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ISLAM IN ASIA: PEOPLE, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS

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WEEK 3

Islam in Central Asia

For most of the 20th century, the Soviet Union suppressed Islam in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It closed mosques and Muslim schools, abolished Islamic courts, outlawed polygamy, waged a campaign to eradicate wearing of the veil, taught atheism and restricted contact with the outside Muslim world. Nevertheless, many Muslims in the Soviet Union continued to teach Islam and practice Muslim rituals in private. Then near the end of the Soviet Union, mosques reopened and Central Asians rekindled ties with the rest of the Muslim world. Yet after the fall of the Soviet Union, independent Central Asian governments enacted renewed restrictions on Islam to promote private devotion and prevent outside Islamic influences and extremism.

Between 1994 and 2000, I studied Arabic and Islamic law in the Near East and North Africa. I often heard in passing and saw as graffiti and in documents the Muslim profession of faith (*shahada*), heard the call to prayer five times a day (*salat*) and saw people praying in streets outside of overcrowded mosques. I saw boxes for alms giving (*sadaqa*) at the entrances of mosques and attended lively celebrations to end the daily fast during the month of Ramadan. I knew several people who completed the *hajj* to Mecca and received prayer beads from friends who had recently returned. In short, Islam was very visible.

When I first lived in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, it seemed quite the opposite; Islam was not very visible. I rarely heard the *shahada* or *salat*, saw fewer mosques and *sadaqa* boxes, knew only a few people who fasted during *Ramadan* and did not know anyone who completed the *hajj*. Based on these comparative observations, I thought Central Asians were not good Muslims. Today I realize there are many ways to understand and practice Islam, all of which are influenced by historical, cultural and political factors.

Due in part to the historical factors discussed above, many Muslims in Central Asia express their devotion inwardly.

In one small city in northern Kyrgyzstan, for example, 300-400 men gather at a local mosque several times a week to share *osh* (Central Asian rice pilaf). They do so to celebrate a wedding or remember someone who recently died, but sharing *osh* also serves as an expression of their faith. Before eating, they each perform the *amin* (a cultural practice of running the palms of your hands down in front of your face). After eating, male Muslim leaders (*domla*) recite the Quran and offer one prayer for the family of the wedding couple or deceased and another for the consumed food. During the prayers, each man holds his hands together in a cupping shape open toward heaven and concludes again with the *amin*. Similarly, some Central Asian women quietly invoke the name of God before performing a task or discreetly perform the *amin* while passing a cemetery. Witnessing such expressions of Islam means more to me now.

Muslims throughout Central Asia perform other private rituals to worship God and appeal to him for help. Some Uzbek and Tajik women, for example, meet with women Muslim leaders (*otin-oyi*) who recite the Quran and give advice. Others meet with Muslim healers. Muslims also visit sacred nature spots in Kyrgyzstan and the many ancient shrines in Uzbekistan. Some Turkmen and Kazakh families



(*xojas*) trace their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad or one of his four successors and use their influence to bless others.

While these Central Asian practices are inconspicuous and often performed in private, they are no less Muslim than the practices I saw and heard so tangibly in other Muslim parts of the world.

Next week:

Ethnic diversity among China's Muslims

Above: Kalon Juma Mosque in Bukhara, Uzbekistan

Photo by Marta Mikkelsen