by CARC *ethnographically*, by which I mean that I shall mine the various memos and reports for descriptions of manifestations of religiosity. While CARC commissioners exuded their dissatisfaction at the chronic inability of the state to adapt to changing circumstances, their reports ironically open up for the scholarly observer new vistas on the recomposition and resilience of Muslimness.

To read such records is no easy business, of course, for they reflect the concerns of Soviet bureaucrats handling sensitive topics, the crafting of which frequently required adjustments, amendments, and omissions to pass muster. Moreover, changing political circumstances often pushed such bureaucrats either to emphasize or minimize the significance of what they were asked to report about. Counting heads at a saint-day festival, for example, or reflecting upon attendance at a sermon marking the Prophet's birthday (*mavlud*) could yield a range of different outcomes. CARC's regional representatives could persuade readers in Moscow about the need to increase surveillance means and, concomitantly, bolster their own institutional role. But their reports could also be read as failures in the business of agitation and propaganda, thereby leading to a dismissal from office and the hiring of someone else deemed a better fit for the same task. So, how do we make sense of such



Figure 5.1 Worshippers at a mosque in the province of Samarqand.  
Photo by Rahimjon Murodov, 1979 © Paolo Sartori

records? Can historians trust them? This is a question that the late Sonja Luehrmann addressed directly in her work while attempting to come to terms with the ineluctable presence of religion in the Soviet archives. Though speaking Soviet bureaucratese, such records do something else than just shed light on the life of the institutions that generated them, she says. The documentary value of such records, Luehrmann suggested, lies in the perspective they offer on the social environment that breathed life into them.<sup>17</sup> And it is to this religious environment that I would like to turn my attention.

### **Not Knowing**

During the preparation of the new constitution, in 1976 the Moscow branch of CARC resolved to create a special team to inspect the religious landscape of Uzbekistan. This initiative was of extreme significance for Kuroedov who sent one of his trusted men, CARC head commissioner for Azerbaijan Ahmed Ahadov, to Uzbekistan to ‘check the observance of the legislation on religion.’ The overall picture emerging from Ahadov’s report to CARC authorities in Moscow was that state organs were marred by general negligence, while Islamic institutions did not merely exist on the sly, but operated in fact openly. In addition, religious individuals who manifested their Muslimness frequently – and often ostentatiously – disregarded the surveillance apparatus of the state.

Ahadov landed in Tashkent in mid-June. On the 18th he immediately visited the district of Srednechirchik north of Tashkent, and met with Malika Kho’jaeva, deputy chairman of the district executive committee. Ahadov was interested in the work of the commission for the control of compliance with the law on welfare under the district executive committee. It turned out that Kho’jaeva had happily passed the buck, so to speak, and put all the commission’s

---

<sup>17</sup> Sonja Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 20-24.

responsibility on the head of the financial department for the district, one Ergash To'raev. Kho'jaeva, explained Ahadov, ignored the legislation on religion, and in fact in the file of her commission he found only three documents which had last been updated in 1973.<sup>18</sup> Kho'jaeva was in good company, however, for many people ignored the very existence of Soviet legislation on religion, as we shall see.

The bigger shock for Ahadov was to see that the Srednechirchik district executive committee had no certificate of agreement whatsoever with the founders of the religious associations, and that it had no information about the property of the local mosque and little idea about religious attendance during major religious festivals and other life-cycle events that play an important role within communities. To'raev, notes Ahadov, tried in vain to justify himself by emphasizing that before every religious holiday the executive committee held meetings with teachers, heads of district institutions and village councils to strengthen atheistic work among the population. But Ahadov reported rather acidly that in the last two years the Srednechirchik district executive committee had never discussed the state of control over the observance of the legislation on religions locally. In fact, no one knew how many unregistered Muslim communities operated in the district. The latest data dated back to 1973 and indicated the presence of 17 unregistered mullahs operating in the district, but neither the local executive committee nor the CARC commissioner had done anything to find out more about them. All the members of the committee could do was to lay blame on Ergash To'raev, but no one tried to summon him in connection with Ahadov's visits. It transpired that things had worked more or less in the same way for many years, and that the former CARC commissioner had rarely been in the field and had done little to assist other state organs in strengthening control over the observance of the legislation on religion. Even the property of the local mosque was never properly audited. This explains why the district executive

---

<sup>18</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 39.

committee did not have an inventory of what mosque communities actually owned.<sup>19</sup>

On June 22 1976, Ahadov expressed his desire to visit an unregistered mosque. A representative of the local executive committee grudgingly took him to the collective farm named after Dmitrov in the Nizhnechirchik district. The CARC inspector barged through the doors of the administration where he found the secretary of the party committee of the collective farm, a Korean lady by the name of Lyudmila Pak. Together they hit the road to inspect the unregistered mosque. While in the car, Pak did her best to extoll the virtues of the kolkhoz. She spoke enthusiastically about its thriving economic activities, which included cotton-growing, cattle breeding and poultry farming. With 25,000 hens, the farm gave more than 1 million eggs per annum to the state! The farms were mechanized, and there was gas and running water in the farmers' houses. The kolkhoz also boasted a two-storey kindergarten which could make any city blush in envy, plus a club and a cinema, a secondary school, a department store and other buildings. While Pak was still flaunting the remarkable achievements of the collective farm, the car parked close to the unregistered mosque called Oq Inoq. There Ahadov met with Karim Shodmonov, the caretaker of the mosque, who had been working there for some 19 years, and who explained that there were usually between 50 and 60 people attending Friday prayers, and on religious holidays the number of worshippers increased to 400-500 people. Close to the mosque, there was a holy place, a spring known as Buzruk-bua. The spring was noticeable for the presence of big flags, and a glass jar full of money, offerings made by the locals. Ahadov took notice of items for exorcism and fortune-telling: amulets, rags, ropes, prayers, and gowns.<sup>20</sup> Shodmonov lived a comfortable life, said Ahadov: 'he has established for himself a large farm with 15 rams, two cows, a donkey and many chickens. There is also a large garden nearby, where tomatoes, cucumbers, corn are grown.

---

<sup>19</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 40.

<sup>20</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 47.

He is the owner of the cemetery and the garden adjacent to it.’<sup>21</sup> Ahadov was now in an absolute rage, for everyone there appeared to ignore the fact that rural councils were expected to keep cemeteries away from the clutches of people like Shodmonov, ‘who offer religious services pursuing their own selfish purposes and spread superstition.’<sup>22</sup> Cornered by the CARC inspector’s line of questioning, Pak admitted that she had no idea that there existed a Soviet law on religious affairs. She furthermore explained that she never wanted to offend Muslims who went there to pray. Faced with such unsatisfactory circumstances and yet knowing that it would have been difficult to make things change, Ahadov resolved to explain to his superiors in Moscow that ‘the Oq Inoq mosque must be registered. It has a very good reputation, it is visited often and the local Soviet authorities are unable to stop its activities.’<sup>23</sup> It is ironic to observe how, in a hyper-normative state such as the USSR, the remedy for a violation of the law was a bureaucratic shift in status of a mosque.

Was this event an unusual one-off? The answer must be in the negative, for there is a colossal amount of evidence to suggest that throughout the 1970s the Soviet Party-State tacitly accepted that Muslim religious communities had been operating freely for decades. Only one year had passed since Ahadov had reported what he had observed in the Dmitrov collective farm when in 1977 CARC commissioner Tashkenbaev was tasked with examining how the situation on the ground looked around Samarqand. His detailed review of manifestations of Muslimness, especially in the Urgut district, pointed to a situation where the level of control by state organs and its effectiveness was worryingly low with little prospect for improvement. Party members tasked with the implementation of the new constitution worked without proper initiative, and above all with a poor understanding of their duties and the basic provisions of the legislation on cults. They were thus unable to understand what

---

<sup>21</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 47.

<sup>22</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 48.

<sup>23</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 74, l. 48.

constituted violations of the law and failed to make any proposals for a significant corrective to the prevailing situation.<sup>24</sup>

Tashkenbaev observed a similar attitude when examining how rural communities and village councils ignored religious activities in their own areas of immediate responsibility: they failed to collect data on unofficial congregations, on imams, and on the attitude of the population to the observance of the Islamic calendar, and above all they purposefully ignored how devotional rituals of all kinds were preserved in spite of the prescriptions to fight against them. Most worrying of all, Tashkenbaev noted, was local Party members' dismissive attitude towards the implementation of state regulations concerning religion. Having toured the countryside of Urgut, Tashkenbaev reported that there were 15 unregistered Muslim religious associations operating on the territory of five different collective farms. Precisely on account of their illegal character, he explained, religious practice was left in the hands of a cast of local ulama who proselytised without control, often in defiance of state ideology, and were free to teach Islamic sciences to the younger generation. Tashkenbaev counted more than thirty such individuals in the district of Urgut alone. The most disturbing, indeed shocking detail, however, was that eleven of them showed him financial records attesting to the fact that they had paid income tax on money earned through their religious activities. Not only did they report themselves to financial authorities, but they also flung their religious performance in the face of the state: so much for the power of the Soviet state and the general atmosphere of intimidation! The same situation applied to holy places, which, as we have seen, were regarded by many (including SADUM) as the arch-enemy of the Soviet state. In 1977, during the construction of a recreation area in the collective farm named '5th Anniversary of the Foundation of Uzbekistan,' the kolkhoz management paid for the restoration of the shrine of a Sufi master known with the epithet of Gausul A'zam ('The Supreme Helper'). The work was supervised by one M. Khamraev, a collective

---

<sup>24</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, ll. 51-55.



farm surveyor (*zemlemer*) and a Party member. None of the participants in this illegal enterprise were reported or punished. This was not an unusual course of behaviour, for the level of disorganisation in the area had increased to such an extent that Communists' family members had begun to take over the role of mullahs.<sup>25</sup>

Tashkenbaev further explained that there was little hope that the situation would change under current circumstances: if the leaders of collective farms and local activists were personally acquainted with unregistered mullahs and the congregations they supervised, and yet took no effective measures to intervene in the affairs of these latter, why should one bother going to the lengths of trying to get one's congregation registered? The example he offered was quite telling: the Urgut district executive committee had received only one application at the beginning of 1977, from a congregation of Muslims inhabiting the village of Kairakli situated in the 'Krupskaia' collective farm. Signed by 60 individuals, the application requested the registration of the Ghishtli mosque. The latter was a congregational mosque made of bricks (*ghisht*) and a place of worship situated in the village of Kairakli which was visited by hundreds of believers on religious festivals. As we shall see in more detail towards the end of this chapter, all the petitioners wanted to do was to register their village mosque for their congregational prayer, which would have allowed them to avoid traveling all the way to Samarqand to attend prayers there. The district executive committee, however, rejected the petition without offering any explanation. But the situation got even worse when on 1 June 1977, one T. Ergashev, the head of the committee, took it upon himself to put a lock on the door of the mosque. Local believers lodged a complaint against him, of course, but Tashkenbaev concluded that things were still up in the air.<sup>26</sup>

All this evidence suggests that collective farms offered an institutional infrastructure that allowed Muslimness to thrive almost

---

<sup>25</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 54.

<sup>26</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 54.



unconcerned by atheists, the police, or indeed even the KGB. This was in large part a reflection of the fact that by the 1980s the state was more preoccupied by the rise of Wahhabism and political Islam than anything else. In 1981, for example, a Samarqand Party member who spied on illegal religious activities reported rather frustratingly that it did not make sense to speak about the closure of unregistered mosque communities. ‘True, bureaucratically a mosque could be said to have been closed. In fact, however, to say that it has been closed isn’t true either, for even if it hasn’t been opened and the people aren’t permitted there, there are many believers (*dindorlar*) who gather somewhere else to perform their religiosity,’ he explained. But to add insult to injury, he noted that people were getting carried away by the principle of religious freedom and that believers were organising and drawing others close to religion: ‘Everyone [today] is free to pray and cultivate his religious beliefs according to his own conscience (*diniy e’itiqod, namoz o’qish kabilar har kimning uz vijdoni erkindir*); and he can do all this wherever he sees fit. However, to proselytise is unacceptable, really.’<sup>27</sup> That a Party member from Kattakurgan, in the region of Samarqand, was abusing the vocabulary of religious freedom several years prior to perestroika is particularly arresting.

As we shall see in more detail in the remainder of this chapter, in 1981 the state unleashed a new campaign of registration that responded to the changing political scene in the Muslim world. The state thus resorted to the old practices of counting mosques and parishes in order to keep them under its purview, so to speak, especially for fiscal purposes. This should not mislead us, however. The state was doing little more more than spying on its own population. Soviet bureaucracy kept reporting about people taking the initiative to build their own mosques. In October 1980, a Party member and policeman by the name of Usmanov decided that he had had enough. He had already warned many of his acquaintances in the Urgut district that he had turned a blind eye to manifestations of religiosity,

---

<sup>27</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 83, l. 32.

but he did not want to connive in devotional practices that were going on in plain sight. He thereupon resolved to write to the head of the KGB of the Uzbek SSR in Tashkent and inform him about the illegal construction of a new mosque in the Kho'jabaland village of the Leningrad collective farm. 'During my visit on 24 October 1980,' he reported, 'I talked to the wife of the *brigadir* Ubaydulla Asrorov and the wife of Fazliddin Yunusov. They told me that a mosque is being built mainly at the expense of the [kolkhoz] foreman, Ubaydulla Asrorov. But there is also an *eshon* (they do not know his name) who is giving him some financial support. Asrorov's house is located near the cemetery where his father, grandfather and other relatives are buried. According to the locals, some important holy man, an *eshon* they say, is also buried there.'<sup>28</sup> The policemen further explained that the cemetery 'was functioning,' by which he meant that burials were taking place there. However, he noted that the cemetery was of an elite nature, for 'only *eshon* or *kho'ja* family members are allowed to be buried there,' proceeding then to conclude that Asrorov too must have built the mosque in honour of his saintly relatives. The mosque was a modest one. It consisted of one long room and a veranda. When he visited it, Usmanov saw that it had been plastered with clay, and that the pillars of the veranda and its cover had just been put in place. He did not find Asrorov, who at the time was at the sawmill cutting timber for the mosque. The policeman further reported that the chairman of the local rural committee tried to sort things out, arguing that Asrorov was in fact simply erecting a guest house (*mehmonkhona*) – that is, nothing ostentatiously religious. Usmanov ordered the head of the rural committee, the chairman of the collective farm, and the secretary of the party organization to summon Asrorov and explain to him that what he was doing was illegal. The story ends here with all the documentation being forwarded to the Samarqand prosecutor's office, which, unsurprisingly, did not take further action.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 64, ll. 31-32.

<sup>29</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 64, ll. 31-32.



Figure 5.2 The Kho'ja Ismoil mosque, 1980. © Paolo Sartori

It should not surprise us, then, to read two years later that, during one of his routine tours of the district, CARC commissioner Tashkenbaev noted that ‘there are instances of violation of the law on religious cults. For example, due to the lack of control by the authorities, in 1982, on the territory of the Karatepe and Ilonli rural communities, a mosque was built without permission at the initiative of the [local] Muslim clergy.’<sup>30</sup>

It may well be that CARC commissioners had pragmatic reasons for depicting themselves as necessary to the state. That is to say that CARC commissioners may have felt pressed to depict a situation in overly alarming tones in order to bolster their status vis-à-vis other Party organs and officials who had a different view on the atheist project of the state. And yet, unless one is able to show that all these reports were completely made up, to dismiss them as the work of bureaucrats detached from reality may be misleading.

### **Securing Registration: The Kho’ja Ismoil Bukhoriy Mosque**

The degree of freedom which Soviet Uzbeks enjoyed while articulating their Muslimness is best reflected in a memo that one Shermurot Dunbaev crafted in the wake of a meeting with a delegation of journalists from the BBC who were working on a documentary on the Soviet Union. The meeting took place in August 1987, when Dunbaev was working as deputy imam of the Kho’ja Ismoil mosque (see Figure 5.2). Situated in the Payariq district, c. 20 km north of Samarqand, the mosque is adjacent to the Imam al-Bukhari shrine erected to memorialise the legacy of one of the most important scholars of Prophetic traditions – if not indeed the most important – , the 9th-century polymath Muḥammad ibn Ismā’il al-Bukhārī. This devotional complex is built on a natural elevation

---

<sup>30</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 106, l. 33.

surrounded by richly irrigated countryside that during Late Socialism was dotted with a galaxy of collective farms producing cotton and fruits. On a clear day from the gates of the Imam al-Bukhari shrine one could spot the city of Dahbid. Another significant station in the cartography of Muslim holiness, Dahbid was (and still is) associated with the shrine of Makhdūm-i A'zam (1461-1542), a Sufi mystic and the founder of one of the most prominent lineages of the Naqshbandiyya in the region.

Why did the British delegation stop at the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque? The Imam al-Bukhari shrine had been an obligatory stop for foreign visitors, particularly Muslims, touring Uzbekistan starting in the early 1950s. Little did the BBC correspondents know, however, that the status of the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque had been at the centre of severe controversies especially since the 1960s: although it had operated illegally for decades, often with copious attendance on Fridays, the mosque appeared almost derelict and its profound state of decay had caused concern among outsiders, especially diplomats and representatives of official delegations from Muslim countries. In this section, I shall illuminate the trajectory whereby a vibrant community of believers secured registration of the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque, a crucial move which allowed the mosque to thrive in the decades to follow.

When the British journalists were flown from Moscow to Samarqand on a late-summer day in 1987, Dunbaev performed Uzbek hospitality and treated foreigners to tea and a lavish meal. Over lunch, however, he had to face a barrage of contentious questions. The producer from the BBC, in particular, wanted to know how Muslims in Uzbekistan financed the upkeep of mosques; whether they were free to pray where they wanted to; how they observed religious rituals while serving in the army and working in factories; and whether believers could avoid serving in Afghanistan, then under Soviet occupation. And then the British journalist posed a seemingly easy question: 'Are there madrasas for young children [who are eager] to receive a religious education?', he asked. At which point, Dunbaev exploded with a loud: 'No! But our young children do receive religious education [at home] from their fathers and

grandfathers, because in our country many of those who possess religious knowledge pass it on to their children...'<sup>31</sup>

The answer was no exaggeration. The autobiographies of individuals offering services to mosque or shrine communities make it plain that many in Soviet Uzbekistan were exposed to Islamic education at home. One may of course say that Dunbaev's resorting to the notion of 'domestic education' was actually a preventive move to deflect a potential accusation of breaking the law: Dunbaev had to produce a report of his encounter with the BBC team, and so had to package his report in such a way as to avoid criticism or condemnation by potential future readers of the report. Indeed, Soviet legislation allowed Muslims to receive religious education only at home, with the exception of course of those who made it to the Mir-i Arab and Baraq Khan madrasas in Bukhara and Tashkent respectively. However, Dunbaev's emphasis on the domestic character of Islamic education in Uzbekistan accurately attested to how the USSR in fact served as an incubator for Muslim culture.

Shermurot (né Alisher) Dunbaev was born on 10 January 1960 in the village of Yo'ltepa, in the Payariq district, into a family of farmers (*kolkhozchi*). At the age of seven, he went to a primary school within the 'Communism' collective farm where he lived. In 1971, he left his village and began studying at a secondary school in Samarqand. Once he graduated in 1977, he tried hard to enter a pharmaceutical institute in Tashkent, but failed the entrance exams several times. In 1978, he was drafted into the Soviet army and deployed in Eastern Europe. After just two years later, he was able to make it back to Uzbekistan. Although eager to pursue his studies further, Dunbaev nevertheless was destined not to leave his native village. His parents were homebound because of their frail health, and so as to provide for them he opted to enter a local engine assembly plant. It was precisely from his father whom he revered so much that Shermurot had received all his 'religious education' (*diniy*

---

<sup>31</sup> *Yo'q! Lekin bizlardagi yosh bolalar diniy ilmni o'z otalaridan bobolaridan olishadi, chunki bizda diniy ilmni bulguvchilar ko'p o'shalar o'z bolalarni o'qitadilar*, SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 1.



*ilm*), a circumstance that brought him to serve the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque in various capacities. He had barely made it back from the army when in March 1981 he rose to prominence within the mosque community. In his own personnel report submitted to the Party authorities in 1986, Dunbaev displays self-preservation and says little about his religious upbringing, giving the impression that he was associated only casually with the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque community, where he had begun to work first as a guard and then as cashier.<sup>32</sup> In fact, in a letter addressed to the CARC office in Samarqand in the same year, the then imam of the mosque extols Dunbaev's piety and solid religious background, explaining that, as soon as he had returned from military service, Dunbaev had served as his deputy, and that in this capacity he had conducted Sufi devotional rituals and overseen other 'religious ceremonies' (*diniy marosimlar*). This latter terminology was of course code for all sorts of Islamic practices including offering sermons, giving moral guidance and replying to questions, especially on dogmatics, coming from the local community of believers as well as from pilgrims. But his status at the mosque became official only in July 1986, when Dunbaev was invited to travel to Tashkent and take an exam at the SADUM, after which he became a licensed deputy imam.<sup>33</sup>

Dunbaev's trajectory is instructive, for it shows that the Islamic education that one could receive at home in a kolkhoz in the 1960s and 1970s was in fact quite substantive. It furthermore shows clearly how Muslim religious figures operated openly in public and often in places as important as the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque without the approval of the state. Indeed, in spite of their rather modest upbringings, all the individuals who applied for a position at the mosque explained, though hesitantly and only in passing, that they had received a religious education at home.<sup>34</sup> In some cases, it

---

<sup>32</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 61.

<sup>33</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the autobiographies of Usmon Alemov (b. 1950), Abdughani Alibekov (b. 1937), Sulaymon Makhmudov (b. 1957), SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 142, 94, 18.

transpired that such an education afforded them the ability to read not only the Qur'an, but also Islamic literary texts.<sup>35</sup> We have seen earlier in this chapter how CARC members and state representatives were taken aback when confronted by students who claimed to be familiar with Islamic scriptures. But such expressions of bewilderment produce an optic illusion which can mislead the historian today. The intellectual sophistication of people working at the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque is well conveyed by the official inventory of the mosque's library collection, which includes an impressive list of works. Ranging from texts of Islamic jurisprudence (*Mukhtaṣar al-wiqāya*, *Fiqh-i kaydānī* and their various commentaries both in Arabic and Turkic)<sup>36</sup> to hagiographical works such as the 17th-century *Lamahāt min nafahāt al-quds*,<sup>37</sup> the collection covers a good deal of the traditional curriculum which students of an Islamic primary school (*maktab*) were supposed to master, including the classics of Persian literature and manuals of Arabic grammar.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the autobiography of Raimbay Mavlonov (b. 1955), SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 10.

<sup>36</sup> As noted by Danielle Ross in her "Copying Islam: Constructing a New Soviet Islam through the Re-production of Religious Texts in the South Urals," processes of vernacularization of Islamic legal literature, which had been under way in the early modern and modern period, continued to develop through the Soviet century. Indeed, we find Islamic jurisprudential texts in Turkic across Uzbekistan, that is from the Ferghana Valley to Qaraqalpaqstan, in all sorts of environments ranging from private collections and mosque libraries. Interestingly, while reporting on the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice in 1978, CARC commissioner for Qaraqalpaqstan R. Qdyrbaev noted that the imam of the congregational mosque in Chimbay read from the *Zubdat al-masā'il*, a text originally written in Kashghar in Central Asian Turkic in the second half of the 18th century. The imam of the mosque in Chimbay possessed a lithographed copy that had been published in Kazan in 1899 and he most probably referred to it when answering his parishioners' questions. See QPA, f. 1, op. 35, d. 247, l. 107. On the *Zubdat al-masā'il* and its reception in Central Asia, see my "Between Kazan and Kashghar: On the Vernacularization of Islamic Jurisprudence in Central Eurasia," *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 61 No. 2 (2020), pp. 216-246.

<sup>37</sup> Devin DeWeese, "The "Mashāyikh-i Turk" and the "Khojagān:" Rethinking the Links between the Yasavī and Naqshbandī Sufi Traditions," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol 7 no 2 (1996), pp. 180-207.

<sup>38</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 92.



Although the congregation coalescing around the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque was capacious, it did not secure registration until rather late in the day. As early as September 1972, thirty individuals 'belonging to the Muslim cult' signed a petition to request the support of the state to constitute a religious community 'to satisfy their mutual religious needs.' They claimed they were all familiar with the Soviet legislation concerning religion, which they promised solemnly to uphold.<sup>39</sup> With signatures of Uzbek men born at the turn of the 20th century, this rather unassertive petition traversed all the levels of Soviet bureaucracy, slowly all the way from Samarqand to Moscow.<sup>40</sup> The all-Union CARC office immediately supported the request, but it took a whole year, until mid-October 1973, for the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque community to aggregate all the necessary documentation so as to be declared 'legal.' It is difficult to say what consideration weighed most in the decision to authorise its legalization. I am inclined to think, however, that CARC members in Moscow must have known that in 1974 the Imam al-Bukhari shrine would be celebrating its 1200-year jubilee with guests coming from all over the world. Foreign policy with Middle Eastern countries mattered, of course, and the USSR was interested in showing the world that Muslims were not discriminated against. To that effect, it was important to make concessions to local mosque communities and show that everyone in Payariq was happy.

In fact, in March 1972, six months before that group of thirty believers put pen to paper to apply for the registration of the mosque, mufti Ziyouddin Bobokhonov wrote directly to Kuroedov and Uzbek CARC Commissioner Ghaniev. The prospect of celebrating the 1200-year jubilee of Imam al-Bukhari's birth in the presence of 200 foreign guests (mostly ulama) put CARC under a lot of pressure, and the mufti decided that this was an apposite moment to put forth a series of unprecedented requests. First of all, he asked for the registration of the mosque for, while it had been operating

---

<sup>39</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 169.

<sup>40</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 167-168.

officially in the past, its permit to do so had been revoked under Khrushchev. His point was simple: under current circumstances, the situation at the mosque was untenable, for each time foreign Muslim delegations visited the al-Bukhari shrine complex, SADUM had to send an imam several days in advance to give the appearance that the mosque was functioning. To register the mosque and appoint someone to offer religious services therein were not enough, however. The mufti requested that a new road of 4 km be paved so as to connect the shrine complex to the main road leading to Samarqand.<sup>41</sup> The problem with the road was serious and Ziyouddin Bobokhonov's mentioning it in fact touched a raw nerve. Many still remembered the embarrassing moment when, during his visit to the USSR in 1956, Indonesian President Sukarno expressed his desire to visit the Imam al-Bukhari shrine, which at that time was not functioning, and had no clergy in attendance. In order to play for sufficient time in which to bring the shrine back to life, Soviet authorities persuaded the Indonesian delegation to travel to Uzbekistan by train. The delegation first spent a few days in Tashkent and then proceeded to Samarqand. However, the road connections back then were so bad that, while approaching the shrine, Sukarno had at some point to leave the car and walk barefoot across the fields. This is a story that people in Uzbekistan still remember and one that must have informed discussions in the early 1970s around the registration of the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque.

At the same time, one should not underestimate the influence of local groups lobbying for the registration of the mosque community. As I have mentioned earlier, Payariq was close to many other hubs of Muslim religiosity and it was also part and parcel of a landscape of piety in which shrine communities played a decisive role. In the settlement of Dahbid, just a few kilometers south of Payariq, for example, in 1966, one Abdughani Odylov had taken action to revive the shrines of Makhdum-i A'zam and Bahadur Yalangtosh, which had been put under state protection, but remained in a state

---

<sup>41</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 540, ll. 10-11.

of decay. Odylov was an elderly man who was known for tending the shrines as a sheikh. When Odylov was jailed on charges of extorting money from pilgrims, local Party members together with the staff of the Samarqand Pedagogical Institute mobilized to have Odylov released.<sup>42</sup> This and other similar cases indicating that the state could do little to disrupt shrine and mosque communities should give us pause: the man who signed off and stamped the last ‘certificate of registration’ (*spravka o registratsii*) for the Kho’ja Ismoil mosque was Tashkenbaev, who led the CARC office for the Samarqand province.<sup>43</sup> In this capacity he represented the Soviet state. Significantly, however, when solemnizing the records issued by his office, he signed his name not only in Cyrillic but also in the Arabic script. Was this a deliberate move to make his sympathy for the mosque community finally manifest? There is no way for us to know, but this stylistic whim may suggest that he must have played at both tables, as it were, and that it is possible that he lobbied for the registration of Muslim congregations. We shall return to his role in the bureaucratic process leading to the sanctioning of mosque communities in the province of Samarqand later on.

Once the status of the Kho’ja Ismoil mosque was made official, the next move was to appoint a curator (*mutavalli*) for the mosque community. The choice fell on Ibodullo Boboyorov. Born in 1892, Boboyorov was the scion of a saintly family (*makhzum*). It must have been his august lineage which afforded him the opportunity to serve for years as the muezzin of the Kho’ja Zumrod mosque in Samarqand. In fact, Boboyorov wasn’t a local. He originally came from Jomboy, a village surrounded by cornfields south-east of Samarqand and lived all his life in the old city of Samarqand, in a neighbourhood just behind the tomb of Tamerlane, away from the horrors of Soviet constructivism. His election to the post of curator, however, was symbolic, and laden with religious significance: the

---

<sup>42</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 65, ll. 199-200.

<sup>43</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 175.

Kho'ja Ismoil mosque was thus blessed by the sanction of a family of Muslim savants.

If the choice of the curator, though important, was merely symbolic, the appointment to the post of imam was crucial for the well-being of the mosque community. With the registration secured, the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque could now look for a new energetic individual to lead the congregation beyond the immediate remit of the locality. It is unclear to this day whether there were alternative candidates, but the choice fell on one Usmonjon Rahimjonov. Born in 1929 in a modest family of Uzbek farmers living in Tajikistan, in 1949 he was accepted at the Mir-i Arab madrasa, where he studied for almost a decade. He was then appointed to the post of curator of the famous Ya'qub Charkhiy mosque in Dushanbe. After having served in that capacity for five years, he made it to Cairo to study at the al-Azhar madrasa. With six years of training in Egypt and being now fluent in Arabic, as well as his native Tajik and Uzbek, in 1964 he was summoned back to Uzbekistan and appointed as an instructor (*mudarris*) at the same madrasa in Bukhara where he had first studied.<sup>44</sup>

Rahimjonov's duties as the imam of the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque were regulated by an official working contract with the executive committee representing the mosque community. The contract stipulated that, in return for a salary of 200 roubles a month (paid by the executive committee), Rahimjanov undertook to meet the religious needs of the faithful, and to conduct five daily services in the mosque and to operate in accordance with the requirements of the Soviet legislation on religious cults. The contract furthermore made him an employee of SADUM, for it stipulated that the imam was expected to explain to mosque attendants the fatwas issued by the Spiritual Board, addressing specific points of theology and dogmatics. The imam was legally bound also to expose unregistered mullahs whose behaviour was faulty from the point of view of both

---

<sup>44</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 188-189.

sharia and Soviet law<sup>45</sup> Rahimjonov must have known that he had to keep the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque free from individuals whom SADUM regarded as potential enemies and competitors in the market of religious authority.

We do not know what his relations with the other ulama staffing SADUM were, but he must have enjoyed a distinguished status within the organization: not only did he join various delegations abroad (Tunisia, Syria and Afghanistan),<sup>46</sup> but he was also a member of SADUM's presiding committee who was often tasked with the organisation of the reception of international visitors and the explanation of 'the current situation of freedom of conscience existing in the USSR.' Among his various appointments, he also acted as a member of the 'Peace Foundation' and attended various international conferences for nuclear disarmament. It was in this capacity that he was awarded the gold medal of peace by Soviet party organs. Rahimjonov thus commanded authority over many Muslim communities and enjoyed the respect of his peers.<sup>47</sup>

At the beginning of the 1980s, Rahimjonov played a significant role in the delegations that the USSR sent to Afghanistan. In 1984 he delivered a speech in Kabul at the celebrations of 'the 4th anniversary of the April Revolution in Afghanistan.'<sup>48</sup> Rahimjonov's sermons reflect a masterful ability to operate in multiple different registers, combining the Muslim and the Soviet. His speech began with an invocation of Muslim brotherhood:

You and I are neighbours, brothers in faith. Our Republic of Uzbekistan shares a common border with your country, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, but this border divides only our countries, not our hearts. The Qur'an says that all Muslims are brothers, and these words have found their full embodiment in the age-old and traditional friendship between

---

<sup>45</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 96.

<sup>46</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 95.

<sup>47</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 21.

<sup>48</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 131-137.

the Uzbek and Afghan peoples. But friends, as the saying goes, are made in adversity. And now, when the counter-revolutionaries, armed and supported by imperialism, Chinese hegemonists and reactionaries of the region, have brought suffering and death upon the peaceful Afghan people, trying to force them away from the ideals of the April Revolution, our country, true to its international duty, has naturally come to your aid. This help is fully in line with the principles of our great religion of Islam, which calls Muslims not only to peace, friendship and solidarity, but also to mutual help and mutual assistance.<sup>49</sup>

Rahimjonov was quick to change pace, resort to the official rhetoric of internationalism and frame Soviet military intervention as a token of friendship and solidarity:

Hundreds and thousands of Afghan students are studying in the educational institutions of Uzbekistan and other republics of our country, and will return to their homeland as highly qualified specialists and will make their worthy contribution to the further development and prosperity of science, culture and all branches of the national economy of Afghanistan and to the realization of the goals and objectives set by the April Revolution. The Soviets, including numerous Uzbek specialists, are helping Afghans to rebuild and develop their economy. With their participation, power plants and water reservoirs are being built in Afghanistan, desert lands are being developed, and modern agricultural techniques are being introduced. All this is being done so that the Afghan people themselves can enjoy the fruits of their land for their own benefit and not fall under the power and domination of the imperialist countries of the world, as happened to the

---

<sup>49</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 131.

long-suffering people of Palestine. That is the aim and purpose of our friendship and our solidarity.<sup>50</sup>

Rahimjonov appears today as a virtuoso of Soviet Muslim rhetoric. After having praised the virtues of Imam al-Bukhari, a collector of hadiths, he once again played the card of Muslim brotherhood in the name of the Prophet. As we shall appreciate by reading the excerpt here below, however, his speech was tainted by a utilitarian colour, which constrained references to Muslim solidarity within the strait-jacket of Soviet ideology of internationalism:

But al-Bukhari belongs not only to us, he belongs to all the Muslims of the world; [as such] he also belongs to you, Afghan Muslims who are orthodox Muslims and hold fast to the principles of the holy religion. Learn from him, too, [and take inspiration from] his [sense of] justice and nobility, his unflinching devotion to Islam, his love for his people and for the people of other countries, for he has given us the most accurate, the most precious sayings of the Prophet Muhammad [...]. In his farewell speech, the Prophet said: 'As I leave you, I leave you the Qur'an and my sayings. If you follow them, you will never stray from the right path.' We, Soviet Muslims, follow the words of the Prophet. We never leave our relatives, our friends, our neighbours in distress. You have a full opportunity to observe it for yourself. When the evil forces of reaction tried to attack you in order to destroy the gains of the April Revolution, to enslave you and prevent you from building a new and happy life, the first to come to your aid were we, the Soviet people, your loyal neighbours and faithful friends.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 133.

<sup>51</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 136-137.

Not everything in the garden of Rahimjonov was rosy, however. In August 1986, for example, during a visit to the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque by the Sudanese Prime Minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi (1935-2020, in power from August 1986 to June 1989), Rahimjonov arranged for his grandson Ibrohim to read the Qur'an. In so doing, he contravened the official protocol of the visit as he had similarly done in the past. When an official complaint reached him from Tashkent, Rahimjonov realised that Ibrohim's future would be forever tainted by his own misjudgement, and that the boy's access to the Islamic Institute in Tashkent was in peril. To remedy the situation, he tried to explain that it had been all his fault: he had educated his grandson to read the Qur'an before foreign guests since he was a teenager; the Sudanese prime minister was one of them, and after having heard Ibrohim read the Qur'an back in 1980, he inquired about him at which point Rahimjonov summoned him. 'That was terribly wrong' (*juda mamnu bo'ldi*), he declared in an explanatory note sent to the CARC office in Samarqand.<sup>52</sup>

In that same year Rahimjonov made another mistake. He delayed for an hour in opening the congregational prayer for the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice at the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque, an act of negligence which earned him an official reprimand. Clearly, these two events are nothing more than just a microscopic stain in an otherwise immaculate CV. However, they acquired a completely different meaning and morphed into issues of major concern because of existing tensions amongst the staff of the mosque. In the fall of 1986, such tensions escalated into an acrimonious settling of scores at an official meeting of the mosque staff with the executive committee of the mosque community and the CARC office from Samarqand. The first person to take the floor was a party member, Egamqul Kho'jaqulov, who represented the executive committee of the municipality of the Payariq district. In an inflammatory speech, he immediately attacked Rahimjonov for the delay in opening the Friday prayer. Kho'jaqulov deliberately crafted his account to give

---

<sup>52</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 64.



the impression that such a delay had brought about a chaotic situation at the mosque. In Kho'jaqulov's confused intermingling of events we learn that, while people were waiting for the imam, many women had gathered around the mosque to attend the prayer. There was nothing wrong with female attendance at the mosque, of course, but most of them were carrying their children and this was against the law. But it was during the prayer when things really went awry, noted, Kho'jaqulov. One Akramova, who represented the central committee of the Uzbek Communist Party, pointed her finger at several women, mocking them for being unable to perform the ritual prayer. Furthermore, she began to reprimand ostentatiously other women for what she regarded as immoral behaviour. She claimed that she had seen some of them at the cemetery pulling their hair, stomping their feet and crying out loud. But wrongdoings at the mosque did not stop here: several Communists had entered the building and started to pray, for which they were fined. Kho'jaqulov ended by recommending that the imam explain to the congregation that they should follow the Party to the same extent that they followed Islam.<sup>53</sup> Had Rahimjonov's faulty behaviour really opened a Pandora's box? It is unlikely that he was to be blamed for anything happening in and outside the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque community. Although the minutes of the meeting show Kho'jaqulov clearly acting as a bureaucratic zealot, one is equally reminded that the celebration of major festivals according to the Islamic calendar brought together large crowds of believers. In such circumstances, all eyes were on Party members and mosque officials who were put under pressure to ensure compliance with the Soviet legislation on religious activities. And it was precisely because of all this attention that Rahimjonov was obliged to assume his responsibility. He asked officially to be forgiven, and promised not to repeat such a mistake.<sup>54</sup> After this incident, he requested to be dismissed from his position and allowed to return to Dushanbe to assist his older

---

<sup>53</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 57.

<sup>54</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 59.

sister who was then seriously ill. SADUM and CARC agreed to release him from duty in January 1987.<sup>55</sup> He was replaced the following April by one Mustafoql Melikov, who had already led the congregation of another mosque in Samarqand province and was as fluent as Rahimjonov was in Arabic.<sup>56</sup> Melikov was thus able to beat SADUM's candidate, one Usmon Alemov, who was Shamsuddin Bobokhonov's protégé and had to settle for the position of Melikov's deputy.

Things were changing at an accelerating pace, with an almost complete turnover of the staff: a new face for the duty of Sufi and a new individual tasked with the duty of the call to the prayer. At the same time a new religious infrastructure around the Kho'ja Ismoil mosque emerged: new religious associations in the neighbouring collective farms had secured free use of buildings for devotional purposes in 1985.<sup>57</sup> The general environment was one in which mosque communities operated now unencumbered by state intrusion. A revealing moment in this respect was the visit of the British journalists in the summer of 1987. Having taken pictures of the mosque and the al-Bukhari shrine complex without any restrictions, the BBC delegation was about to leave when one of the British journalists approached Shermurot Dunbaev and asked him: 'Is [the number of] believers growing?'. Unable to avoid a boastful statement, Dunbaev exclaimed: 'Of course they are, for we [in the USSR] have four Spiritual Boards which take care of everything with diligence. For this reason, [the number of] believers is increasing.'<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 21-22.

<sup>56</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 15.

<sup>57</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 87.

<sup>58</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 14, l. 3.

## 1981: The Tipping Point

In August of 1981, the head of the CARC office for Uzbekistan Usmon Rustamov travelled to Samarqand to deliver a lecture at a seminar on the religious situation in the republic and the compliance with the Soviet legislation on religious cults. At the 26th Congress of the Communist Party, leaders had opted for significant changes in state policies towards Islam at home and abroad. The consolidation of the Khomeini regime in Iran and then the negative developments following the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan had become major concerns in Moscow, for political Islam could, in principle, destabilise Soviet Muslims.<sup>59</sup> Rustamov's task, in the face of this potential danger, was to explain to provincial CARC commissioners and party members what the practical implications of Brezhnev's latest address were and what had to change on the battle-front against Islam. He opened his speech by affirming that every problem in state-church relations could be solved by 'ensuring real freedom of conscience.'<sup>60</sup> For the territorial integrity of the state, he explained, it was essential that 'all personnel working on the ideological front should have a politically correct approach to religion and the church, and that local [governmental] bodies should strictly observe the constitutional provisions on freedom of conscience and the legislation on religious cults.'<sup>61</sup> The situation in the republic was dire, he went on to argue. There was no point in concealing the fact that 'Islam is characterised by very high rituality: in many settlements almost all the dead are buried by performing the religious rite of *janoza*; in some districts up to 95% of newlyweds solemnise a religious marriage (*nikoh*). The number of cases of illegal teaching of religion to children is increasing, as is the distribution of religious literature among believers. There is an

---

<sup>59</sup> *Documents and Resolutions: The 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Moscow, February 23 -March 3, 1981* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1981), pp. 18-19.

<sup>60</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 8.

<sup>61</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 9.

increase in religious rituals among women. The cult of worshipping holy places persists.<sup>62</sup> He noted emphatically that ‘the situation with the Muslim cult is, frankly speaking, not good.’<sup>63</sup> The main problem, he said, was that abroad ‘our ideological adversaries are doing everything to ensure that the flame of the Islamic revival spills over into the Soviet Union. Anti-Communist centres and media [sponsored by] imperialist states and Muslim countries concoct the existence of a problem with the rights of Muslims in the USSR, [and spread false news about] the suppression of Muslims’ national customs and traditions and [about] Russification. They try in every possible way to stir up religious-nationalist and even hostile sentiments among Soviet Muslims. In pursuit of these sordid goals, our enemies rely primarily on the Muslim clergy’s acting uncontrollably without registration.’<sup>64</sup> In a speech that lasted more than one hour, Rustamov recurrently repeated the term ‘registration’ - a notion which became of crucial importance for the new course of state-Muslim relations in Uzbekistan. As he continued: ‘One of the burning problems [in this respect] is that of bringing order to the network of Muslim religious associations. We cannot continue to tolerate such a situation whereby the overwhelming majority of Muslim associations in the republic operate without registration, i.e., uncontrolled [...] In the province of Samarqand alone, there are three Muslim communities with nine imams, and 35 religious associations with more than 200 wandering mullahs who operate without registration. These are, as they say, the official statistics. If we dig deeper, a very unpleasant picture emerges, which can and should be disclosed to our audience. In the Urgut district alone there are more than 20 unregistered associations according to incomplete data. Religious festivals were performed in 14 locations in this district this year. More than two thousand people attended them. In other words, [we see] high religious observance, which permeates

---

<sup>62</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, ll. 9-10.

<sup>63</sup> *Polozhenie v étom kul'te, priamo skazhem, ne blagopoluchnoe*, SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 10.

<sup>64</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, ll. 10-11.

people's everyday life (and this is typical not only for Urgut district). [Under such circumstances] every rural community and every collective farm has special premises where believers can worship and perform religious rites and rituals publicly. [Party] leaders at the district level do not want to take such facts into consideration.<sup>65</sup> Rustamov was explaining to his audience in Samarqand what at the local level everyone knew, namely 'that many of the unregistered associations have been operating for decades in order to comply with all the Soviet laws, but nevertheless the officials of the local Soviet bodies categorically oppose the registration of these associations.'<sup>66</sup> In other words, Rustamov was now putting the blame on local Party organs which, fearing reprimands by higher authority and ignoring the Soviet legislation on church-state relations, had done their best to impede the registration of mosque communities. The unintended negative consequences of upholding the secularist foundation of the Soviet state and elevating atheism to a guiding doctrine were patent: 'The wrong attitude towards the issues of registration of religious associations creates favourable conditions for the activity of a large army of unregistered mullahs. They not only have responsibility for all religious and ceremonial practices in many thousands of settlements, but also act as organizers of illegal construction of mosques, open clandestine schools for teaching children religion, manage cemeteries, establish clandestine printing houses, and reproduce and distribute religious literature and sermons, [which are] broadcast by foreign radio stations.'<sup>67</sup>

What, then, should be done? The CARC conference members in Samarqand approved a resolution which invited 'Party, Soviet and Komsomol activists' to 'deal thoroughly with each of the unregistered religious associations and determine which of them are subject to registration in accordance with the existing legislation.'<sup>68</sup> The resolution included a cascade of recommendations which natu-

---

<sup>65</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, ll. 11-12.

<sup>66</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 12.

<sup>67</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 12.

<sup>68</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 21.

rally expatiated on the need to strengthen atheistic propaganda and do away with the relics of the past. The main upshot of the resolution was clear, however: all illegal mosque communities which had been on the radar of CARC for decades required registration. On 20 August, less than two weeks after the CARC conference, Party leaders in Samarqand resolved in one go to register mosque communities in the territories of the Krupskaiia, Leningrad, and Ilyich collective farms which were located in the Urgut district, including the Ghishtli mosque that, as we have seen above, had been a subject of controversies and power-struggles between local Party organs. These were all Muslim institutions that had operated illegally since the 1940s, and it is striking that in a matter of only a few months they could secure what they had been requesting in vain for decades.<sup>69</sup>

For Party organs, especially the executive committees operating at the provincial level, this was a major loss of power. One is reminded that just a year earlier, in the summer of 1980, things had looked diametrically different. On 2 June 1980, a group of thirty elders (*mo'ysafidlar*) representing the city of Urgut protested that a city of more than 30,000 inhabitants whose population was overwhelmingly Muslim did not have an official mosque offering religious services. It was an untenable situation that inhabitants of Urgut had to travel for more than 40 km to reach Samarqand to participate in the congregational prayer. Urgut, they reminded their addressee, was a region with many historical mosques and madrasas. To open just one mosque would have been relatively easy for the state, they argued.<sup>70</sup>

Bypassing the Tashkent bureau of CARC, the Urgut elders' petition went straight to Moscow. Kuroedov immediately sent a telegram to his CARC colleagues in Tashkent lamenting that there had already been all too much back and forth between Muslims in Urgut and his office and he therefore asked the Uzbek CARC to deal

---

<sup>69</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 81.

<sup>70</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 20.

with it.<sup>71</sup> After a week, in a rather circumspect missive, Rustamov commanded Tashkenbaev to look carefully (*tshchatel'no*) into the case, suggesting that all he needed was a pretext to turn down the application for registration. Tashkenbaev did not move a finger. Why? Because two weeks earlier he had already written a detailed report addressing the situation of unregistered mosque communities in the Urgut district, which conclusively explained why they had to be made legal. He had dutifully explained that there existed in fact twelve unregistered religious associations, where believers held collective prayers. All these communities had dedicated rooms for prayer and their own mullahs; furthermore, he noted, they 'have been operating for many years.'<sup>72</sup> And all these years, he continued, the district executive committee had been receiving applications from the believers inhabiting the collective farms named after Krupskaja and Leningrad, requesting that the the Ghishtli mosque be registered. On religious holidays, up to 300 people gathered here for prayer. His inquiry, however, had revealed that local councils had either ignored or rejected such requests without offering explanation. Tashkenbaev noted that 'such an attitude is a violation of socialist legality and causes discontent among believers, and also leads to the creation of conflict situations between believers and local authorities, which are used by extremists to incite religious fanaticism and arouse antisocial sentiments among believers.'<sup>73</sup> In a major leap of faith in the system, Tashkenbaev affirmed that 'as a CARC commissioner, I consider it absolutely necessary to satisfy the request of the believers of the Urgut region to register a Muslim association. This, first, would uphold believers' constitutional rights and close the path to fanaticism and unhealthy judgments; secondly, it would contribute to the damping of the activities of other unregistered Muslim associations and ministers of worship operating in the area.'<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 35.

<sup>72</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 72.

<sup>73</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 73.

<sup>74</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, l. 76-77.

Tashkentbaev sent this report to the executive committee of the party at the provincial level. He had prepared also another copy for Kuroedov, but the report never made it to Moscow.<sup>75</sup> Instead, members of the local executive committee took things into their own hands and declared that the list of thirty signatories who had supposedly petitioned for the registration of the Ghishtli mosque was a forgery (*fiktivnyi*), the work of one Aminjon Yunusov, ‘who illegally performs religious practices,’<sup>76</sup> for which he had been already fined. To confer even more weight upon such allegations, the local executive committee mentioned that all the signatories stated that they knew nothing about the petition and they had never applied for the Ghishtli mosque to be registered. This happened on 11 July 1980. As we have seen earlier, the Ghishtli mosque eventually was registered on 20 August 1981. All the paperwork, all the manpower mobilised, and all the investment put into hampering a process of registration was wasted in vain.

## Conclusion

1981 was the year when in Uzbekistan party organs which were tasked with upholding the Soviet constitution and fighting religion seem to have finally realised that they had lost the war against Muslimness. Atheism thus became a more programmatic statement of faith, than an ideological weapon to achieve Sovietization. Thus, for example, one encounters a report by the prosecutor in Samarqand lamenting that on 28 January 1981, one Egamberdy Haqberdiev, a 77-year-old retiree, killed his brother-in-law Mukum Tursunkulov with a blow to his neck. Haqberdiev was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment for the crime. The report dutifully mentioned that both the victim and the assailant were known to be particularly pious Muslims and to have gone to the mosque every Friday. However,

---

<sup>75</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 63, ll. 75-78.

<sup>76</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 46, l. 37.



the document concluded, ‘belief in God did not stop a man from committing this grave crime.’<sup>77</sup> One wonders whether prosecutors too commented with the same irony on murders perpetrated by self-proclaimed atheists. But this is another matter, of course.

While unleashing a major campaign of registration of existing mosque and shrine communities, the state simultaneously continued to persecute proselytisers, at least occasionally. In October 1981, for example, the Internal Affairs Office for the region of Samarqand reported about the outcome of an inquiry initiated roughly a year earlier. In December 1980 one Khamdam To’raev, a 49-year-old Uzbek from the Urgut region who worked as a barber, was caught selling a text about Islamic dogmatics titled ‘What is Islamic faith?’ (*Islom dini nima?*) in front of the local shopping centre. Eventually, To’raev was sentenced to three years in prison.<sup>78</sup> The sentence was brandished as a major achievement in the fight against religion: an article to this effect was printed in the newspaper *Lenin yo’li* (21.04.1981) under the title ‘Burning money’ (*Pulga tuzan qo’yib*).<sup>79</sup> That the Samarqand prosecutorial office could finally sink its claws on a Muslim believer caught in the act of proselytising was evidence that the state was still able to implement the existing legislation, in particular, to discipline people who spread religious literature without specific authorisation. This is how Tashkenbaev framed the To’raev case, most probably in an attempt to persuade the Party higher echelons in Tashkent that there was nothing to worry about.<sup>80</sup> Following the same tack, but displaying more bureaucratic virtuosity, the head of the executive committee for the city of Samarqand, one N.I. Ibragimov, explained that the sentence against To’raev was evidence that the new law on the registration of mosque communities was particularly effective: ‘the prevailing opinion is that the legalization of unregistered [Islamic associations] will inevitably lead to an increase in their number and the activation

---

<sup>77</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 20, l. 11.

<sup>78</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 83, l. 28.

<sup>79</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73 [62], l. 54.

<sup>80</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 72, l. 7.

of believers. However, in fact, practice shows the opposite, namely that their registration leads to a constraining of the network of religious institutions [...] Based on CARC's recommendations, we are now registering additional [Muslim] clergy in the region in order to improve the effectiveness of control over compliance with the legislation on cults and to limit the activities of wandering mullahs. Currently, 22 additional mullahs are registered to conduct rituals in eleven rural areas. Prior to their registration, there were 200 unregistered mullahs. After their registration, more than 350 clergymen operating unofficially were identified. Currently, 400 people have stopped their illegal activities, while more than 150 clergymen continue to perform rituals.<sup>81</sup>

Rhetorical acrobatics did not much help Ibragimov to achieve clarity. The figures he provided showed in fact that the registration of mullahs led to a steep increase of mosque communities, which inevitably led to a strengthening of Muslim religious networks. In addition, it wasn't terribly clear what the To'raev case had to do with the registration of mullahs. It may well be that Ibragimov was attempting to signal that the To'raev case was merely the tip of the iceberg. Be that as it may, the deeper one looks into cases whereby Muslims were reported to be spreading Islamic literature, the more one gleans that there was quite a lot going on in Uzbekistan in the 1980s. Roughly two years after issuing a sentence against To'raev, the same court in Samarqand heard a similar case. This time a group of eight individuals were demonstratively sentenced to seven years in jail for selling Islamic *samizdat*.<sup>82</sup>

Islamic teaching relied not only on published texts, but also on sermons recorded on cassettes. In 1984, S. Kholmuradov, the deputy imam of the Kho'ja Abdu Darun mosque in Samarqand, lost his job because he was found leading an underground teaching cell (*hujra*). The prosecutor could uncover his activities, for Kholmuradov had invited his former mentor, one Qori Ismoil, from Tashkent

---

<sup>81</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 73, l. 54.

<sup>82</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 74, l. 67.

to Samarqand to deliver sermons. His speeches were recorded on tapes and distributed for free among a group of 15 students. 'For violating the legislation on religious cults and for spreading religious dogma,' the prosecutor solemnly concluded, 'we have removed Kholmuradov from registration, and seized all tape cassettes with recordings.'<sup>83</sup>

In fact, acquiring Islamic literature during this period seems to have been much easier than earlier scholarship has assumed. The following case is rather telling, for it shows the extent to which mullahs and sheikhs could be resourceful in this respect. In March 1982, the district court of Khiva sentenced one Otaboy Qodirov to five years in prison in a labor colony for having disseminated Islamic literature. Qodirov was born in 1935 in the village of Gandumkan in the district of Khiva and had a broadly commonplace profile: an Uzbek living in a collective farm, upon graduating from high school he began to work in a local chemical factory. His record was almost immaculate, aside from the fact that he did not possess a Party card. Things became unpleasant for him, however, when a number of people reported on him for 'having been engaged in religious propaganda for many years.' The sentence held that, starting from 1974, he had been working at the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoni (see Chapter Three) and proselytising among pilgrims. In addition, witnesses indicated that while at the shrine he taught Arabic and sold religious literature, which he brought from other places. There was more, however. In the summer of 1977, he met with one Hojibibi Ishchanova who then lived in the city of Daşoguz and invited her to stay at the shrine for forty days as a pilgrim. So the lady did. During this period, Qodirov taught her to read Arabic, especially the Qur'an. Later, said witnesses, they often met. He sold her religious books and initiated her to serve as a mullah. The sentence offers interesting details about the sort of religious

---

<sup>83</sup> SOA, f. 1648, op. 1, d. 106, l. 3. On the thriving unofficial market in audio cassettes in Uzbekistan across the 1980s and early 1990s, see David Tyson, "The Role of Unofficial Audio Media in Contemporary Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 13 No. 2 (1994), pp 283-294.

literature which Qodirov was handling. It appears that he sold Hojibibi a copy of the *Hikmat*, a collection of Sufi poems attributed to Ahmad Yasavi. Most probably crafted in the 19th century,<sup>84</sup> this text circulated widely in Central Asia, and hundreds of copies are still available today in manuscript libraries. In return for this copy of the *Hikmat*, Hojibibi gave Qodirov a robe (*cho'pon*) and a shirt. We also read that Qodirov used to travel to Tashkent to purchase 'religious books,' which he then resold at the shrine. But he did not stop here: 'In the evenings, he recorded the contents of the Qur'an from the Islamic Republic of Iran on tape from the radio and sold them.' But why did locals decide to report him to state authorities? The problem wasn't Islamic literature, of course. At the court, Hojibibi's daughter, Salomat Matyakubova, testified that: 'Since 1977, my mother, having fallen ill, began to visit the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoniy, where a man by the name of Otaboy Qodirov invited her to stay there for forty days as a pilgrim. [My] mother stayed there for more than forty days and learned to read the old book *Haftiyak*.<sup>85</sup> After forty days at the shrine, my mother made a donation (*sadaqa*) by slaughtering a ram. After returning from the cemetery, she invited Mullah Otaboy to give his blessing. He came to us accompanied by [four women:] Urazgul Opa, Durjon, Roziya and Shukurjon Opa. My mother gave Mullah Otaboy a robe and a shirt. Qodirov sold my mother one sacred book for 100 roubles and gave her a blessing. After that, he began to visit to us. One day he brought us ten copies of a book titled *What is the Islamic faith?* and asked my mother to sell them. She sold one book to Sonya Matyakubova for ten roubles. In 1981, Qodirov attempted to have me and my mother's sister, Muhabbat, work in a medical school in Khiva. We visited him four times. Last time, on 19 July 1981, I saw him lying with my mother Hojibibi. When I went home, I told my father what I saw, after which we kicked her out of the house. We are five children and we do not need such a mother.' The

---

<sup>84</sup> DeWeese, "Ahmad Yasavi and the *Divan-i Hikmat* in Soviet Scholarship".

<sup>85</sup> See footnote 87 at page 188.

main motive for bringing Otoboy Qodirov to court then was not the fact that he had been serving illegally at the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoniy, nor that he had taught Hojibibi to read the Qur'an, nor that he had distributed copies of the *Hikmat* and *Islom dini nima?* In this respect, the statement given by Madrim Matyakubov, Hojibibi's husband, is revealing: 'Otoboy Qodirov met my wife Hojibibi Ishchanova at the shrine of Kho'ja Yusuf Hamadoniy and invited her to stay there for forty days as a pilgrim. During this period, he taught her the rules of reading religious books, the Qur'an and prayers. He sold sacred books through my wife Ishchanova. To receive his blessing, my wife invited Otoboy Qodirov to our house, where she gave him a robe and a shirt. At that time, mullah Otoboy sold one sacred book [known as] *Hikmat* to my wife for 100 roubles. On 19 July 1981, my daughter Salomat saw my wife in Otoboy Qodirov's house, lying with him, and told me about it. For this reason, I legally divorced my wife. My five children are under my care [now]. I ask for Otoboy Qodirov, who is guilty of the destruction of my family, to be severely punished.'<sup>86</sup> Qodirov must have thought that he could continue to operate at the shrine, serving as a sheikh and teaching pilgrims how to read Islamic literature in the Arabic script. He failed to appreciate, however, that the wrath of a jealous husband could be more powerful than the surveillance apparatus of the USSR.

Islamic literature became such a widespread phenomenon that, under CARC's pressure, in 1983 the mufti Shamsuddin Bobokhonov issued a fatwa 'about the damages caused by the sellers of new books' (*yangi chiqqan kitobfurushlar zararlarini haqida*).<sup>87</sup> In

---

<sup>86</sup> <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/>, accessed online on 15 November 2023.

<sup>87</sup> O'MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 740, l. 1-6 (in Uzbek). In fact, we know that texts of Islamic dogmatics and Sufism were copied and circulated even in the 1960s. A prime example of this kind of literature is the *Nūr-nāma-yi Sharīf*, a collection of instructions for masters of guilds (*risola*), which was copied by a certain Tirkesh Khaldzhanov, the surveyor of the 'Socialism' collective farm in the district of Köhneurgench (Turkmen SSR). The text bears no date, but it was no doubt copied after 1964, for the work was written on a Soviet notebook produced by the 'Voskhod' press, which was established in 1962 (it bears the following number STU 36-18-131-64). Cf. Fundamental Library of

rather patronizing fashion, the mufti held that works such as *Islom dini nima?* were ‘unreliable’ and therefore they could not be used as ‘sources’. The problem with these books, opined the mufti, was serious. The Spiritual Board had carried out a special inspection and found out that these texts were full of blunders and unreliable information. More specifically, ‘they distort in a crude manner aspects of dogmatics which are considered the foundation of Islam. They do not quote any reliable book, and present insignificant matters as if they were prescribed duties for believers.’<sup>88</sup> In sum, the fatwa presented Islamic literature distributed outside of SAD-UM’s purview as the product of evil forces, that is, a concoction by individuals ‘who seek by every means to deceive the common people and make money. If they wished to please Allah and to do godly deeds, they would write these books correctly. After that, they would submit them to the ulama for review and have their sanction.’<sup>89</sup> While CARC was trying in vain to curtail the spreading of underground Islamic literature, the mufti seized the opportunity to claim for the Spiritual Board the absolute monopoly over the production and distribution of what it deemed to be ‘good’ Islamic literature. ‘For these reasons’, the fatwa admonished, ‘we inform all Muslims through this fatwa that if these kinds of books and similar new works come into their possession, they should not read them!’<sup>90</sup>

This was the atmosphere in Uzbekistan in 1983. With a cascade of new mosque communities and mullahs being registered and, in parallel, a network of hundreds of shrines operating across the country, the idea of waging a fight against Muslimness had become almost meaningless. Thus concluded a lengthy essay published in 1986 by *Science and Religion*, the mouthpiece journal of the atheist organization ‘Knowledge’ society, which spoke openly about the

---

the Qaraqalpaq Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, MS Nukus VR-32 (uncatalogued). Interesting, the *Nūrnama* was one of the works targeted by Shamsuddin Bobokhonov’s fatwa.

<sup>88</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 740, l. 3.

<sup>89</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 740, l. 3.

<sup>90</sup> O’MA, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 740, l. 3.

alarming phenomenon of Islamic underground teaching.<sup>91</sup> Muslimness was everywhere, if one bothered to look and recognise what one was seeing.

---

<sup>91</sup> Kamil Ikramov, "Mezhdu slishkom prostym i ochen' slozhnym," *Nauka i religii* (1987/1), pp. 6-9.

## **EPILOGUE**



I have argued throughout this book that Soviet-era ethnographers, CARC commissioners and members of Party organs of all stripes depicted Muslimness in Uzbekistan as an unabashedly vibrant culture with believers tenaciously, indeed stubbornly clinging to their faith. In doing so, they unwittingly testified to the failure of the Soviet project of shaping an atheist society premised upon a Communist lifeworld. In fact, in the period between the end of the Second World War and the demise of the USSR, mosque and shrine communities came to constitute what can be termed a religious space. This space was no doubt self-contained and challenged by the secularist policies and the inward-looking tendencies cultivated by a one-Party state. However, it simultaneously served as a harbour for Uzbeks to keep at bay those forces of cultural change that elsewhere, especially in post-colonial situations, led to the radicalization of the Muslim public and the rise of political Islam as an alternative to liberal democracies. While a substantial number of the ulama employed at the Muslim Spiritual Board in Tashkent turned to fundamentalism as a way to achieve a puritanical version of Islam, it is nevertheless the case that the sort of Islamist movements seen for example in Egypt under Anwar Sadat or in Algeria never really materialised in Soviet Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup>

What alienated Uzbeks in the USSR from global movements of political Islam was a mix of different factors. The limited

---

<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that Central Asians approached fundamentalism differently if compared to other regions of the Muslim world. There is a distinctly Soviet contribution to this sort of turn to fundamentalist notions of the proper sources and foundations of Islam. My sources are mostly crafted in Uzbek, and much of the region's written Islamic heritage was in Uzbek or Persian, with Arabic being equally important, but less prominent. Soviet education, however, and especially Soviet Orientalism taught Soviet citizens that the cultural practices conveyed by Turko-Persian writing traditions were reflections of a corrupted, tainted, imperfect Islam, and that the real sources and foundations of Islam had to be in Arabic, and preferably from the Arab world.

possibilities for foreign literature to circulate in the USSR, together with SADUM's entrenched unwillingness to meddle in politics and the widespread propensity among Uzbeks to identify Muslimness with worship (*ibodat*), brought about a tendency that eventually elevated ritual over everything else. In the past scholars have termed such a phenomenon of Muslims' de-politicization 'Hanafi quietism', but I would suggest that this expression is coloured by a derogatory tinge that makes Uzbeks look unnecessarily detached. As I have attempted to explain at the very beginning of this book, there existed in Soviet Uzbekistan a robust constituency of believers who were profoundly convinced that their Muslimness was not defective in any respect, and who certainly did not think of their coreligionists living across the wider Islamic world between Senegal and Indonesia as embodying a more 'superior' type of Muslim.

In fact, over the course of this book we have encountered many religious experiences encapsulated in Soviet documentation – a wealth of vignettes which can be read as manifestations of Islamically-informed spirituality, morality, and aspirations to improve oneself transcendently. In aggregating these vignettes, I have pursued what, in keeping with Karl Schlögel, can be termed an 'archaeology of a vanished world,'<sup>2</sup> for since the early 1990s the possibility to travel and study abroad, the liberalisation (though timid) of Islam, and the advent of the internet turned Soviet Uzbekistan, together with Soviet civilization more generally, into a relic of the past.

A hermeneutics of Soviet-style religiosity, therefore, presents us with an unavoidable challenge: how can we interpret the ways in which Uzbeks nowadays remember and make sense of their Muslimness under Late Socialism? And do their stories differ from the narratives surfacing today from Soviet archives? When discussing aspects of their life prior to 1991, Uzbeks today recognise that they do not live in the same country in which they were born as Soviet

---

<sup>2</sup> Karl Schlögel, *The Soviet Century: Archaeology of a Lost World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 1-6.

citizens. At the same time, their stories appear to congeal around a conventionalised narrative of oppression and subjugation which does not do justice to the religious vibrancy nor to the resourcefulness of believers recorded in our documentation.

In early October 2011, I had the good fortune to encounter someone who was able to help me to reflect historically about this conundrum. At the time I was on a field trip in Khorezm, in western Uzbekistan, to inspect private archives. While based in Khiva, I could make occasional forays into the wide expanse of the oasis blessed by the waters of the Amu Darya and explore the generally reclusive space of collective farms. Were it not for the resourcefulness of my informant, it would have been impossible to win locals' trust. In the early 2000s, the so-called War on Terror in Afghanistan gifted Islam Karimov the legitimacy needed locally and abroad to rule Uzbekistan with an iron fist and crack down on Islamists even when none existed. Unencumbered by even the most basic concerns for human rights, the Karimov regime morphed after a decade of all-out arbitrariness into a *Polizeistaat*, i.e., a state ruled by an all-mighty network of security forces that allowed a few to loot the country as they pleased. In such an environment, to study anything even remotely associated with 'Islam' was problematic at best, and could indeed be positively dangerous. It should not come as a surprise then that many people were terrified at the idea of receiving foreign guests, particularly those like me who expressed an interest in Soviet Islam. The reader can therefore imagine my deep gratification at hearing the good news that there was a family in the district of Kho'jayli, in the Autonomous Republic of Qaraqalpaqstan, who were willing to open the doors of their rich manuscript library.

Early on the morning of 11 October, together with my informants from Khiva, I set off in a dark-blue Lada Niva, heading north on the R-163 highway. After a couple of hours, we reached the town of Kipchak where we crossed the Amu Darya on a pontoon bridge. A long queue of lorries waiting to embark on the bridge served as a propitious opportunity to have breakfast with fried fish. After juddering our way over the bridge to the other bank of the river, we regained our former composure and proceeded along a scenic

road that waded into a desert area and cut across majestic rocky outcrops. At a junction close to Nukus, we veered south-west, entered the district of Kho'jayli and continued until we found a village called Keneges. With orchards of all sizes, fruit trees, small barns and beehives, the village was once part of the Hamza collective farm, which had now fallen into disarray. We took a dusty narrow lane flanked by poplar trees, which led us into a courtyard. Our car stopped in front of a large single-storey house surrounded by barns and shacks. Pumpkins had just been collected and amassed against the walls to dry in the sun. In the air, I could sniff a smell of burnt gasoline, which I attributed to a Soviet-style tractor with a trailer parked nonchalantly nearby. It was a sunny early afternoon, but a brisk breeze was blowing through the fields announcing colder days soon to come.

A few steps away our host stood waiting for us in a dark grey suit, his head covered by a black fur hat. His name was Ibrohim Makhsum, and he had been born into a family of *eshons*. His genealogy traces back to Bobo Niyoz Eshon, a scholar who in 1877 received a substantial land grant from the Khans of Khiva, the dynasty that ruled over Khorezm. The land belonged to a charitable endowment established to support a mosque community (*masjid qavmi*). Called *yorliqli yer*, the khalal grant 'constituted a tax-exempt form of landholding,'<sup>3</sup> which entitled Bobo Niyoz Eshon to a specific share of the agricultural produce generated by the land. The khans had been making similar grants throughout the 19th century, and by proceeding in this fashion they were able to create a solid network of communities led by holy men loyal to them. They usually selected prominent scholars, most of them with distinguished Sufi lineages and affiliations, around whom coalesced groups of knowledge and piety and who could deploy manpower for agricultural labour and construction works. Beside his Sufi credentials, however, Bobo Niyoz Eshon was also a jurist (hence his supplementary

---

<sup>3</sup> Ulfatbek Abdurasulov, "Atā'i-Mulk and Yārliqli-Mulk: Features of Land Tenure in Khiva," *Der Islam* Vol. 88 No. 2 (2012), p. 314.

title of *ākhūnd / okhun*) and his mosque functioned as an important centre for the transmission of Islamic knowledge in the district of Kho'jayli. In fact, his mosque was often referred to as a *madrasa*; it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that we find records of local scholars who turned to Bobo Niyoz Eshon to see if he could lend out texts of Islamic ethics such as the *Akhlāq-i muḥsīnī*.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately prior to the Bolshevik revolution, the Bobo Niyoz Eshon mosque community was able to expand the scope of its agricultural activities with a growing number of lessors working on the land granted to him. In 1915, for example, a fiscal register kept by the chancellery of the Khans of Khiva reported that the area under cultivation had grown considerably from 37 to c. 51 hectares.<sup>5</sup> A thriving economic activity ensured that all Bobo Niyoz Eshon's sons pursued Islamic education at the madrasas down in Khiva, as attested by his private correspondence with his children. The family archive includes a rather moving letter penned by one of his sons, Muhammad Murod Eshon, who studied at the Allah Quli Khan madrasa at the end of the 19th century. In a circumpect and deferential way, the boy warned his father in Keneges that, while waiting for his financial support, he had to borrow money left and right and was thus in dire straits. Bobo Niyoz Eshon's family continued to flourish following the establishment of Soviet power in Qaraqalpaqstan. The endowment continued to exist at least until the mid-1920s, covering expenses for the upkeep of the mosque and assuring a salary to its imam who was a member of the family. But things changed for good in 1928, when Muslim endowments were declared illegal in Uzbekistan. Stripped of all its sources of income, in 1932 the mosque was closed and repurposed into a warehouse to serve a new collective farm unimaginatively named 'The Red Peasant' (*Qizil Dehqon*).

---

<sup>4</sup> For this work, see Maria Eva Subtelny, "The Works of Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshif as a Source for the Study of Sufism in Late 15th- and Early 16th-Century Central Asia," in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*, pp. 98-118.

<sup>5</sup> O'MA, f. I-125, op. 1, d. 584, l. 5ob.

Ibrohim Makhsum's father Nuriddin Qori was 24 years old when this happened. Orphaned when he was only a young child, Nuriddin Qori was brought up by his great-uncle Yunus Qori (1874-1932), a scholar who had studied first with a prominent Turkmen *eshon* in the district of Daşoguz and then in Khiva during the reign of Muhammad Rahim II (r. 1864-1910). When Soviet authorities closed the Bobo Niyoz Eshon mosque, Nuriddin Qori was able to avoid the confiscation of its library. Like other scholars, he must have learnt the art of deflecting books' confiscation early on in the Soviet atheist campaign. Having salvaged his books, he fled to Turkmenistan and found shelter in a small village where his great uncle had once sojourned. Nuriddin Qori lived there in hiding, without any official registration for 27 years. Things became slightly easier for him only with the end of the Second World War. By then he commanded authority over the local Muslim community, and between 1946 and 1959 Nuriddin Qori was able to form an illegal network of students. His underground teaching activity grew considerably over the years and, eventually, some of his disciples became imams under Late Socialism. With Stalin dead, in 1959 his family members were able to mobilize resources to bring Nuriddin Qori back to Keneges where he lived until his death in 1989,<sup>6</sup> a narrative common amid scholarly families in Central Asia.

---

<sup>6</sup> I draw all this information from Yaqub Jumamuratov, *Boboniyoz okhun madrasasi va o'ghillari, Muhammad Murod Eshon, Kho'jamurod Eshon va Yunus Qorilar* (Kho'jayli, 2004). This is an unpublished work submitted to the Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Beruni Institute in Nukus.





Figure 6.1 Ibrohim Makhsum and his manuscript library, October 2011.  
© Paolo Sartori.

Born in 1961 as a Soviet citizen, Ibrohim Makhsum was exposed to a kind of Islamic knowledge that was similar to the curriculum of the madrasas of the Khanate of Khiva. In fact, he inherited the

library of the Bobo Niyoz Eshon mosque, which covers an impressive array of genres: *belles lettres* in Persian (Hafiz, Bedil) and Turkic (Navo’i, Fuzuli), local historiography (*Ta’rīkh-i Khwarazm-shāhī*), texts of jurisprudence in Arabic (the *Zākhira*,<sup>7</sup> a commentary on the *al-Wiqāya*,<sup>8</sup> and a copy of *Fiqh al-Kaydānī*)<sup>9</sup> and in Persian (*Salāt-i Mas’ūdī*). One also finds quite a number of texts popularising Sufism, such as poems attributed to Ahmad Yasavi and Mashrab as well as the *Risāla-yi ‘azīza*, a commentary on Sufi Allohyor’s *Sabāt al-‘ājjizīn*.<sup>10</sup> Finally, I could see various copies of the Qur’an together with a battered copy of the *Jāmi‘ al-‘ulūm* penned by the 12th-century polymath Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī.

When invited to reflect about his *own* understanding of Muslimness in the Soviet period, Ibrohim Makhsum explained that he always wanted to live a life guided by the example given by his forefathers (*ota-bobolarimiz tutgan yo’lni borish*), who had pursued the cultivation of the Islamic sciences along the Hanafi path; hence, his sustained effort to have a new mosque built in lieu of the dilapidated Bobo Niyoz Eshon mosque. ‘Sufism (*tasavvuf*) was also an integral component of my being a Muslim in the Soviet period,’ he said. Pushed to qualify this statement, he added that apiculture, for example, had been one such occupation that allowed him to pursue the Sufi ideal of ‘the perfect individual’ (*insoni komil*) through a full exposure to nature.<sup>11</sup> While his words proved always discreet, he occasionally referred to the Soviet government as despotic (*mustabid*), a reference that inevitably led to the formulaic expression ‘with

<sup>7</sup> For a description of this fatawa collection, see Sartori, *Visions of Justice: Sharī’a and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia*, p. 262.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282 fn. 106.

<sup>9</sup> On the *Fiqh al-Kaydānī*, see *ibid.*, p. 255 fn. 15.

<sup>10</sup> I have discussed the circulation of this work and his commentaries in my “From the Demotic to the Literary: The Ascendance of the Vernacular Turkic in Central Asia (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries),” pp. 228–229.

<sup>11</sup> On apiculture as constitutive of Muslimness in European Russia in the 1960s, see Alfrid Bustanov, “A Space for the Subject: Tracing Garden Culture in Muslim Russia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 65 No. 1-2 (2022), pp. 90–91.



the blessing of independence' (*mustaqillik sharofati bilan*) when he described his accomplishments in the 1990s: a new mosque in the village opened by local authorities, his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his eldest son studying in Tashkent to become an imam. Otherwise, Ibrohim Makhsum's own self-fashioning as a Soviet Muslim appeared impervious – indeed, hermetically sealed – to my intrusive questions.

Efforts to unravel the meaning of Muslim religiosity in Soviet Central Asia have hitherto been few and far between. Marianne Kamp alone has pointed to the entrenched habit of concealing knowledge about manifestations of religiosity among Uzbeks who narrated past events, mostly connected to collectivisation.<sup>12</sup> While Kamp examined interviews relating to the interwar period, things seem not have improved much when scholars have directed their attention to the post-Stalin period. We can count today only on a handful of studies (mostly limited to Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) that offer a sense of the degree to which the episteme of Islamic knowledge informed social relations in Central Asia under Late Socialism.<sup>13</sup> The silence of folk narratives with regard to Islam in the Soviet period often seems to pose an insurmountable challenge to our interpretation of the past. When one examines private archives and post-1991 family narratives which eulogize Muslim scholarly lineages such as Ibrohim Makhsum's, one is bound by necessity to pause and reflect on the recurrent habit of obliterating references to the religious self. Indeed, if one directly asks one's Uzbek interlocutors to recount their experience as religious individuals under Soviet rule, the answer one gets is unfailingly evasive. I am inclined to interpret this silence as an unintended consequence of what we may term epistemic dissonance, by which I mean a condition resulting from a situation in which a person operates within two or more systems of signification. One was Islamic, the other Soviet. I emphasize the intrinsic epistemic character of said systems of

---

<sup>12</sup> Marianne Kamp, "Where did the Mullahs Go? Oral Histories from Rural Uzbekistan," *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50 No. 3-4 (2010), pp. 503-531.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent review of the literature, see Sartori, "Why Soviet Islam Matters."

signification, for there clearly existed in Uzbekistan two different discourses, one premised upon being Muslim and the other on being Soviet, and both of them intrinsically hyper-normative. As we have seen in Chapter One, SADUM's main objective was to design an Islamic discourse which weaponized ulama to discipline Muslims' behaviour. Those Soviet state organs which scaffolded the rhetorical edifice of atheism operated in the same fashion. While one could adopt Muslim and Soviet discursive *postures* at one and same time, it was more difficult to reflect productively on one's identity. The example of Ibrohim Makhsum points to a widespread situation whereby in the 1970s and the 1980s many people in Uzbekistan continued to perform Muslim religiosity without necessarily cultivating forms of religious self-reflexivity which would have allowed them to fashion themselves in terms different from those afforded by Soviet speak. I do not want to exclude of course the possibility that there existed individuals who, by dint of their education and intellectual trajectory, could develop a peculiar penchant for self-fashioning and were able to do so in an Islamically-informed language.<sup>14</sup> What I do want to suggest, however, is that an epistemic dissonance may have constrained the space for ordinary believers to develop a specific language of Soviet Muslimness and find their own authorial voice, their own register. The past weighed heavily on the mind of many interlocutors, who otherwise appear to have been unencumbered when expressing their religiosity in many creative ways.<sup>15</sup>

Ibrohim Makhsum and I exchanged notes on the codices and the printed books he had at home. It was a moment of great excitement, for we read texts together; we had found something that was of

---

<sup>14</sup> *Muslim Subjectivity in Soviet Russia: The Memoirs of 'Abd al-Majid al-Qadiri*, eds. Alfrid Bustanov and Vener Usmanov (Padeborn: Brill Schönigh, 2022). See, also, Bustanov, "A Space for the Subject: Tracing Garden Culture in Muslim Russia."

<sup>15</sup> Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*; Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Northern Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005).

mutual importance to both of us. When we casually opened a lithographic copy of Hafiz's poems and read together several verses, I asked him when and where he had acquired fluency in Persian. At the time, I had no sense of the implications of this apparently banal question. Ibrohim Makhsum explained that he had acquired the rudiments of Persian from his father as a child, but it was only his deployment with the army in Afghanistan in the 1980s that afforded him the opportunity to practise. A recollection of the Soviet occupation, even for just a short lapse of time, was enough to cast a penumbral shadow on our conversation. There was nothing else left to say.

It was time to go. A few more pictures were taken, while we exchanged a new round of handshakes. Checking my belongings before entering the car, I overheard an almost imperceptible question that Ibrohim Makhsum whispered into the ears of my guide: 'This visit won't cause me any problems, right?'

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## **Archives and abbreviations**

### **Uzbekistan**

Archive of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan, Tashkent

Archive of the National Agency of Restoration, Tashkent

National Archive of Uzbekistan, Tashkent [O'MA]

Samarqand Oblast Archive, Samarqand [SOA]

Samarqand Museum of the History of the Culture and Art of the Peoples of Uzbekistan, Samarqand

Urgench Provincial State Archive, Urgench

Party Archive of the Qaraqalpaq Regional Committee of the Uzbek Communist Party, Nukus [QPA]

### **Russian Federation**

Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Orientalists' Archive, St Petersburg [IVRAN Arkhiv Vostokovedov]

Russian Ethnographic Museum, St Petersburg

Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Archeology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow [AIEA RUS]

### **Manuscript Libraries and Abbreviations**

Beruni Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Tashkent [IVANRUZ]

Fundamental Library of the Qaraqalpaq Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Nukus

Ichan Qal'a Museum, Khiva

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Qaraqalpaq Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Nukus

Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St Petersburg

Staatsbibliothek, Berlin

### **Newspapers and Journals**

*al-Islāh* (1915-1918)

*Kommunizm ghalabasi* (1980-1987)

*Mushtum* (1937)

*Nauka i religiia* (1961-1987)

*Pakhtakor* (1980-1990)

### **Published Primary Sources**

Abu Takhir Khodzha. "Samariia. Opisanie drevnostei i musul'manskikh sviatin Samarkanda," transl. V.L. Viatkin, in *Spravochnaia knizhka Samarkandskoi oblasti*. Vyp. 6 (Samarkand: Tipografiia K.M. Fedorova, 1899), pp. 153-259.

Achil'diev, I. "Kak zhivesh, makhallia?," *Nauka i religiia* (1980/2), pp. 34-39.

Basilov, Vladimir N. and K. Niiazklychev. "Perezhitki shamanstva u Turkmen-Choudurov," in G.P. Snesarev and V.N. Basilov (eds.), *Domusul'manskie verovaniia i obriady v Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 123-137.

Basilov, Vladimir N. "Toshmat-Bola," *Sovetskaia Étnografiia* (1975/5), pp. 112-124.

Basilov, Vladimir N. "Dukhi Momokhol," in N Palagina (ed.), *Étnicheskaia istoriia i traditsionnaia kul'tura narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Nukus: Karakalpakstan, 1989), pp. 138-149.

Basilov, Vladimir N. "Albasty," in V.Ia. Petrukhin (ed.), *Istoriko-étnograficheskie issledovaniia po fol'kloru: Sbornik statei pamiati Sergeia Aleksandrovicha Tokareva* (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 1994), pp. 49-76.

Bazarbaev, Zh. *Opyt sotsiologicheskogo izucheniia ateizma i religii* (Nukus: Karakalpakstan, 1979).

Bustanov, Alfrid and Vener Usmanov (eds.). *Muslim Subjectivity in Soviet Russia: The Memoirs of 'Abd al-Majid al-Qadiri* (Paderborn: Brill Schönigh, 2022).

- Documents and Resolutions: The 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Moscow, February 23 -March 3, 1981* (Moscow: Novosty Press Agency Publishing House, 1981).
- Dokumenty arkhiva Khivinskikh khanov po istorii i ètnografii Karakalpakov*, podbor dokumentov, vvedenie, perevod, primechania i ukazateli Iu. È. Bregelia (Moscow: Nauka, 1967).
- Gafferberg, È.G. "Perezhitki religioznykh predstavlenii u beludzhei," in G.P. Snesev and V.N. Basilov (eds.), *Domusul'manskie verovaniia i obriady v Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 224-246.
- Ghylmani, Saduaqqas. *Zamanymyzda bolghan ghulamalaryng ghumyr tarihtary*. ed. and trans. A. Muminov and A. Frank (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2013).
- Juvaini, 'Ala-ad-Dīn 'Ata-Malik. *The History of the World-Conqueror*, translated from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini by Johan Andrew Boyle (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).
- Katalog Khivinskikh kaziiskikh dokumentov (XIX–nach. XX vv.)*, ed. A. Urunbaev et al. (Tashkent and Tokyo: Department of Islamic Area Studies, 2001).
- Kitāb-i Mullā-zāda* (Samarkand: Tipolit. G.N. Demurova, 1904).
- Knorozov, Iurii V. "Mazar Shamun-Nabi (Nekotorye perezhitki domusul'manskikh verovaniia u narodov Khorezmskogo oazisa)," *Sovetskaia ètnografiia* (1949/2), pp. 86–97.
- Knorozov, Iurii V. "Shamanskii zikr v podzemel'e Mazlumkhan-sulu," *Ètnograficheskoe obozrenie* (1994/6), pp. 91-96.
- Köprülü, Mehmet Fuad. *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff (London: Routledge, 2006).
- Kuhn, Alexander. "Ot Khivy do Gazavata," *Turkestanskii Sbornik* (122), pp. 203-222.

- Mardonova, A. *Traditsionnye pokhoronno-pominal'nye obriady tadzhikov gissarskoi doliny (kontsa XIX-nachala XX vv.)* (Dushanbe: Donish, 1998), pp. 83-92.
- Meyendorf, E. *Puteshestvie iz Orenburga v Bukharu* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975).
- Muhammad Ḥakīm Khān. *Muntakhab at-tawārīkh. Selected History*, Vol. II, eds. Yayoi Kawahara and Koichi Haneda (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asian and Africa, 2006).
- Rahmonov, Abdulla and Sobir Yusupov. *Khorazm 'muqaddas' joy-lar va ularning vujudga kelish sirlari* (Tashkent: Qizil O'zbekiston, Pravda Vostoka va O'zbekiston Surkh birlarshgan nashriyoti, 1963).
- [Samoilovich, Alexander N.] "Kratkii otchet o poezdke v Tashkent i Bukharu i v Khivinskoe khanstvo komandirovannogo SPB. Universitetom i Russkim Komitetom privat-dotsenta A.N. Samoilovicha v 1908 godu," *Izvestiia Russkogo Komiteta dlia izucheniia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii v istoricheskoi, arkheologicheskoi, lingvisticheskoi i étnograficheskoi otnoshcheniakh* 9 (1909), pp. 1-15.
- Shīr-Muhammad Mīrāb Mūnis and Muhammad Rizā Mīrāb Āgahī. *Firdaws al-iqbāl: History of Khorezm, by Shir Muhammad Mirab Munis and Muhammad Riza Mirab Agahi*, translated from Chaghatay and Annotated by Yuri Bregel (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
- Shcherbina-Kramarenko, N. "Po musul'manskim sviatyniam Srednei Azii (putevye zametki i vpechatleniia)," *Spravochnaia knizhka Samarkandskoi oblasti. Vyp. IV* (Samarkand: Tipografiia voisk Samarkandskoi oblasti 1896).
- Snesarev, Gleb P. *Relikty domusul'manskikh verovaniĭ i obriadov uzbekov Khorezma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969).
- Snesarev, Gleb P. *Khorezmskie legendy kak istochnik po istorii religioznykh kul'tov Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1983).
- Stebliuk, Iuri. "Pogrebal'nye sooruzheniia iuzhnogo Khorezma XVIII–XIX vv.," *Polevye issledovaniia Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii*



- v 1958–1961 gg. II: pamiatniki srednevekovogo vremeni—étnograficheskie raboty. Materialy Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii pod obshchei redaktsii S.P. Tolstova, vypusk 7 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1963), pp. 98–117.
- Sukhareva, Ol'ga A. *Kvartal'naia obschchina srednevekovoi Bukhary* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976).
- Tadzhikova, Z. “Pesni pokhoronnogo obriada tadzhikov (po materialam zeravshanskikh ékspeditsii),” in *Problemy muzykal'nogo fol'klora narodov SSSR: Stat'i i materialy* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1973), pp. 95-100.
- Tayzhanov, K. and Kh. Ismailov. “Makcham – dom dlia dukhov predkov,” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1980/3), pp. 87-93.
- Troitskaia, A.L. “Zhenskii zikr v starom Tashkente,” *Sbornik Muzeia antropologii i étnografii* Vol. 7 (1928), pp. 173-199.
- Tul'tseva, L.A. “O nekotorykh sotsial'no-étnicheskikh aspektakh razvitiia obriadovo-prazdnichnoi kul'tury v Uzbekistane,” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1984/3), pp. 11-34.
- Ugolovno-protsessual'nyi kodeks UzSSR* (Tashkent: Gosizdat, 1956).
- Ustaev, Sh.U. “Novyi god (navruz) v mifologicheskikh vozzreniiakh tadzhikov i uzbekov,” *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1985/6), pp. 97-104.
- Welsford, Thomas and Nouryaghdi Tashev. *A Catalogue of Arabic-Script Documents from the Samarqand Museum* (Samarqand and Istanbul: IICAS, 2012).
- Zadykhina, Klavdiia L. “Uzbeki del'ty Amu-Dar'i,” in S.P. Tolstov and T.A. Zhdanko (eds.), *Trudy Khorezmskoi Arkheologicheskoi-Étnograficheskoi Ékspeditsii, vol. I [1945-1948]* (Moscow: Izd.-vo Akademii Nauk, 1952), pp. 319-426.
- Zaleman, K.G. ‘Legenda pro Khakim-Ata’, *Izvestiia Akademii nauk* (SPb.) Vol. 9 No. 2 (1898), pp. 105-150.
- Zhdanko, Tatiana A. “Byt karakalpanskogo kolkhoznogo aula (Opyt étnograficheskogo izucheniia kolkhoza im. Akhunbabaeva

Chimbaiskogo raiona Karakalpakskoi ASSR),” *Sovetskaia ètnografiia* (1949/2), pp. 35-58.

### Secondary Literature

- Abashin, Sergei. “Zangi-ata,” in *Islam v territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi imperii: èntsiklopedicheskii slovar’*, ed. S. M. Prozorov, vol. 3 (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura RAN, 2006), pp. 40-41.
- Abdurasulov, Ulfatbek. “Atā’i-Mulk and Yārliqlī-Mulk: Features of Land Tenure in Khiva,” *Der Islam* Vol. 88 No. 2 (2012), pp. 308-323.
- Abdurasulov, Ulfat. “Advice from a Holy Man: *Īshāns* in Nineteenth-Century Khorezm,” in Ron Sela, Paolo Sartori, and Devin DeWeese (eds.), *Muslim Religious Authority in Central Eurasia* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 180-207.
- Abdurasulov, Ulfat and Nuryoghdi Toshov. “Soviet ‘Local’ Knowledge: Babajan Safarov’s Notes on Slavery in Khwarazm,” in Nader Pournaqcheband and Florian Saafeld (eds.), *Aus den Tiefenschichten der Texte: Beiträge zur turko-iranischen Welt von der Islamisierung bis zur Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2019), pp. 265-292.
- Abduvakhitov, Abdujabbar. “Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan,” in Dale F. Eickelman (ed.), *Russian Muslim Frontiers: New Directions in Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 79–97.
- Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- Algar, Hamid. “Abu Ya’qub Hamadāni,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I/4, pp. 395-396.
- Alymov, Sergei. “The Concept of ‘Survival’ and Soviet Social Science in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* Vol. 9 (2013), pp. 157-183.
- Alymov, Sergei S. “G.P. Snesev i polevoe izuchenie “religiozno-bytovykh perezhitkov”,” *Ètnograficheskoe Obozrenie* (2013/6), pp. 69-88.

- Arapov, Dmitry (ed.) *Islam i sovetskoe gosudarstvo (1944-1990): Sbornik dokumentov. Vypusk 3* (Moscow: Mardzhani, 2011)
- Babadžanov, Baxtiyor. “On the History of the Naqšbandīya Muğad-didīya in Central Mawara’annahr in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries,” in M. Kemper, A. von Kügelgen, D. Yermakov (eds.), *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1996), pp. 385-413.
- Babajanov, Bakhtiyar and Ashirek Muminov, Elizaveta Nekrasova. “Le mausolée de Chashma-yi ‘Ayyûb à Boukhara et son prophète,” *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* Vol. 5-6 (1998), pp. 63-94.
- Babadjanov, Bakhtiyar and Muzaffar Kamilov. “Muhammadjân Hindûstânî (1892–1989) and the Beginning of the Great Schism among the Muslims of Uzbekistan,” in S.A. Dudoignon and H. Komatsu (eds.), *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), pp. 195–219.
- Babadjanov, Bakhtiyar. “Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan: a View from Within,” in Stéphane A. Dudoignon (ed.), *Devout Societies vs Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China through the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2004), pp. 39-60.
- Babadjanov, Bakhtiyar M. “The Economic and Religious History of a Kolkhoz Village: Khojawot from Soviet Modernisation to the Aftermath of the Islamic Revival,” in Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Christian Noack (eds.), *Allah’s Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realms* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2011), pp. 202-263.
- Babadjanov, Bakhtiyar M. “‘Paradise at the Feet of Mothers and Women:’ Soviet and Post-Soviet Discourses of Muslim Women’s Emancipation,” in Ch. Obiya (ed.), *Islam and Gender in Central Asia: Soviet Modernization and Today’s Society* (Kyoto: CIAS, Kyoto University, 2016), pp. 19–33.

- Babadzhanov, Bakhtiar and Michael Kemper. "Khindustani," in S. M. Prokhorov (ed.), *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi imperii. Ėntsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, tom I (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura RAN, 2006), pp. 426-428.
- Babadzhanov, Bakhtiar M., Ashirbek K. Muminov, Anke von Kūgelgen. *Disputy musul'manskikh avtoritetov v Tsentral'noi Azii* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2007).
- Babadzhanov Bakhtiar and Paolo Sartori. "U istokov sovetского diskursa o "khoroshem islame" v Tsentral'noi Azii," *Ab Imperio* (2018/3), pp. 219-255.
- Bar Sadeh, Roy. "Questioning Imperial Minority Rights: The General Islamic Conference of 1931 in Jerusalem and the Fate of Soviet Muslims," SICE Blog. "<https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/questioning-imperial-minority-rights-the-general-islamic-conference-of-1931-in-jerusalem-and-the-fate-of-soviet-muslims>"
- Bartol'd, V.V. *Sochineniia*, vol. VI: *Raboty po istorii islama i arabskogo khalifata* (ed. A.V. Khalidov) (Moscow: Nauka, 1966).
- Beisembiev, Timur K. *Annotated Indices to the Kokand Chronicles* (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa ILCAA, 2008).
- Bellamy, Carla. *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in An Ambiguously Islamic Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (ed.) *The Past as Resource in the Turkic Speaking World* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008).
- Bennigsen, Alexandre and S. Enders Wimbush. *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1985).
- Bertel's, Evgenii Ė. "Roman o sheikhe Nadzhm ad-Dine Kubra," in *Izbrannye trudy*, III, *Sufizm i sufiskaia literatura* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), pp. 329–334.

- Bustanov, Alfrid. "A Space for the Subject: Tracing Garden Culture in Muslim Russia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 65 No. 1-2 (2022), pp. 74-125.
- Collins, Cathleen. *Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads* (Oxford University Press 2023).
- Dağyeli, Jeanine Elif. »*Gott liebt das Handwerk*« *Moral, Identität und religiöse Legitimierung in der mittelasiatischen Handwerks-risāla* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2011).
- Dağyeli, Jeanine. "Wheat the Magnificent," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* Vol. 64 (2018), pp. 203-226.
- DeWeese, Devin. "The "Tadhkira-i Bughrā-khān" and the "Uvaysī" Sufis in Central Asia: Notes in Review of "Imaginary Muslims," *Central Asiatic Journal* Vol. 40 No. 1 (1996), pp. 87-127.
- DeWeese, Devin. "The "Mashāyikh-i Turk" and the "Khojagān:" Rethinking the Links between the Yasavī and Naqshbandī Sufi Traditions," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 7 No. 2 (1996), pp. 180-207.
- DeWeese, Devin. "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia: Descent Groups Linked to Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi in Shrine Documents and Genealogical Charters," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 31 (1999), pp. 507–530.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Sacred Places and 'Public' Narratives: The Shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavī Ṣūfī Order, 16th-17th Centuries," *Muslim World* Vol. 90 No. 3-4 (2000), pp. 353-376.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 13 No. 3 (2002), pp. 298-330.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Ahmad Yasavi and the *Divan-i Hikmat* in Soviet Scholarship," in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 262–290.

- DeWeese, Devin. "Survival Strategies: Reflections on the Notion of Religious 'Survivals' in Soviet Ethnographic Studies of Muslim Religious Life in Central Asia," in Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (eds.), *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Münster: Lit, 2012), pp. 35–58.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57 No. 2 (2014), pp. 326-363.
- DeWeese, Devin. "An 'Uvaysī' Hagiography from Eastern Turkistān: The *tadhkira* of Quṭb al-Dīn 'Irāqī," *Etudes orientales: Revue culturelle semestrielle* Vols. 27–28 (2016), pp. 15–86.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Mapping Khwārazmian Connections in the History of Sufi Traditions: Local Embeddedness, Regional Networks, and Global Ties of the Sufi Communities of Khwārazm," *Eurasian Studies* Vol. 14 No. 1–2 (2016), pp. 37–97.
- DeWeese, Devin. "A Khwārazmian Saint in the Golden Horde: Közlük Ata (Gözlī Ata) and the Social Vectors of Islamization," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* Vol. 143 (2018), pp. 1-22.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The 'Description of Khwārazm' and the Experience of Pilgrimage in 19th-Century Central Asia," in Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo G. Pinto (eds.), *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 183-218.
- DeWeese, Devin. "The Soviet Union in Islamic Studies: Some Reflections on Envisioning the USSR as a Religious Space," in Ron Sela, Paolo Sartori, and Devin DeWeese (eds.), *Muslim Religious Authority in Central Eurasia* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 17-68.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. and Sayyid Ahmad Qalandar, "'They Were All from the Country': The Revival and Politicisation of Islam in the Lower Wakhsh River Valley of the Tajik SSR (1947-1997),"

- in Stéphane A. Dudoignon and Christian Noack (eds.), *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realms* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2011), pp. 47-122.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. "Local Lore, the Transmission of Learning, and Communal Identity in Late 20th-Century Tajikistan: The *Khujand-nāma* of 'Ārifjān Yahyāzād Khujandī," in Dudoignon, Stéphane A. (ed.), *Devout Societies vs. Impious States?: Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russian Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2004), pp. 213–41.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. "From Revival to Mutation: The Religious Personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to Independence (1955–91)," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 30 (2011), pp. 53-80.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. "A Surrogate Aristocracy? Sufi Adab, Modernity, Rurality and Civilisation in Ex-Soviet Central Asia," in C. Mayeur-Jaouen (ed.), *Adab and Modernity: A 'Civilising Process'?* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 527–551.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. 'Holy Virgin Lands? Demographic Engineering, Heritage Management, and the Sanctification of Territories in ex-Soviet Central Asia, since WWII', in Eren Tasar, Jeff Eden, Allen J. Frank (eds.), *From the Khans' Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 358–408.
- Dudoignon, Stéphane A. "Gnosis as Dissent? In Soviet and Present-Day Tajikistan," *Journal of Central Asian History* Vol. 1 No. 2 (2022), pp. 273-308.
- Eden, Jeff and Paolo Sartori, Devin DeWeese, "Moving Beyond Modernism: Rethinking Cultural Change in Muslim Eurasia (19th-20th Centuries)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 59 No. 1-2 (2016), pp. 1-36.
- Eden, Jeff. *Warrior Saints of the Silk Road: Legends of the Qarakhanids* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

- Eden, Jeff. *God Save the USSR: Soviet and Muslims in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- Efthymiou, Marie. "The Qur'ān Manuscripts in the Al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, Republic of Uzbekistan. An Overview," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* Vol. 6 No. 1 (2015), pp. 1-16.
- Erkinov, Aftandil. "Le contrôle impérial des répertoires poétiques. La mise au pas des prédicateurs *maddāh* dans le Gouvernorat général du Turkestan (fin xixe-début xxe siècle)," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* 24 (2015), pp. 145-182.
- Exnerova, Vera. "Radical Islam from Below: The Mujaddidiya and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the Ferghana Valley," in Pauline Jones (ed.), *Islam Society, and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 55-76.
- Formichi, Chiara. *Islam in Asia: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- Frank, Allen J. *Gulag Miracles: Sufis and Stalinist Repression in Kazakhstan* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019).
- Frank, Allen J. "Sayaq Ata and the Antelopes: Game Animals as an Islamic Theme in Qazaq Hagiography," in Eren Tasar, Allen J. Frank and Jeff Eden (eds.), *From the Khan's Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese*, (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 409-434. eds.
- Frank, Allen and Jahangir Mamatov. *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Loisdale, C.T: Dunwoody Press, 2006).
- Garipova, Rozaliya. "From the Kolkhoz to the Pulpit: Rashida Abistay and Female Religious Authority in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 33 No. 1 (2021), pp. 35-71.
- Grant, Bruce. "Shrines and Sovereigns: Life, Death, and Religion in Azerbaijan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 53 No. 3 (2011), pp. 654-681.



- Green, Nile. “Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering History at the Sufi Shrine of Aurangabad,” *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 38 No. 2 (2004), pp. 419–446.
- Grehan, James. *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Gross, Jo-Ann. “The Biographical Tradition of Muḥammad Bashārā: Sanctification and Legitimation in Tajikistan,” in Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (eds.), *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 310-314.
- Ianes, Mariia. “Klavdiia Leont’eva Zadykhina – ètnograf, issledovatel’ Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana. K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia,” *Antropologicheskii forum* (2007/7), pp. 455-460.
- Idrisov, Abdusalim, Ashirbek Muminov, and Maria Szuppe. *Manuscrits en écriture arabe du Musée régional de Nukus (République autonome du Karakalpakstan, Ouzbékistan). Fonds arabe, persan, turkī et Karakalpak* (Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente C.A. Nallino, 2007).
- Jacquesson, Svetlana (ed.) *History Making in Central and Northern Eurasia: Contemporary Actors and Practices* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2016).
- Jansen, Hanna E. and Michael Kemper. “Hijacking Islam: The Search for a new Soviet Interpretation of Political Islam in 1980,” in M. Kemper and S. Conermann, *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 124-144.
- Kalinovsky, Artemy M. *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- Kamalov, S.K. and V.V. Germanova. “Sovetskaia Rossiia i Karakalpakii: Internatsional’noe sotrudnichestvo i bratskaia vzaimopomoshch,” *Obschestveniiie Nauki v Uzbekistane* (1983/1), pp. 1-10.

- Kamp, Marianne. "Where did the Mullahs Go? Oral Histories from Rural Uzbekistan," *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50 No. 3-4 (2010), pp. 503-531.
- Kehl-Bodrogi, Krisztina. "Religion is not so strong here:" *Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008).
- Keller, Shoshana. *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2001).
- Khalid, Adeeb. *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
- Khalid, Adeeb. "Review of *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* by Eren Tasar," *Slavic Review* 77 (2018), pp. 1035-1037.
- Khusnutdinov, Filipp. "From Soviet to Saudi: On Central Asian Ulama and the Hijra," SICE Blog, accessed online 02.04.2023 <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/from-soviet-to-saudi-on-central-asian-ulama-and-their-hijra>
- Khusnutdinov, Filipp. "Altin-khan tura: biobibliograficheski ocherk," *Journal of Central Asian History* Vol. 1 No. 2 (2022), pp. 329-338.
- Kleinmichel, Sigrid. *Halpa in Choresm (Hwārazm) und Ātin Āyi im Ferghanatal. Zur Geschichte des Lesens in Usbekistan im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2000).
- Klimentov, Vassily. *A Slow Reckoning: The USSR, the Afghan Communists, and Islam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024).
- Krämer, Annette. *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel: Studien über Frauenälteste (otin und xalfa) im unabhängigen Usbekistan* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2002).
- Liu, Morgan Y. *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

- Louw, Maria. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- Louw, Maria. "The Art of Interpreting Visionary Dreams," in Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Madeleine Reeves (eds.), *The Central Asian World* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 351-364.
- Luehrmann, Sonja. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Marsden, Magnus. *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Northern Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005).
- Melvin-Koushki, Matthew and James Pickett. "Mobilizing Magic: Occultism in Central Asia and the Continuity of High Persianate Culture under Russian Rule," *Studia Islamica* Vol. 111 (2016), pp. 231-284.
- Morrison, Alexander. "Sufism, Panislamism and Information Panic. Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising," *Past & Present* Vol. 214 No. 1 (2012), pp. 275-304.
- Ogudin, V.L. "Tron Solomona. Istoriia formirovaniia kul'ta," in S.N. Abashin and V.O. Bobrovnikov (eds.), *Podvizhniki islama. Kul't sviatykh i sufizm v Srednei Azii i na Kavkaze* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003), 69-102.
- Ohayon, Isabelle. "Documenting Kazakh Funeral Rituals through Material Life Indicators (1960s-1980s)," *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 83-106.
- Olcott, Martha B. "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia," *Carnegie Papers* 77, January 2007.
- O'zbek tili izohli lughati*, ikki tomli (Moscow: Russkii Iazyk, 1981).
- Paul, Jürgen. "The Histories of Samarqand," *Studia Iranica* Vol. 22 (1993), pp. 82-92.

- Penati, Beatrice. "On the Local Origins of the Soviet Attack on "Religious" *Waqf* in the Uzbek SSR (1927)," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* Vol. 36 (2015), pp. 39-72.
- Peris, Daniel. *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- Pianciola, Niccolò and Paolo Sartori. "*Waqf* in Turkestan: The Colonial Legacy and the Fate of an Islamic Institution in Early Soviet Central Asia, 1917-1924," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 26 No. 4 (2007), pp. 475-498.
- Pickett, James. *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).
- Privratsky, Bruce G. *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001).
- Rasanayagam, Johan. *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Renard, John. *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- Ro'i, Yaacov. *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 2000).
- Ross, Danielle. "Copying Islam: Constructing a New Soviet Islam through the Re-production of Religious Texts in the South Urals," *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 51-81.
- Salmonov, Ahmadjon. *O'zbekistonda Sovet hokimiyatining diniy siyosati: Uydirma va tarikh haqiqati (1917-1960 yillari)* (Tashkent: Tafakkur, 2015).
- Sartori, Paolo. "Towards a History of the Muslims' Soviet Union: A View from Central Asia," *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50 No. 3-4 (2010), pp. 315-334.

- Sartori, Paolo. *Visions of Justice: Sharī‘a and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- Sartori, Paolo. “Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 30 (2019), pp. 367-405.
- Sartori, Paolo. “From the Demotic to the Literary: The Ascendance of the Vernacular Turkic in Central Asia (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries),” *Eurasian Studies* Vol. XVIII (2020), pp. 213-254.
- Sartori, Paolo. “‘On the Importance of Having a Method:’ Reading Atheistic Documents on Islamic Revival in 1950s Central Asia,” in Eren Tasar, Jeff Eden, Allen J. Frank (eds.), *From the Khans’ Oven: Studies on the History of Central Asian Religions in Honor of Devin DeWeese* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 284-322.
- Sartori, Paolo. “Why Soviet Islam Matters,” *Geistes-, sozial-, und kulturwissenschaftlicher Anzeiger* Vols. 157-158 (2022-2023), pp. 5-24.
- Sartori, Paolo and Bakhtiyar Babajanov. “Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 62 No. 1 (2019), pp. 1-65.
- Sartori Paolo and Ulfat Abdurasulov. *Seeking Justice at the Court of the Khans of Khiva (19th- Early 20th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020)
- Sartori Paolo and Pavel Shablei. “Delo Mukhammada Sharifa: Rossiiskaia imperiia i sufizm v Kazakhskoi stepi v seredine XIX veka,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* Vol. 64 No. 3-4 (2023), pp. 561-595.
- Schlögel, Karl. *The Soviet Century: Archaeology of a Lost World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023).
- Shanazarova, Aziza. “The Making of Qīz Bībī in Central Asia’s Oral Shrine Traditions: From the Great Lady to a Fourteen-Year-Old Virgin,” in Chiara Formichi (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 94-108.

- Shanazarova, Aziza. "The Book of Women's Rituals: The Central Asian Adaptation of the 'Aqā'id al-nisā'," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 33 No. 2 (2022), pp. 317-333.
- Shaw, Charles. "Soldiers' Letters to Inobatxon and O'g'ulxon: Gender and Nationality in the Birth of a Soviet Romantic Culture," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* Vol. 17 No. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 517-552.
- Smolkin-Rothrock, Victoria. "The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion, and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism," *The Russian Review* Vol. 73 No. 22 (2014), pp. 171-197.
- Smolkin, Victoria. *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- Subtelny, Maria Eva. "The Works of Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī as a Source for the Study of Sufism in Late 15th- and Early 16th-Century Central Asia," in Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (ed.), *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 98-118.
- Taneja, Anand Vivek. *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).
- Tasar, Eren. *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- Tasar, Eren. "Sufism on the Soviet Stage: Holy People and Places in Central Asia's Socio-Political Landscape After World War II," in Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (ed.), *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 256-283.
- Tasar, Eren. "Mantra: A Review Essay on Islam in Soviet Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 63 (2020), pp. 389-433.
- Tasar, Eren. "Pious Lives of Soviet Muslims," in Chiara Formichi (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 296-309.

- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- Thum, Rian. *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- Thum, Rian. "What is Islamic History?" *History and Theory* 57 (2019), pp. 7-19.
- Tosun, Necdet. "Ahmed Yesevî'nin Menâkıbı," *İLAM Araştırma Dergisi*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (Ocak-Haziran, 1998), pp. 7381.
- Tyson, David. "The Role of Unofficial Audio Media in Contemporary Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 13 No. 2 (1994), pp 283-294.
- Wanner, Catherine (ed.). *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Wensinck, A.J. and H.A.R. Gibb. "'Arafa," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden: Brill, 2012).
- Zadeh, Travis. "Commanding Demons and Jinns: The Exorcist in Early Islamic Thought," in Alireza Korangy and Dan Sheffield (eds.), *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.'s 70 Birthday* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), pp. 131-160.
- Yo'ldoshkho'jaev, Haydarkhon and Irodakhon Qayumova. *O'zbekiston ulamolari* (Tashkent: Movarounnahr, 2015).
- Zhdanko, Tat'iana A. "Étnograficheskie issledovaniia Khorezmskoi ékspeditsii (narody, problemy, trudy)," in M.A. Itina, Iu.A. Rapoport, N.S. Tsycheva, B.I. Vainberg (eds.), *Kul'tury i isskustvo drevnego Khorezma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), pp. 21-40.
- Ziad, Waleed. *The Hidden Caliphate: Sufi Saints Beyond the Oxus and Indus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021).

## **INDEX**



## A

- Abdulkhokim Qori ... 125–133
- Afghan resistance, see also *mujahideen* ... 33
- Afghanistan ... 11, 33–34, 38, 92, 131, 217, 254, 274, 286, 294–295, 300, 316, 324
- Al-Azhar ... 84, 99, 293
- albasti* ... 210, 252–253
- All-Union ‘Knowledge’ Society, see *Znanie*
- Andijan Rebellion (1898) ... 50–51
- Andijan, city and province 134
- Andropov, Yuri ... 198
- animal sacrifice, see also sacrifice ... 87, 161, 193, 223, 258,
- anti-religious campaign (1959–1964) ... 109, 114, 142, 157–158
- Arabic language ... xv, 3, 59, 67, 71, 149, 166, 268, 289, 293, 299, 308, 314, 321
- Arabic script ... xv–xvi, 14, 26, 28, 36, 38, 54, 56, 60, 63, 65, 76, 79, 83, 94, 109, 156, 292, 310
- Architecture Directorate ... 12
- atheism ... 5–18, 26, 162, 186, 198–202, 217, 267–271, 302, 305, 323
- atheistic propaganda ... 199, 241, 266–267, 303
- avliyo / awliyā’* ... 65, 135, 152–153, 164, 178

## B

- Baraq Khan madrasa ... 55, 287
- Basilov, Vladimir ... 254, 258–259
- bazaars ... 51–52, 127
- beggars ... 127, 188
- Bennigsen, Alexandre ... 33, 234
- Beruniy ... 172, 176, 181, 185–192, 201
- Bibi mushkil-gushod* ... 140
- Bishkek ... 61
- Bobokhonov, Eshon ibn Abdumajidkhon ... 54, 57–60, 73–80, 90–91, 99, 102, 131
- Bobokhonov, Shamsuddin ... 82–83, 125, 130–131, 134, 299, 310–311
- Bobokhonov, Ziyouddin ... 42, 49, 63–64, 74, 79–81, 87, 101–102, 113–114, 117–118, 124, 127, 290,

- Bukhara, city and province ... 12, 55, 66–67, 69, 84, 105–106, 108, 147, 149, 235, 268, 287, 293
- Al-Bukhari, imam ... 285–286, 290–291, 296
- C**
- CARC, *see* Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults ... 13–16, 22–24, 28–33, 43, 54–55, 59–64, 72, 75, 78–70, 83–84, 86–87, 91, 98–105, 111–113, 119, 137, 164, 181, 186–191, 195, 205, 222, 233, 266–269, 274–276, 278–279, 285, 288–290, 292, 297–314
- cemeteries ... 47, 82, 183–190, 195, 268, 279, 302
- census ... 155
- charity, *see also fitr- sadaqa; zakat* ... 47, 138
- children ... 10, 43, 114, 121–122, 127, 134, 160–161, 187, 194, 205, 221, 234, 236, 244, 248, 255–257, 262, 266–268, 286–287, 298–302, 309–310, 318
- chiltan* ... 255–259
- churches ... 8, 12, 16, 29, 266–271, 300–302
- circumambulation ... 167, 243
- circumcision ... 102, 112, 205
- clergy ... 16, 22–23, 60, 64, 75, 92, 101–102, 113, 134, 151, 186, 188, 270, 272, 285, 291, 301, 307
- collective farms ... 10, 16, 25, 42, 62, 86, 107–109, 112, 139, 163, 185, 191–193, 223, 233, 263, 272, 278, 278–281, 283, 286, 287, 302, 308, 310, 317–318
- colonialism ... 49
- Communist Party of Uzbekistan ... 75, 191, 199
- constitution ... 10, 36, 101, 144, 266–267, 273, 276, 279, 305
- Cultural Revolution ... 21, 92
- Cyrillic ... xv–xvi, 26, 197, 292,
- D**
- dev* ... 210, 226, 257
- DeWeese, Devin ... 216
- disciples, *see also murids* ... 67, 73, 147, 170, 240
- din, diniy* ... 13–14, 116, 282, 287–288,
- dogmatics ... 25, 28, 116, 288, 293, 306, 310–311
- Dunbaev, Shermurot ... 285–288, 299
- Dushanbe, city and province 2–3, 293, 298
- dust ... 50, 68, 129, 236

## E

- Eden, Jeff ... 22  
Egypt ... 92, 293, 314  
'*eid al-adha*, see also Feast of Sacrifice ... 20  
'*eid al-fitr*, see also Ramadan ... 102  
*eshon* ... 46, 52, 54, 59, 62, 205–206, 235, 255–258, 283, 319  
ethnography ... 25, 33, 37–38, 110, 123, 142, 153, 167, 172, 175, 203, 216–217, 229, 241, 253  
executive committees ... 27, 197, 266, 276–278, 281, 293, 297, 304–305  
exorcism ... xvi, 37, 50, 87, 153, 155, 210–212, 216, 219–220, 223, 229, 234, 240, 247–248, 278  
exorcist, see also *pork-hon* ... 61, 210–211, 224–225, 240, 242–243, 245, 247–250, 254, 256–258, 260

## F

- fasting, see also Ramadan ... 15  
*fatwas* ... 12, 42, 49, 53–55, 56, 58–63, 67–68, 74, 77, 79–83, 93–94, 99, 101–103, 108, 115, 124, 127, 188, 212–213, 310–311

- Feast of Sacrifice ... 20, 61, 77, 102, 181, 184, 201, 233, 289, 297  
*fitna* ... 125–131  
*fitr-sadaqa* ... 102, 113  
freedom of conscience ... 10, 14, 266, 269, 294, 300  
Frunze, see Bishkek ... 61  
fundamentalism ... 34, 84, 109, 116, 134–135, 192, 314  
funeral prayer and rites, see also *janoza* ... 13, 31, 107, 109, 114, 119, 300

## G

- Great Terror (1937–1938) ... 19, 21, 59, 72, 92, 216

## H

- hajj* ... 17, 55, 69, 120–122  
Hanafism ... 63, 73, 97, 124, 131–132, 321  
Hast Imom ... 55  
healers ... 147, 221–222, 255–257, 263  
Hindustoniy, Muhammadjon ... 2–5  
historiography ... 25, 321  
holy men ... 46, 65–66, 225, 245, 283, 317  
holy places ... 32, 63, 67–68, 73, 79, 82–83, 118, 145, 151–152, 155, 159, 181, 187–188, 192–193, 196, 203, 230, 253, 278, 280, 301

holy war ... 4, 28, 124

*hijra* ... 3

*hujra* ... 3, 307

## I

Idrisov, Rahmatulloh ... 84–87

imams ... 2–3, 13–17, 27,  
60–61, 64, 81, 93–95, 99,  
103, 106, 109–112, 117–120,  
122, 125, 127–128, 133,  
135–137, 149–151, 174,  
188, 242, 280, 285–301,  
307, 318–319, 322

Inoghomov, N. ... 13–14,  
79–80, 101

Iran, see also Islamic Revolution (1979) ... 38, 131,  
217, 274, 300, 309

*ishanizm* ... 50–51

## J

*jinn* ... 86, 210, 212–214,  
219–226, 234, 246, 253–  
254, 343–344

## K

Kazakhstan ... 57, 61, 90, 111,  
113, 117, 135, 142–143, 260,  
322

Khanqa ... 149, 175, 242–243,  
247–248,

Khiva ... 26, 44, 60, 104, 142,  
151, 156–160, 163, 167, 175,  
204, 218, 245–246, 251, 308–  
309, 316–320

Kho'ja Ismoil Bukhoriy  
mosque ... 285

Kho'ja Yusuf Hama-  
doniy ... 42–44, 78, 87,  
308–310

Khoqand, city and prov-  
ince ... 2, 68, 125, 127

Khorezm ... xvi, 42, 112, 142,  
146, 156–161, 164, 166,  
168–169, 174–178, 187,  
198, 201, 203–204, 212,  
217–218, 221, 226, 230,  
241, 245, 254, 257, 259,  
264, 316–317

Khrushchev, Nikita ... 22, 42,  
73, 80, 84, 112, 114, 158,  
164, 167, 291

Knorozov, Yuri ... 146, 153,  
155, 163, 217–241, 247,  
250, 263–264

Köhneurgench ... 142, 232

*kolkhozes*, see also collective  
farms ... 260, 278, 280,  
283, 288

Komsomol ... 13, 43, 186,  
268, 272–273, 302

Kuroedov, Vladimir ... 64,  
266, 276, 290, 303, 305

## L

legislation on religion ... 186,  
276–277

**M**

- mahallas* ... 14, 94, 108–109, 113, 118, 121–122, 127, 131–134, 272
- Makhdum-i A'zam ... 286, 291
- maktab* ... 21, 188, 289
- marriage / *nikoh* ... 138, 300
- Mashrab ... 259, 321
- mazars, see also shrines ... 84, 86, 157, 185, 194, 242,
- Mazlumkhon Suluu ... 185, 190, 202, 229, 232–237
- Mecca, see hajj ... 17, 69, 71, 73, 120–121, 171, 175, 322
- Mir-i arab madrasa ... 84, 106, 287, 293
- Momokhol ... 254–259, 327
- mosques ... 2-3, 8, 12–17, 23–26, 32–35, 38, 44–45, 60–61, 73–74, 79, 81, 94, 99, 100, 102, 103, 111–113, 118, 124–127, 131–140, 147, 149, 153, 163, 167, 174, 185, 188, 242, 253, 269, 271, 272–274, 277–279, 281–283, 285–289–294, 297–299, 302–307, 311, 314, 317–319, 321–322
- mountains, holy ... 68–69, 74–75, 170, 172–173, 176
- muezzin ... 27, 292
- muhtasib* ... 12
- mujahideen* ... 4, 33
- mullahs ... 16, 24, 35, 38, 44, 50, 60, 62, 64, 95–97, 105, 111–1116, 118–119, 122, 124–128, 132, 134, 136, 138, 151, 154, 173–174, 185, 226–227, 235, 248, 250, 253, 257, 269, 277, 281, 293, 301–311
- murid* ... 64, 71
- mutavalli* ... 12, 27, 94, 103, 292

**N**

- Najm al-Din  
Kubra ... 164–174
- Namangan, city and province ... 42, 60, 126, 131–134
- namoz* ... 133, 282
- Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya ... 48–49, 87
- Narimjon Bobo ... 163–164, 181, 183, 185, 187–188, 192–198
- nationalities ... 26, 202
- Nauka i Religiia*, see also *Science and Religion* ... 311
- nikoh* ... 138, 273, 300
- NKVD ... 3, 55, 59, 92
- Nukus ... 19, 23, 38, 169, 187, 191, 193–194, 196, 223, 317
- Nurushev, A. ... 181, 183–184, 186

## O

- Olimkhon to'ra, see  
Shokirkho'jayev
- Osh, city and province ... 68–  
70, 74–75, 77–78, 80, 84,  
92–93, 99, 110, 125
- otin-oyi* ... 95, 114–117,  
120–122, 124

## P

- paranji* ... 99
- pari* ... 210–211, 218, 220–  
221, 225, 249
- People's Democratic Party of  
Afghanistan ... 34
- perestroika ... 3, 132–133,  
206, 282
- Persian language ... xv, 5, 46,  
68, 71, 166, 218, 253, 289,  
314, 321, 324, 340
- pilgrimage ... 17, 42, 65,  
68–70, 73–75, 101, 106,  
117–118, 120–121, 151, 158,  
160–162, 164, 166–167,  
173–174, 187, 190, 192–  
194, 196, 205, 233, 243, 322
- Polianskii, Ivan ... 60, 79–80
- porkhon* ... 61, 114, 155,  
218–229, 233–240, 246,  
250, 252, 257
- Pravda* ... 112
- prayers ... 2, 44, 61–62, 67,  
82, 100, 103, 107, 109,  
112–114, 121, 124, 127,  
132–133, 153, 163, 175,

- 187–188, 212, 214, 232,  
235, 237, 240, 248, 251–  
252, 256, 262, 272, 278,  
281, 297–299, 303–304, 310

- prosecution, prosecu-  
tors ... 196, 205, 267, 272,  
283, 305–308

## Q

- qadi ... 5, 12, 16, 61–62, 71,  
76, 77, 79, 90, 105, 118–119,  
132–133
- Qaraqalpaqstan ... 19–20, 23,  
64, 81, 84, 87, 117, 157,  
172, 178, 181, 186, 189,  
197, 199, 202, 217, 229,  
268, 289, 316–318
- Qdyrbaev, R. ... 189–196, 289
- Qur'an ... 4, 22, 26, 28, 47,  
49, 56–57, 59, 63, 66, 68,  
73, 75, 84, 99, 109, 114,  
116, 120, 124, 140, 146,  
167, 173–174, 187–188,  
192, 196, 194, 211, 222,  
228, 245, 253, 262, 268,  
289, 294, 296–297, 308,  
310, 321
- qurultoy* ... 12, 53

## R

- Rahimjonov,  
Usmonjon ... 293–299
- Ramadan ... 15, 52, 99, 102,  
106, 114, 148, 153, 187–  
189, 201, 272

registration ... 16–17, 23, 33,  
38, 84, 100, 113, 269, 274,  
281–282, 285–286, 290–  
293, 301–308, 319  
religion ... 7–10, 22, 28–29,  
32, 48, 56–57, 99, 101,  
113–114, 139–140, 149,  
151 152, 164, 186, 192,  
198–200, 205, 215, 241,  
262, 266–267, 269–273,  
276–277, 280, 282, 290,  
295–296, 300, 302, 305–306  
religious literature ... 159,  
188, 300, 302, 306, 308  
*risolas* ... 80, 310  
ritual prayer, see *namaz* ...  
107, 298  
rituals ... 4, 7–9, 13, 22, 24,  
31, 35–36, 48, 50, 53, 57–  
58, 63–66, 68–70, 72, 74,  
82, 87, 99, 102, 106, 107,  
117–119, 121, 124, 126–127,  
129, 131, 155, 164, 173,  
187, 193, 205, 219, 223,  
225–227, 235, 242, 244,  
247–251, 257–259, 298,  
315, 326, 335, 340–343  
Russian Empire ... 3  
Russian language ... xv-xvi,  
26, 28, 65, 71, 108, 181, 236  
Rustamov, Usmon ... 300–304  
Rzaev, Q. ... xi, 184–186

## S

sacrifice, see also Feast of  
Sacrifice ... 161, 193, 223,  
258  
SADUM ... 12–18, 21–29,  
35–36, 42–46, 48, 52–65,  
70–139, 147, 158, 188–189,  
280, 288, 291–294, 299  
Safarov, Bobojon ... 156–159,  
161–166, 170, 172, 174,  
176, 178, 204  
saints ... 36, 38, 44, 46–47,  
55, 66–67, 70, 73, 78–81,  
83, 97, 104–105, 117, 127,  
129, 131, 135–136, 145,  
149, 151–152, 154–155,  
156–161, 163, 185, 189,  
204–205, 217–219, 228,  
230, 237, 245, 258  
Samarqand, city and prov-  
ince ... 38, 62, 67, 83, 100,  
102, 112, 121–122, 136,  
149, 190, 235, 253, 266,  
268, 271–272, 274, 279,  
281–283, 285–288, 290–  
292, 299–303, 305–308  
*samizdat* ... 307  
Saudi Arabia ... 28, 92  
scientific atheism ... 162, 199  
scientific materialism ... 190,  
192, 215, 218  
secret police ... 3, 92  
Shamun Nabi ... 178, 190,  
229–237

- sharia ... 21, 24, 48, 54,  
 57–58, 61, 63, 74, 77, 81–  
 82, 93, 96, 103, 105–106,  
 108–109, 113–124, 128–129,  
 137–140, 155, 160–161,  
 212–213, 294
- Sheikh Muhammad Sodiq Mu-  
 hammad Yusuf ... 97, 132
- sheikhs (figures at  
 shrines) ... 42–44, 50,  
 58–59, 77–78, 81, 84–87,  
 97, 101, 142–143, 149–151,  
 154, 156, 161–162, 166,  
 179, 182, 185, 188, 193–  
 194, 201–202, 205–206,  
 230, 232, 235–238, 240–  
 242, 292, 308, 310
- Shirinbaev, Sharif ... 22, 43,  
 100–102
- shirk* ... 48, 124, 129
- Shokirkho'jayeov, Olimkhon  
 To'ra ... 5, 61, 71–81
- Shokirov, Yusufkhon ... 74, 99
- Shrines ... 11–17, 26, 32,  
 35–37, 42–53, 62, 65–70,  
 72, 74–75, 77–79, 81–87,  
 93–96, 100–107, 116–118,  
 120–121, 124, 127–130,  
 135–136, 140–165, 170–  
 205, 229–236, 242–245,  
 250, 257, 268, 272, 280,  
 285–292, 299, 306, 308–314
- Snesarev, Gleb ... 26, 149–  
 151, 167, 175–180, 205,  
 217, 241–261
- Solomon's Throne ... 68–80
- Sottiev, Ismail Makh-  
 dum ... 42–46, 78, 83–84,  
 87, 99
- springs, holy ... 63, 245, 278
- Stebliuk, Yuri ... 142–143
- Sufism ... 35, 45–48, 50–51,  
 53–54, 56, 58, 63–64, 72,  
 81, 83, 100, 107, 216, 219,  
 234, 245, 310, 321
- Sukarno ... 291
- Sulton bobo ... 84–85, 117,  
 171–195, 201, 206–207
- T**
- tabib* ... 147, 221
- Tajikistan ... 42, 76, 81, 293,  
 322
- Tasar, Eren ... 13, 16, 28–29,  
 54, 71, 75, 91, 96–97, 100,  
 112, 136, 269
- Tashkenbaev, To'ymur-  
 od ... 62, 112, 279–281,  
 285, 292, 304, 306
- Tashkent, city and prov-  
 ince ... 12–15, 23, 35, 38,  
 42, 45, 55, 71–72, 77–79,  
 84, 91, 101, 108–110, 116,  
 118, 120–121, 134–136,  
 139, 147, 149, 151, 155,  
 269, 272–273, 276, 283,  
 287–288, 291, 297, 306–  
 307, 309, 314, 322
- taxes ... 38, 100, 102, 112,  
 121, 185, 269, 280, 317



To'raev,

Khamdam ... 306–307

To'rtqo'l ... 20

Turkestan ... 50–52, 71, 92,  
117, 178, 210, 226

Turkmenistan ... 42, 44,  
81–83, 142, 157, 163, 165,  
167, 177, 188, 218, 232, 319

## U

ulama ... xvi, 13, 22, 24–26,  
35, 46, 48, 51, 53, 55,  
57–58, 65, 70, 72, 78–79,  
91–92, 9698, 100, 102, 104,  
109, 112, 130–131, 149,  
151, 155, 233, 280, 290,  
294, 311, 314, 323

Urgench ... 42–44, 146, 163,  
223, 242–243, 245, 251

Uzbek language ... xv, xvi,  
6, 13–14, 26, 28, 36, 54,  
56, 60, 65, 71, 76, 79, 83,  
93–94, 107, 156, 314

## V

veiling, see *paranji*

## W

Wahhabism ... 124, 131,  
134–135, 282

## Y

Yasavi, Ahmad ... 107,  
116–117, 143, 226, 228, 250,  
309, 321

## Z

*zakot* ... 121, 138

Zangi Ata ... 116–117

*zikr* ... 48, 63, 68, 93, 107,  
117–118, 219–220, 229, 234,  
237–238, 240, 257

*ziyosat* ... 65–67, 71, 117, 128

*Znanie* ... 95, 189, 267

*A Soviet Sultanate* is the first English-language social history of Islam in Soviet Central Asia after WWII, and it focuses on a key question: what did it mean to be a Muslim in Socialist Uzbekistan? The notion that in the eyes of many Soviet citizens Socialist Uzbekistan was an abode of Islam forms the book's framing device for understanding how the atheist project of the Soviet empire ultimately failed, but also how it simultaneously helped shape the range of meanings of Muslimness. The book's central aim is to tell an epic narrative of resilience, resistance and subversion. It follows men and women who did not genuflect before the aggressive policies of forced secularization and did not abandon their sense of commitment to the otherworldly. By triangulating the bureaucratic output of atheist institutions with unpublished ethnography, hagiographical literature, and petitions addressed by Uzbeks to the Soviet muftis in Tashkent, *A Soviet Sultanate* brings together vignettes portraying lives lived in the company of God and His prophet, together with a teeming cast of saints, angels, and evil spirits.

**Paolo Sartori** is Senior Research Associate at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, where he also serves as the Chairman of the Committee for the Study of Islam in Central Eurasia (1552–2000s).

ISBN 978-3-7001-9430-9



Made in Europe