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Private Initiative, Religious Education, and Family Values: A Case Study of a Brides' School in Tashkent

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Key Points

- Some aspects of Islam, namely those linked to 'national traditions,' have been rehabilitated by the Uzbek government, which sees in Islam an element of its narrative about the Uzbek ahistorical national identity.
- However, in practice, the state authoritarian rule persecutes extremist religious activities and raises suspicion against anything considered 'too' Islamic, both in terms of ideology and faith practices.
- Religious education is very strictly controlled and limited. Small scale religious education at home is tolerated to a certain degree, when taught by women.
- The contemporary Uzbek Muslim identity is not based on a literal reading of the Quran, but rather on the everyday practice of religious rituals, knowledge from local mullahs, and social practices.
- The issue of transmitting religion as a faith and knowledge, and as a practice, is at the core of current debates about interpretative and subjective experiences of Islam.
- The brides' school thus serves as a space not only for basic moral and religious education of the youth, but also for other useful things such as matchmaking, networking, and starting up business initiatives.
- A *kelin* (bride) has a very low, if not the lowest status, in the family and kinship networks as well as in her neighborhood of residence.

Introduction: Islam in Uzbekistan

The status of Islam in Uzbekistan is complex. The majority of the population is Muslim, but the state promotes secular and democratic principles of governance. Some aspects of Islam, namely those linked to 'national traditions,' have been rehabilitated by the Uzbek government, which sees in Islam an element of its narrative about the Uzbek ahistorical national identity.[1] However, in practice, the state authoritarian rule persecutes extremist religious activities and raises suspicion against anything considered 'too' Islamic, both in terms of ideology and faith practices. The 'good' Islam is submissive to the state authority and limited to irregular visits to officially recognized mosques, while any other means of religious expression is considered a 'bad' and 'false' conception of Islam.[2] Religious education is very strictly controlled and limited. Small scale religious education at home is tolerated to a certain degree, when taught by women. Informal religious gatherings of male religious leaders and ulemas were already well known in the Fergana Valley in early 1970s, and these circles gained even more prominence in the last two decades.[3]

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Decades of atheism promoted by the Soviet regime have left their traces in the daily arrangements and practices of people in post-Soviet Muslim states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the so-called 'return' of religion was visible mainly in family-related and gender issues,[4] and in reassessing the role of religion in defining national and social identity. The contemporary Uzbek Muslim identity is not based on a literal reading of the Quran, but rather on the everyday practice of religious rituals, knowledge from local mullahs, and social practices that are considered to be traditional and therefore respected. The issue of transmitting religion as a faith and knowledge, and as a practice, is at the core of current debates about interpretative and subjective experiences of Islam.[5]

Nonetheless, there is still a gap in the literature, which overlooks practices that take place in more closed, and private spheres of community life. These initiatives remain discreet, as the state authorities often decry them as part of a broader Islamic threat. However, they deeply shape the social fabric at the local level and play a key role in circulating and interiorizing what are considered to be social norms and morality in post-Soviet Uzbek society.

This paper presents a case study of a school for brides that a woman involved in a variety of migrants' networks organized. Migrants who moved from various parts of Uzbekistan to Tashkent have formed their networks and communities in the capital. Sarvinoz educates youth and their parents about Islam and how to become a proper Muslim; in her school she teaches Arabic and one's duties as a proper Muslim. This case study sheds light on micro-efforts on the ground to bring the Islam back to daily life.

A trajectory of female leadership

Sarvinoz is a woman in her early 50s who has two daughters and a son. She was a gynecologist by profession and practiced until she was married. She was the seventh *kelin*[6] (bride) in a large family with eleven sons. Before moving to Tashkent and opening the school, Sarvinoz demonstrated unusual qualities and organizational capabilities, especially considering her status as *kelin* who conventionally would not have enough independence from her husband and in-laws to do anything beyond her household and family

matters. The events she organized involved young unmarried and married women getting together for tea and discussing problems, or other similar social activities. Sarvinoz pointed to the fact that all *kelin*s lived in the same house as their parents-in-law, which was very challenging for her. She spoke at length about the difficulties, as she put it, of coping with her "very strict" mother in-law and living together with "very different" women under the same roof. She was a very "exemplary" (*obratzoviy*) *kelin* and was respected for that. She had been well educated, was open minded (*ochiq*), and very active in organizing social events with the people around her.

Her experience of being one of many *kelin*s helped her to learn diplomacy in order to 'keep the peace' in the family and gave her much of the knowledge she now shares with the young women around her. As a result, she initiated social gatherings of young girls among her relatives and friends to talk about different matters that were of primary concern for any future *kelin*. Parents—especially mothers—were happy to send their daughters to attend those social gatherings. First of all, girls would get to know each other better and secondly, they would be noticed in the environment of families with 'good standing', such as the in-laws of Sarvinoz herself. In turn, being seen in 'good' or 'elite/higher class' circles of families, and learning such 'important' matters, would offer better chances for a successful marriage. Finally, the knowledge these girls acquire at Sarvinoz's gatherings is one thing that their busy mothers must teach them.

As for Sarvinoz, she was interested in enhancing her reputation among the parents of the girls, which would earn her recognition as somebody more than a *kelin* in a family within her immediate social surroundings. Her new social engagement also gave her incentives to spend her free time in a more interesting way than merely sitting at home and serving her parents-in-law, deprived of a job. In addition, she did not have her own children for more than ten years, which left her freer than others who were busy rearing children from the first year of their marriage. Sarvinoz had to adopt a child after ten or twelve years. Immediately after the adoption, she became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. After another five or six years she gave birth to a son.

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A brides' school…for all

Sarvinoz gained popularity as an organizer of the brides' school already in her home town and the number of her listeners grew. She continued her school in Tashkent in her little office—a two room flat on the first floor of an apartment house in Tashkent, situated in front of her husband's office.[7] The school was now open not only for girls, but also for boys and mothers. It aimed to prepare good *kelin*s, husbands and mothers in-law. For the girls, the stakes are high. A *kelin* has a very low, if not the lowest status, in the family and kinship networks as well as in her neighborhood of residence. She is never called by name and only recognized as a '*kelin* of so and so'. Later when she lives separately from her in-laws, she will be called a wife of so and so. Only after she has already married off her daughters and sons, and became a mother in-law herself, will she finally be called by name and given a full social status.

Although the school widened its range of listeners and attendees, they were all part of Sarvinoz's surrounding networks (*faqat ozlarimiznikilar*/ only our own people).[8] She stated that "there are no strangers *(chujoylar)* in the classroom". I attended several classes for both girls and boys, but did not have a chance to attend those for mothers-in-law. During classes both boys and girls

learned how to write Arabic, what it means to be a proper Muslim, and the duties of children to their parents and of wives to their husbands. She also explained, mostly to girls, how it was to live in a family and to take care of a husband and children and at the same time respect elders and please parents-in-law (*qaynota-qaynana*). She often talked about the life stories of others in order to bring up positive and negative examples. Mothers-in-law attending the classes mostly talked about how to keep peace at home and live together with daughters-in-law. That class provides many chances to chat and gossip since the 'students' were Sarvinoz's friends. They met at her office, made tea, talked about their everyday life and children, planning events, and gossiping about others. This is also a good opportunity for mothers to shape the future of their children in terms of marriage and, for boys, careers.

Local charismatic leaders play a key role in creating new spaces for private initiatives. They constitute a new form of both religious and economic entrepreneurship, social reach of which is still largely underestimated

Sarvinoz could be compared to the *otin-oyi* described by Habiba Fathi,[9] i.e. those women providing Islamic education for youths, mostly girls in their neighborhoods. Sarvinoz is more than just an *otin-oyi*, as she has multiple social identity: she is also a business woman, a care provider for newly arrived migrants, a match maker, and an ethnic entrepreneur. Unlike *otin-oyi*, who is limited to religious education and often as a healer function, Sarvinoz can promote religious education outside a purely religious frame, through chats, meetings, and events in which learning and understanding the Quran is not necessary. She is not proselytizing Islam *stricto sensu*, but "brings religion back into the peoples' lives" as she has stated herself.

Sarvinoz estimates that people define themselves as Muslims but do not practice Islam before entering an elder age, conventionally between 50 and 60 years old. The aim of her school is to do something good in a religious sense (*savab*[10]). *Savab,* in her understanding, is "to do something good for someone for free and to give something to someone who needs it".[11] She explained during my interview with her that every Muslim should do *savab* as much as possible and that it was a duty for each Muslim. Another 'holy mission' (*niyat*[12]) is to educate people about Islam as a devoted Muslim herself. She said that it was important for each Muslim mother to bring up her children with awareness and good knowledge of Islam, but recognized with regret that she had not yet reached that goal, and that she was the only person in her family who did not drink alcohol, prayed five times a day, and kept *roza* (fasting).

Some concluding remarks

The bride school I presented is a very informal one. Some are more formal and officially registered—the *kelinlar maktabi*—and offer courses for young women on cooking, sewing, and other craft work that can be useful not only for the household but also as a profession. Sarvinoz's bride-school is also unusual since its doors are open for both young people of both sexes, as well as their mothers. This school thus serves as a space not only for basic moral and religious education of the youth, who are considered to be spoiled and threatened by a low level of morality, but also for other useful things such as matchmaking, networking, and starting up business initiatives.

Charismatic leaders such as Sarvinoz are exceptional cases. Not so many people take a private leadership of their communities with a particular focus on the youth in terms of their family values and religious knowledge. Sarvinoz denounced a rising gap in the current educational system as well as education at home, as parents became either too busy or are living too far away from their families (due to labor migration) to manage

moral education. She thinks that there is an urgent need for those elders, or younger women who have additional time outside of their household, to contribute into additional education of the youth. There are also other interests involved in 'elders' educating youth about Islam. The religion serves as a medium through which elders would like to strengthen, regain, and support their legitimacy and status in their communities. Young people who have sufficient or strong beliefs in Islam are easy to guide in the name of the religion. These people are more obedient and not rebellious when it comes, for example, to following one's traditions and culture.

The private initiatives briefly presented in this paper are important to study in order to understand local perceptions of morality and religion as well as youth education. These local charismatic leaders play a key role in creating new spaces for private initiatives: they dramatically shape the life of their communities, but they are also able to build economically profitable structures. They constitute a new form of both religious and economic entrepreneurship, social reach of which is still largely underestimated.

Endnotes

1. Sh. Akiner, 'Kazakhstan,' 'Kyrgystan,' 'Tajikstan,' 'Turkmenistan,' 'Uzbekistan,.'' In A. Day, ed., *Political Parties of the World* (London: John Harper Publishing, 5th edition, 2002), 281-83, 289-91, 456-58, 472-73, 518-19; I. Hilgers, *Why do Uzbeks have to be Muslims? Exploring religiosity in the Ferghana Valley* (Berlin: LIT, 2009); J. Rasanayagam, "Informal economy, informal state: the case of Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 31, no. 11/12 (2011): 681-696.
2. S. Kendzior, *State propaganda on Islam in independent Uzbekistan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
3. A. Abduvakhitov, "Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan," in D. Eickelman, ed., *Russian Muslim Frontiers. New Directions in Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 79-97; A. Rashid, *Jihad: The rise of militant Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2002).
4. B.G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan. Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (London: CurzonPress, 2001); M. Pelkmans, "Asymmetries on the 'religious market' in Kyrgyzstan," in C. Hann, ed., *The postsocialist religious question: Faith and power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 29-46.
5. J. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); A. Masqeulier, "*Prayer Has Spoiled Everything": Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); C. Simon, "Census and sociology: evaluating the language situation in Society Central Asia," in S. Akiner, ed., *Cultural Change and Continuity in Central Asia* (London: Kegan Paul, 1991), 84-123; N. Tapper, and R. Tapper, "The birth of the Prophet: Ritual and gender in Turkish Islam," *Man* 22 (1987): 69-92; M. Lambek, *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte: Local discourses of Islam,sorcery and spirit possession* (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1993); G. Tett, "Mourners for the Soviet Empire," *Financial Times*, 27 November, 1995, 14.
6. A *kelin* is a young woman who has a mother-in-law and does not have her own daughter-in-law. A *kelin* usually has a very low status in families or even kinship networks. It can be seen in the labor distribution during bigger or smaller family and other social events, as well as their roles and influence in the decision making processes of different importance. Often these circumstances make *kelin*s of different families within one or several kinship networks unite and do some things together, although it can be quite difficult if a *kelin* lives together with her parents-in-law.
7. She bought those two room flats on the first floor with her own savings, she said. She also owned the flat above, which has three rooms.
8. Interview with Sarvinoz, April 4, 2006.
9. H. Fathi, "Gender, Islam, and social change in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 303-317.
10. From the Arabic, 'savab'/reward also in religious sense.
11. Interview with Sarvinoz, April 4, 2006.
12. From the Arabic, '*niyat*'/intention.