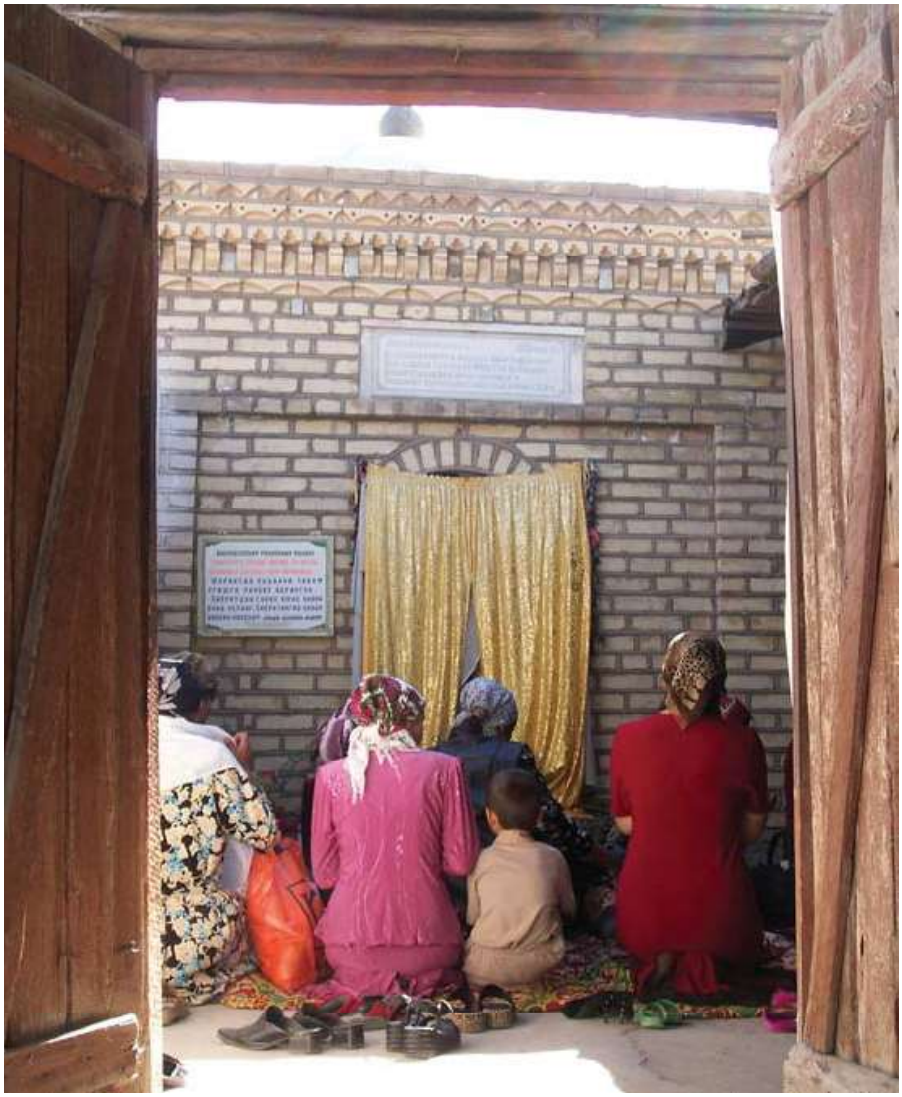
Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

# "Religion is not so strong here"

## Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism

*Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi*



LIT

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Atheist propaganda and the systematic repression of all forms of institutionalised religion led to a considerable decline in religious belief and observance among the Muslim population of Soviet Central Asia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, Islam began to acquire renewed significance in the region. This development has attracted much international interest from political scientists and other analysts, most of whom tend to see the reassertion of Islam as the most serious threat to regional security, political stability and democratisation in the newly independent states of Central Asia. Little work has been done so far to test such hypotheses by investigating the articulation of Islam in particular local contexts. In this study of contemporary forms of everyday Muslim religiosity in the province of Khorezm in Uzbekistan, Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi aims to contribute to a more balanced understanding of what is going on in the field of religion in a place that, up to now, has received little scholarly attention from Western anthropologists.

Among the newly independent states of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is generally regarded as the country where post-Soviet Islamic revival has been most visible and where ‘fundamentalist’ tendencies are the most strongly pronounced. The religious landscape of Khorezm, however, contrasts with this general picture and shows the danger of such generalizations. The people of Khorezm consider themselves to be less religious than their fellow countrymen and, there has been only a moderate increase in observance of the normative tenets of Islam following independence. For the majority, religious practice has remained bound up with life-cycle events and concerns about health, wellbeing, and prosperity. The book focuses on these elements of everyday religiosity, which include various domestic rituals, shrine related activities and diverse forms of religious healing. Kehl-Bodrogi shows how the Khorezmians, like other Muslims in post-Soviet Central Asia, have to grapple with tensions between their local heritage, the new state ideology, and the pull of a religious modernism that is informed by diverse external and internal influences. She outlines the opposing conceptions that people hold about what constitutes correct Islamic belief and practice and illustrates on the basis of rich ethnographic materials how these often contradictory notions are acted out in everyday behaviour.

What emerges from the different modes of religious behaviour described in this book is a picture of temperance and tolerance which has deep secular roots: people continue to think of religion as a matter of private conscience rather than a public issue. This prevailing attitude, Kehl-Bodrogi argues, prevents Islamic puritans or indeed any other religious militants from making major inroads in the region.

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Cover Photo: Women praying at the shrine of Mushkul Kushod in Urganch, Uzbekistan (2005) (Photo: Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi).

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# Contents

# List of Illustrations

## Map



## Plates



(all photographs taken by Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, 2003-2006)

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## Notes on Transliteration

In this book, Uzbek words are written according to the official (modified) Latin alphabet adapted by the Uzbek government in 1995 in order to replace the Cyrilic alphabet, which has been in use for the Uzbek language since 1940. This also applies to words of Arabic or Persian origin in local usage. Thus, for example, I use *namoz* instead of *namaz*; *avliyo* instead of *awliya*; and *ziyorat* instead of *ziyarat*. For words that have been incorporated into the English language, I use the anglicised form, even if they do not conform to the Uzbek usage; for example, Tashkent instead of Toshkent; Khiva instead of Xivo; Khorezm instead of Xorazm. The same refers to the names of famous Islamic personages and Sufi brotherhoods. For widely known Islamic terms, I have retained the conventional transliteration from Arabic. That is, rather than writing Islom, *ulamo* and Qur'on, as in Uzbek, I use Islam, *ulama*, and Qur'an.

The transliteration of Russian names and titles in the bibliography follows the Library of Congress system.

# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| *avliyo* | Friend of God, 'saint'. The term derives from the plural of the Arabic *wali*, meaning 'friend', 'benefector', or 'protector'. In Khorezm, the term also designates a cemetery or a shrine. |
| *azon* | The call for prayer. |
| *biotok* | Bio-energy (Russian). |
| *chilla* | A specific 40 day period of retreat and avoidance, particularly after birth. |
| *dasturxon* | Tablecloth; hospitality offered at the table; tablecloth filled with bread, sweet, piece of fabric etc. which is offered by the guests to the hosts of a ceremonial event. |
| *dovo* | Magic, synonymous with *issiq-sovuq*. |
| *duo* | Free prayer. |
| *duoxon* | Healer, exorcist. |
| *eshon* | Religious figure believed to possess miraculous power. |
| *fatwa* | Formal legal opinion given by a *mufti* (canon lawyer of standing) in answer to a question submitted to him by a legal person or by a private individual. |
| *folbin* | Soothsayer, healer, exorcist. |
| *folbinchilik* | The activity of the *folbin*. |
| *hadith* | Written accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. |
| *harom* | Ritually forbidden. |
| *hijob* | In the Qur'an, *hijab* (Arabic) designates the piece of cloth which Muslim women are required to wear in front of men with whom a marriage according to the Islamic law is possible. In Uzbekistan, the term refers to a headscarf which is tightly fastened under the chin and allows no hair to be seen. It is strongly associated with a 'Wahhabi' dress style. |
| *hudo yo'li* | 'The path of God': offering, synonymous to *sadaqa*. |
| *imam* | Religious office holder who leads the communal prayer. In local usage, the term usually designates a person appointed by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan to head a mosque. |
| *irim* | Superstition. |
| *issiq-sovuq* | Magic. |
| *janoza* | Islamic funeral. |

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|---|---|
| *jar* | Remembrance, Sufi ritual; part of the *o'yin*. |
| *jin* | Spirit. |
| *karomat* | Miracle worked by a saint. |
| *kolkhoz* | Russian acronym for 'collective farm'. |
| *madrasa* | Islamic educational institution. |
| *maraka* | Ritual event for commemorating the dead. |
| mullah | Religious figure, who officiates at religious ceremonies in urban or rural neighbourhoods. Unlike the imams, mullahs usually have no formal religious education. |
| *namoz* | Ritual prayer. |
| *namozxon* | A person who regularly performs the *namoz* prayers. |
| *nikoh* | Islamic marriage ritual. |
| *non* | Flat bread. |
| *ohun* | Title of Muslim religious dignitary. |
| *O'yin* | Spirit exorcism ritual. |
| *pari* | A kind of spirit. |
| *po'rhan* | Spirit healer; exorcist. |
| *potya* | Blessing prayer said in Uzbek (from Arabic *Fatiha*, the opening *Sura* of the Qur'an. |
| *qalin, qalin puli* | Bride price. |
| *ro'za, romozon* | Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the month of fasting. |
| *ruh* | Spirit (of the dead). |
| *sadaqa* | Offering (in money or in kind) to a shrine or a mosque; meal offered at a shrine or at home after the favourable outcome of an event |
| *savob* | Divine merit; meritorious deed. |
| *sura* | A chapter of the Qur'an. |
| *shari'a* | Muslim religious law. |
| *shirk* | Idolatry, polytheism. |
| *shix* | Shrine guardian; member of a religious descent group. |
| *sunnat* | Male circumcision. |
| *tabib* | Healer, 'folk doctor'. |
| *tabibchilik* | The activity of the *tabib*. |
| *tahorat* | The Islamic purification ritual. |
| *to'y* | Life-cycle feast. |
| *tumor* | Amulet. |
| *urf-odat* | Custom, tradition. |
| *xalpa* | Female reciter of religious texts. The term is also |

| | |
|---|---|
| | applied for a female music entertainer at weddings and other joyous ceremonial events. |
| *xo'ja* | Honorific title for the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. |
| *ulama* | Scholars of religious sciences. |
| *yomon go'z* | Evil eye. |
| *ziyorat* | Visit or pilgrimage to a shrine. |


Map 1. The research region.

# *Chapter 1*
# Introduction

The manifold political, social, and economic transformations following the decay of the so called people's republics in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union shortly afterward have been accompanied by a dramatic increase of interest in religion in each of the respective countries. In a sense, post-socialist religious revivals mirror developments taking place in many other parts of the world since the last quarter of the 20th century and are what Martin Riesebrodt (2000) has called the global return of religions to the public sphere. The worldwide re-emergence of religion as a political force as well as a basis for social identity posed a challenge to the classical theory of modernisation, which postulated the secularisation and privatisation of religion as an inevitable concomitant of the modernisation of societies. Confronted with this unexpected development, some analysts defend the secularisation theory by arguing that societies with strong religious orientations are not yet sufficiently modernised, while others declare any expectation of a general trend to secularisation obsolete.[1] Moreover, others argue that the secularisation and revitalisation of religion are by no means contradictory phenomena but, rather, are two sides of precisely the same processes of transformation triggered by modernisation. Thus, as Riesebrodt argues, on the one hand modernisation resulted in the vanishing social significance of religion which has increasingly come to be seen as a matter of private consciousness while, on the other, modernisation itself has brought about new dimensions of uncertainty which in turn led to the re-emergence of religion as a means of resolving them (Riesebrodt 2000: 49-50). Thus, the increased significance of religion in post-socialist societies can be understood as a response to the shaking up of the old certainties – economic, social, as well as ideological – in the course of recent political transformations.

What makes the vibrant religious revival in the former socialist bloc unique is that it emerged in societies where religious beliefs and practices

[1] For an overview of theoretical responses to worldwide tendencies of religious revitalisation, see Riesebrodt 2000.

had been subjected to systematic and enduring suppression by the state. As Douglas Rogers has put it: 'The socialist states of the Soviet bloc joined other modern states in declaring the official separation of church from the state, but added to this the (…) policies of forced secularisation and atheist propaganda' (Rogers 2005: 13).

Up to the end of the 1980s, foreign anthropologists had almost no opportunity to carry out research either in the Soviet Union or in other socialist countries, much less speak of such a politically sensitive topic as religion, the study of which was difficult even for native scholars. Since then, the political changes have allowed for new research opportunities including long-term field work in particular communities in the former socialist world, with Turkmenistan being a significant exception.[2] Taking advantage of this opportunity, in 2003 the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPI) in Halle launched a coordinated research initiative which aimed at the exploration of variations in religious developments in two selected areas of the former Soviet bloc: East-Central Europe and Central Asia. As a first sampling of results of the projects has shown, all post-socialist countries, whether dominated by Islam or Christianity, display one striking similarity: the intermingling of religion and nationalism (Hann & the "Civil Religion" Group 2006). Everywhere, the recourse to 'national' religions constitutes an element of strong national revival, and is promoted and utilised by the new political elites both as a means of legitimising their power and of distancing themselves from the officially atheist orientation of their predecessors. Notwithstanding the fact that the new constitutions everywhere proclaim freedom of religion and consciousness, there are considerable differences in the way post-socialist states deal with religion. Thus, while in many eastern European countries democratisation led to the emergence of a situation that comes near to the model of a religious market triggered by the influx of foreign denominations competing for influence, the case studies of the MPI research group in Central Asia show how political interventions can undermine constitutionally proclaimed religious rights.

This book evolved from an individual research project in the framework of the MPI regional focus group "Central Asia". It is based on material collected during nine months of fieldwork between 2004 and 2006 in the province Khorezm in Uzbekistan. However, before introducing the main subjects of this work, I would like to briefly consider the main features of

[2] Turkmenistan follows a policy labelled 'enduring neutrality' which in practice comes close to a policy of self-isolation. For Westerners to enter the country has become especially difficult since an assassination attempt on the late president Niyazov in 2002, since which time Turkmenistan has tightened up its visa regulations. What changes the post-Niyazov era (Niyazov died in December 2006) might bring about are not yet predictable.

Soviet policy towards Islam in Central Asia, the legacy of which continues to inform government policies towards religion all over the region.

## 1.1 Soviet policy towards Islam in Central Asia

After consolidating their power over Central Asia, the Bolsheviks set out to implement their project of socialist modernisation which aimed at the radical reshaping of society in terms of Marxism-Leninism. Islam, which for centuries had provided the most important basis for people's self-identification and social and political relations in Central Asia, was regarded as the most serious obstacle on the way to modernity and, thus, had to be eliminated. As Nazif Shahrani has put it: 'The goal was nothing short of eradication of the traditional Central Asian way of life and its social, political, economic, and moral order' (Shahrani 1995: 277). Up to World War II, the communist regime destroyed the institutional and educational basis of Islam in the region.[3] All but a few mosques were closed down, demolished, or used for mundane purposes. Numerous saintly tombs – traditional centres of popular veneration – suffered the same fate. Endowed properties (*waqf*) of pious foundations were confiscated and the Shari'a courts abolished. Countless *ulama*, the learned experts of the faith, were executed, imprisoned, or sent to work camps, and religious texts were confiscated and burned, with their owners being punished. The *madrasa*s, institutions for Islamic learning, were abolished and the whole educational system became not merely secularised but atheistic. These measures were accompanied by a large-scale campaign for women's emancipation that included the mass public unveiling of women. Customary practices held responsible for women's inferior status in society, such as early marriage, polygamy, and the payment and acceptance of bride price, were prohibited (see Kamp 1998). As Shoshana Keller notes, the 'law was one of the most important and effective tools used in the campaign, since terms in prison and labour camps could be used to force people to change their behaviour.'[4] The Law on Religious Associations, introduced in 1929 and in force until 1990, prohibited the teaching of relig-

[3] Keller provides an excellent account of Soviet policy towards Islam in the period from 1917 to 1941. Moreover, on the basis of rich archive material, the author reveals the initial difficulties and inconsistencies in the implementation of anti-religious measures under local conditions (Keller 1995). For surveys of Soviet religious policy in various political periods, see also Bräcker 1991; Anderson 1994; Akiner 1996; Ro'i 2000; Khalid 2007.

[4] Keller 1995: 344. Soviet efforts to transform indigenous norms and values are generally described by Western (or Western trained) observers as being equivalent to European colonialism (for example, see Shahrani 1995; Michaels 2003). However, Khalid instead proposes a comparison with Kemalism in Turkey, stressing that in both cases, the implementation of the policy of modernisation 'was the act of a state bent on reshaping the behaviour and norms of its citizens, rather than a colonial state acting on native subjects' (Khalid 2003: 577).

ion, the printing and dissemination of religious texts, proselytising, and any kind of charitable activities.

During World War II, state policy towards Islam assumed a new direction. In order to stop religious activities from going completely underground and to gain better control over them, the state established a bureaucratic administrative structure in the limited framework of which the practice of Islam became legally possible. Under the supervision of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), established in 1943 in Tashkent, ten mosques were reopened and a very small number of students were allowed to do advanced study of Islam at two educational institutions serving the whole of Central Asia: the Mir-i Arab *madrasa* in Bukhara and the Imam al-Bukhari Institute in Tashkent, the latter of which was opened in 1971. Although formally independent, SADUM was subordinate to the government and was responsible for registering mosques, appointing imams, and controlling religious activities in general. The religious personnel of these institutions came from the ranks of the reformist *ulama* who had somehow survived the previous wave of persecutions. Together with the imams who had completed their studies at the *madrasa* in Bukhara, these religious scholars represented what in Soviet usage was called the official Islamic 'clergy' (*dukhovenstvo*) in Central Asia.[5] They were supportive of socialist norms and values (including women's emancipation), and tried to reconcile them with Islamic principles. According to the testimony of their public statements and publications, for the official *ulama* there was no contradiction between Islam and Marxism, since the ideal of socialism was in complete agreement with Islamic premises.[6] Like the Jadids in pre-revolutionary Russia, the official *ulama* strongly opposed many manifestations of traditional Muslim religiosity, such as the veneration of saints, various forms of spiritual healing, the wearing of amulets and the like.[7] Such practices and underlying beliefs were continuously targeted in the anti-religious propaganda literature, where they were accused not only of being superstitions and dangerous relics of a remote past but also

[5] For a criticism of the use of the term 'clergy' in an Islamic context, see DeWeese 2002: 307-8.

[6] For a discussion of the interpretation of Islam by the official *ulama*, see Saroyan 1997: 57, 79 and Erşahin 2005.

[7] The Jadids were a group of Muslim intellectuals engaged in discourse of progress and the nation. Like Muslim reformists in general, the Jadids strove for a thorough reform of Islam as a way for Muslims to meet the challenges of the time. For a detailed account of the Jadid movement, see Khalid 1998.

of contradicting genuinely Islamic teachings.[8] Devin DeWeese has called it 'one of the strange ironies of Soviet history that the Communist Party and the Soviet academic establishment were essentially allied with the official Islamic clergy (not to mention fundamentalists abroad) in adopting a "rigorist" interpretation of what constituted "real" Islam' (DeWeese 2002: 310). However, the respective intentions of the official *ulama* and the political authorities were considerably different. The former attacked popular practices in order to strengthen – within the limited frame of their possibilities – 'proper' Islamic behaviour in the population, while the authorities sought to discredit non-canonical religious practices by declaring them to be mere superstitions, which lacked foundation even within the religion to which the people claim to adhere. Thus, the denunciation of shrine visitation, religious healing and other traditional beliefs as un-Islamic served to undermine the authority of local religious figures.

The official *ulama* were also expected to support Soviet foreign policy initiatives in Muslim countries which, in the view of many Western observers, was actually their main function. Thus, as Shirin Akiner notes, the state's very accommodation with Islam was born out of the desire to present the Soviet Union in a positive light to developing Muslim countries which 'entailed creating at least a façade of acceptance' of Islam (Akiner 1996: 109). While SADUM and the two theological institutions served to maintain this image to outsiders, internally the official representatives of Islam appear to have had only limited influence. The number of mosques operating with state permission was very small and attendance continued to be strongly discouraged throughout the communist era.[9] Party members and state employees especially risked their positions by participating in communal prayers in the mosques. Under such conditions it is hard to see how the official *ulama*'s interpretation of Islam could have been widely circulated.

With the exception of those few who attended the state approved theological institutions, the Muslims of the Soviet Union were deprived of legal ways of attaining formal religious knowledge. In some places, higher Islamic learning continued to be cultivated in informal and illegal study circles but, in the main, the transmission of religious knowledge and practice was restricted to the family, to local mullahs and female religious specialists, the majority of whom had limited if any religious training themselves. Unregis-

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[8] For example, see Saksonov's book with the significant title (in Uzbek) 'Holy places – source of superstitions and *bidat*', the latter term referring in Islam to unlawful innovations or deviation from the principles of the religion (Saksonov 1984).

[9] For example, under Soviet rule, Turkmenistan had three officially functioning mosques, none of them in the capital. In Khorezm, where I conducted research, only three mosques, scattered over the province, operated with legal permission during the Soviet era.

tered mosques which existed in most rural and urban settlements, local mullahs and numerous *eshan*s (religious individuals believed to possess miraculous power), soothsayers, healers, shrine guardians – 'unofficial clergy' in the Soviet usage – constituted the sphere of the so called unofficial Islam in the Soviet Union that existed outside the official structure of religious administration. Muriel Atkin has argued that, given the limited possibilities of the official Islamic establishment to sustain Islamic knowledge and practice among the population, Islam survived in the Soviet Union mainly due to the activities of 'folk Islamic practitioners (…) whose prayers, guidance, and magic are sought to solve a problem or obtain a desired goal' (Atkin 1989: 609). Although anti-religious propaganda continuously attacked these religious practices as the bulwark of ignorance and superstition, the state seldom interfered with them, so long as they remained discrete. During most periods of the post-war era, local authorities – who were themselves members of the communities that they were expected to control – continued to turn a blind eye to religious activities at holy sites or in the domestic sphere, in spite of the official ban. Thus for example, shrines that were handed over to collective farms (*kolkhoz*) often continued to serve pilgrims rather than be put to mundane use.

What made Central Asia under Soviet rule so visibly different from other Muslim societies that did not undergo a comparable socialist experience was the radical de-Islamisation of the public sphere.[10] Mosques were no longer dominant elements of the religious landscape. With the exception of a number of historical buildings preserved as architectural monuments, most of the old mosques were destroyed or left to decay and new ones were not erected. The call to prayer no longer determined the rhythm of daily life; public celebration of Islamic feasts was not allowed, and the veil – the most visible sign of female Muslim identity – disappeared. Observers unanimously agree that, at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the great majority of Muslims were ignorant of even the most basic tenets of Islam, and religious observance was limited to a minority. Whomever I asked in Uzbekistan about religious observance during the Soviet era stated that those few who attended mosques, whether registered or otherwise, were mainly retired old men.[11] Islamic dietary prescriptions – most notably the prohibition of alcohol – were generally ignored. However, Soviet sources testify that Muslims continued to practice male circumcision and to bury

[10] Outside the socialist world, only Turkey witnessed a comparable policy of enforced secularisation, including a wide reaching de-Islamisation of the public sphere, which in its radical form, however, lasted somewhat less than three decades.

[11] Rasanayagam made similar observations in other regions of Uzbekistan (Rasanayagam 2006a).

their dead according to Islamic rules. Most people continued to practice the Islamic marriage rituals in addition to the civil weddings and the custom of paying the bride price went on in many regions, in spite of being legally prohibited.

While the content and scale of Soviet policy towards Islam are well documented and analysed in the literature (for example, see Bräcker 1991; Keller 1995; Ro'i 2000; Hanks 2001), little is known about the role Islam actually played in people's everyday lives. For ideological reasons, Soviet accounts of Islam tended to downplay the social significance of religion among the population. Western analysts, on the other hand, were mostly interested in the question of whether or not Islam in the Soviet Union had the potential to pose a political threat to the regime.

## 1.2 Soviet scholarly research on Islam

From the mid-1950s onwards, the position that 'the capitalist base of nourishing religion has been destroyed and a new base has been created in which there is no soil for religion' became widely accepted by the Communist Party (Anderson 1994: 19). According to this logic, observable religious practices at the time of advanced socialism could be nothing other than 'survivals' (*perezhitki*) of the past. Scholars substantiated this ideological claim by pointing out, through frequent references to Marx and Engels, that 'social consciousness is more conservative than social being', which is why traces of religion can also be detected in highly developed societies, albeit as vestiges of earlier evolutionary stages (Basilov 1980: 234). This ideological stance also characterises the writings of Soviet ethnographers, who produced a number of rich but politically biased accounts of Muslim religious beliefs and practices in Central Asia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union (see Zadykhina 1952; Sukhareva 1960, 1975; Snesarev 1974, 2003; Basilov and Niiazklychev 1975; Firshtein 1978; Basilov 1995; Bajalijeva 2002).

A constant feature of Soviet accounts of Muslim religious life is the artificial division/classification of it into two opposing realms. Thus, scholars contrasted 'real' Islam, represented by the official mosques and their personnel, to a parallel 'popular' religion consisting of what they regarded to be pre-Islamic survivals. The latter category entailed nearly all elements of religious life not confirmed or supported by the canonical texts of Islam and not approved by the official *ulama*, such as the veneration of saints and holy sites, magical practices, spirit healing, the use of amulets, belief in the evil eye, popular demonology and the like. This view held that pre-Islamic survivals 'display greater tenacity in everyday life than do vestiges of orthodox Islam, the decay of which is proceeding more rapidly' (Snesarev 2003: 16). For several reasons, Soviet ethnography focused almost exclusively on

the investigation of alleged pre-Islamic survivals when dealing with the issue of religion in a Muslim context.

On the one hand, this attitude corresponds to the overall evolutionist orientation of Soviet ethnography. According to Vladimir Basilov, the major concern of ethnographic studies of religion was 'research into early forms of religion, which are available for investigation mostly on the basis of their fragments that have survived up to the present' (Basilov 1980: 239). Through the investigation of 'survivals', Soviet scholars aimed at the exploration of the ancient religion of a given population and the evolution of religious ideas in general. On the other hand, by investigating survivals of obsolete social systems Soviet scholars could 'avoid the politically sensitive topic of contemporary religious reality' (Light 2007: 483).

Understood as vestiges of shamanism, particular forms of traditional healing appear to have provided an especially fruitful field of study for Soviet scholars. On the basis of ritual resemblances and the geographic proximity of the region to Siberia, healers referred to as *folbin*, *po'rxon*, or *baxshi* by the respective peoples of Central Asia have long been regarded as minor shamans. For Soviet as well as most Western scholars, traditional healing practices in Central Asia represented an Islamised form of shamanism (for example, see Sukhareva 1960; Centlivres and Slobin 1971; Basilov 1975, 1995; Garrone 2000; Bajalijeva 2002; Snesarev 2003; Sidikov 2004).

Drawing on the Siberian model, the leading expert of Central Asian 'shamanism', Basilov has described the shamans as originally being mediators between humans and the spirit world, chosen and trained by the spirits whom they are obliged to serve and with whom they communicate in a state of ecstasy.[12] According to Basilov, under the influence of Islam the protective spirits of the shamans were replaced by Muslim saints and ecstatic Sufi rites (*dhikr*) 'almost supplanted the immemorial shamanistic methods and became the content of the shamanistic healing rite' (Basilov 1987: 10; see also Sukhareva 1960 and Garrone 2000). Gleb Snesarev also considered healing with the help of spirits in Khorezm to be 'vestiges of shamanism'. For him, however, the phenomenon represented an exclusive mixture of ancient Iranian (Zoroastrian) and Turkic influences and 'was virtually unaffected by Islam' (Snesarev 2003: 35). To be sure, a statement like this could be made only with complete disregard of the therapeutic methods and under-

[12] Basilov actually substitutes the term 'shamanism' with 'shamanship' (*shamanstvo*), arguing that the former designates the entire complex of religious beliefs of the peoples, among whom it constituted the main cult. However, this was not the case with the Islamic peoples of Central Asia (Basilov 1995: 9, 11). In reference to Daur Mongol healers, Caroline Humphrey also prefers the term 'shamanship' in order to indicate that it does not represent a single religious system 'but coexists with other religious practices' (Humphrey 1996: 360).

lying beliefs in the healing traditions of other Muslim peoples. Thus, many of the practices described by Snesarev as remnants of Zoroastrianism or of Turko-Mongol shamanism are to be found among Muslims in countries as far flung as Syria, Morocco, Egypt and Indonesia, even though they are often dismissed by the orthodox as being un-Islamic. The same holds true for many other religious practices relegated to the category of pre-Islamic, local survivals. Thus, while searching for the origins of non-Qur'anic beliefs and practices in the ancient religious strata of Central Asia, Soviet scholars typically failed to acknowledge that many of them form an integral part of everyday Muslim religiosity almost everywhere.

In the main, Soviet ethnographies were the result of short-term expeditions carried out by a team of researchers who interviewed a limited number of mainly elder citizens, a method that prevented scholars from gaining insight into the significance of Islam in everyday life. Indeed, political correctness insisted that whatever this research brought to light belonged to the pre-socialist past and continued to live only in the memory of the older generation. This is not to say that Soviet ethnography did not provide much useful material about Muslim beliefs and practices in Central Asia and elsewhere in the country. However, the disproportionate attention paid to 'survivals' and the emphasis on presenting the data collected as lacking any contemporary relevance obscures the religious lives of people who perceived themselves as Muslims in the Soviet Union. As Maria Louw puts it: 'Soviet studies in Central Asian Islam (…) made no attempts to understand Islam from the perspectives of Central Asian Muslim believers' (Louw 2007: 4).

## 1.3 Western perspectives on Islam in the Soviet Union

Prior to the decline of the Soviet Union, foreign scholars interested in the question of Islam under Communism had to rely almost exclusively on information provided by Soviet sources. Although they draw quite controversial conclusions from these sources, Western authors share their Soviet colleagues' view that social and economic modernisation inevitably leads to the weakening, if not loss, of religion. For quite a long time, the western study of Islam in the Soviet Union was dominated by Sovietologists, most of them policy experts and political scientists generally 'informed more by scholarly expertise in the Soviet system, (…) than by training in the history and religious culture of the regions of "Soviet" Islam' (DeWeese 2002: 13-14). This strand of scholarship adopted the prevailing notion of Soviet ethnographic accounts and anti-religious literature, according to which Islam was divided into two opposing categories, the official religion represented by the state-approved religious establishment and a 'parallel' or 'unofficial' one that existed outside this category. Sovietologists, however, saw the persis-

tence of what their Soviet colleagues described as 'vestiges' of Islam in the Soviet Union as clear evidence of the failure of Soviet attempts to modernise Muslim society. As Alexandre Bennigsen, the most prominent and influential representative of this strand of scholarship has pointed out:

> Though forced to adapt itself to the new order of things, Islam has in no way been contaminated either by Marxism or secularism. (…) Islam in the USSR is the same unadulterated, pure religion that it had been before 1917. (…) Paradoxically, nowadays, Islam in the Soviet Union appears more conservative, more traditionalist, and less modernist then the creed practiced in many Muslim countries (Bennigsen 1980: 39).

Proceeding from the notion of an a priori antagonism between Islam and socialism, this strand of scholarship saw in the existence of a potentially subversive 'unofficial' or 'parallel' Islam the most severe internal threat to the persistence of the Soviet Union (for example, see Bennigsen and Lemercier Quelquejay 1967; Carrère d'Encausse 1974; Bennigsen and Broxup 1985; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985).

The Sovietological approach has been criticised both for its uncritical adaptation of Soviet concepts and for giving too much credit to official statements and anti-religious accounts of Muslim religious life. Several authors have pointed out that, in reality, various links existed between representatives of 'official Islam' and unregistered religious authorities, and that the spheres of orthodox and popular Islam were far less sharply separated than suggested by the Sovietologists or, for that matter, by Soviet authors (DeWeese 2002). Mark Saroyan has also challenged the prevailing view according to which the official Soviet *ulama* were no more than mouthpieces of the regime. Rather, he argues: 'In reinterpreting state values as traditional components of Islamic thought (…), the clerics also revised and rejected the state's arguments concerning the religion's backwardness and obsolescence' (Saroyan 1997: 53).

While Sovietologists created an image of a deeply religious and traditional society resisting Soviet attempts at modernisation, another strand of Western scholarship featured analyses according to which 70 years of socialism radically altered the way of life of Central Asian Muslims, rendering them thoroughly secular (for example, see Olcott 1995; Shahrani 1995, 2005; Akiner 2002; Halbach 2002; Khalid 2003, 2007). Far from seeing Muslim and Soviet identities as irreconcilable, this strand of literature emphasises that the majority of Soviet Muslims internalised the regime's values and saw no contradiction between being a Muslim and a loyal Soviet citizen, or even an atheist. This perspective closely resembles prevailing Soviet views on Islam, in which religious practice was reduced to the celebration of

life cycle rituals and the observance of folk-religious practices which, although regarded as being part of the Islamic tradition, were rather 'syncretic accretions of various origins' (Akiner 2002: 74). Shirin Akiner even suggests that such activities were 'without any specific religious significance' for the people who participated in them 'more out of loyalty to tradition than out of an active commitment to the faith' (Akiner 1996: 116). It has been argued that, for Soviet citizens, Islam became a marker of ethnic and national identity which served to differentiate themselves from outsiders – Russians and other non-Muslim nationalities living amongst them – and did not necessarily require religious observance or deeply held personal belief. Nazif Shahrani puts it even more emphatically: 'Because of the highly successful programs of de-Islamization in Central Asia, the nearly universal claims of Muslim identity by Central Asian natives became devoid of any meaningful religious content: *they became Muslims by name only!*'[13] (Shahrani 2005). For Adeeb Khalid, the equation of customary practices with Islam was a direct result of Soviet policy:

> In addition to bringing about physical destruction of institutions and personnel, Soviet xenophobia also cut off links with the outside Muslim world. (…) Islam was forced into isolation and hence localised. The most important consequence of this isolation was that Islam was rendered synonymous with tradition (Khalid 2003: 577).

The analyses summarised above deal in a rather generalised way with Islam in the Soviet era, without considering important differences between the Soviet Central Asian republics and within them (urban/rural; regional characteristics, education, profession, gender, generation etc). Due to inherent differences, it is reasonable to assume that the transformational effects of the Soviet era on the modes of people's religious expression were not the same everywhere. At the same time, it is questionable whether or not aspects such as the ignorance of dogma, laxity or even outright negligence of religious observance can be uniformly blamed on the influence of Soviet ideology and policy.

DeWeese has recently criticised the prevailing tendency in both Soviet and Western accounts of 'Soviet Islam' to measure Muslim religiosity against an abstract ideal of Islam, instead of against pre-existing forms of religiosity in a given region prior to the Soviet conquest or, for that matter, against contemporary Muslim societies elsewhere in the world (DeWeese 2002: 309). Ethnographic accounts from other parts of the Muslim world suggest that patterns ascribed to Soviet anti-religious policy also apply in

[13] These words are emphasised in the original text.

societies that never experienced atheist indoctrination. For example, Roy Ellen notes that, in early 20th century Singapore, Malays

> (…) were characterized by a leniency in religious observance. For example, alcohol was rarely refused, Arabic prayers seldom understood, (…) Qur'ānic tuition was extremely rudimentary, religious teachers poorly qualified, mosque attendance slight and knowledge of Islamic theology and law restricted, with most individuals not knowing the particular school which they followed. This pattern, with local modifications, is one that applies widely in the region and indeed, among most Muslim peoples (Ellen 1983: 57).

When investigating the transformational effects of Soviet policy and ideology on Islam in Central Asia, we should keep in mind that the degree of absorption of the tenets of Islam among the various peoples of the region was never uniform, but varied from religious minimalism to strict conformity of daily life to the Shari'a. According to 19th and early 20th century observers, religious observance tended to be stricter among the higher social segments, while among the masses ritual ablution, daily prayers, and mosque attendance were often neglected (Bellér-Hann 2006: 315). In pre-Soviet Central Asia, the urban Uzbek and Tajik populations were particularly known for their strong attachment to Islamic orthopraxy. However, even among them, religious observance varied according to historical period, geographical setting, and social and educational background. For example, the 19th century American diplomat Eugene Schuyler, who visited Turkistan at the beginning of the 1870s, reported an 'increasing spirit of indifferentism' toward religious observance among Muslims living under Russian rule:

> It has been found necessary in all Central Asiatic countries to keep up the observance of religion by severe penalties; both in Khokand and Bukhara there exist officials called *Reis* whose duty is to compel the attendance of the inhabitants at the mosques (…). When the Russians occupied Tashkent they abolished the office of *Reis*, and since that time there is much laxity of observance (Schuyler 1966: 91-92).

There were also important differences in the modes of religiosity between nomads and the sedentary population. Thus, the Turkmen tribes never fully adapted to the Shari'a but continued to obey tribal law (*däp*) instead. According to the 19th century Hungarian scholar Ármin Vámbéry, many practices 'which are prohibited to the Islamite, and which the Mollahs make the object of violent attack, exist in all their ancient originality' (Vámbéry 1996: 194). For centuries, Islamised local customs rather than canonical observance, and shrines rather than mosques, were particularly but by no means exclusively the focal point of Muslim religiosity in the nomadic regions. Not only did this attitude pre-date Soviet influence but it continues to inform

religious behaviour in contemporary Turkmenistan (see Kehl-Bodrogi 2006). Writing on present-day religious life in Kazakhstan, Bruce Privratsky stresses that among the Kazakhs, '*it is local, rather than "normative" Islam, that is traditional*' (Privratsky 2001: 10). Furthermore, he ascribes the predominance of customary practices to the limited effect of 19th century Islamic reformism, rather than to Soviet influence.

Thus, Soviet measures that aimed at the eradication of religious beliefs and practices – in particular, the tight restrictions imposed on the reproduction of the learned tradition of Islam, the reduction in the number of mosques, and the discouragement of public expression of piety – probably had a less dramatic effect on religious practice in regions and in segments of the society, where the Shari'a played a less significant role in people's everyday life. It can be argued that in many cases Soviet policy contributed to the preservation of local characteristics of religious practice rather than reduced it. DeWeese has warned that, when speaking about Islam under Communism, one should avoid 'generalizing from one region to the other, or to the whole, without clear evidence' (DeWeese 2002: 327). This admonition must also be taken seriously in respect of the avalanche of religious developments that followed the downfall of the Soviet system.

## 1.4 About this book

The assertion of Islam in the newly independent states of Central Asia – and particularly the emergence of radical Islamic movements – has aroused fear in the outside world that these developments might threaten the political stability of the region and, thus, endanger foreign – mainly US and Russian – geopolitical interests. Up to now, much of the international analysis of Islam in the post-Soviet context has been framed within these political currents (for example, see Polonskaya and Malashenko 1994; Haghayeghi 1995; Olcott 1995, 2007; Rashid 1995; Babadzhanov 1999, 2002; Polat 2000). Therefore, while the issue of Islamic fundamentalism has been the subject of considerable scholarly and journalistic interest, there has been very little research done on the everyday modes of Muslim religiosity in Central Asia after socialism (for example, see Privratsky 2001; Krämer 2002; Louw 2007).

The purpose of this study is to focus on how the changes – brought about in the fields of religion and politics as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union – affected people's everyday religious life in a specific region. The data presented here were collected in the province Khorezm (in the extreme west of Uzbekistan), where I conducted fieldwork from September to December 2003 and from May to October 2004. Moreover, I made two additional visits to the region in August 2005 and June 2006. I spent most of the first research period in a village near the Turkmen border in the

district Ko'shko'pir. In the second phase, although I lived mainly in the provincial capital Urganch, I maintained contact with the village by paying frequent visits, then as well as during my other stays over the following years. From both of my major fieldwork sites I made many journeys to visit healing specialists who live in different parts of the province and to various holy sites, some of them located in the adjacent region of Qaraqalpaqistan.

In historical perspective, the term Khorezm designates one of the oldest irrigation-based agricultural regions of Central Asia. Occupying the lower basin of the Amu Darya and its delta, the region of Khorezm is surrounded by two deserts, the Qaraqum in southwest and the Qyzylqum in the northeast. As a result of the national delimitation by the Soviets in 1925, Khorezm, which in the preceding centuries formed the main part of the territory of the Khanate of Khiva, was divided between the newly established Socialist Republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. A large part of the region was incorporated into the Autonomous Republic of Qaraqalpaqistan, within the boarders of the Uzbek SSR. This territorial and political division was retained when Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

In Khorezm, the reassertion of Islam after socialism has taken less spectacular forms than in other parts of the country, especially in the Ferghana Valley, which in post-Soviet times became known as the stronghold of religious fundamentalism and, therefore, it is not surprising that the region receives scant mention in scholarly accounts of the current political and religious developments in Uzbekistan. Although independence did result in an upsurge of interest in religion in Khorezm, by the time of my fieldwork Islam had already largely retreated from the public sphere, such that relatively few signs of the religious awakening could be detected in everyday life. This resulted, in part, from an increasingly repressive state policy towards particular forms of Islamic religiosity that the government considered to be 'extremist'. To a great extent, however, the low visibility of Islam in Khorezm corresponds to a general laxity of religious performance, an attitude which Khorezmians regard as being characteristic of their province. The title of this book makes allowance for this pervasive self-perception. 'Religion is not so strong here' or 'We are not much interested in religion' are phrases you hear again and again when the people describe the religious situation in this remote part of the country. Consequently, most of my interlocutors interpreted the notable drop in mosque attendance from the mid-1990s onwards as a return to normality after the first enthusiasm over the newly gained religious freedom was over.

Contrary to what preparatory reading of the literature on the post-Soviet Islamic revival had led me to believe, religion did not play a crucial

role in the everyday life of most Khorezmians. For most people, religious practice appeared to be restricted to rituals connected with life cycle events and the commemoration of the dead, much in the same way as it was during the Soviet era. Given the more pressing concerns of survival under deteriorating life conditions, other religious practices were mainly related to concerns about health, prosperity, and to improving social relationships. Rather than dismissing such practices and the underlying beliefs as 'popular' as opposed to 'official' Islam, I will examine them from the perspective of native discourses in which the question – whether or not these practices form part of proper Muslim conduct – remains contested.

In Khorezm, like elsewhere in the Muslim world, people display varying attitudes towards religion, the spectrum ranging from no religious sentiments whatsoever to strict observance of Islamic prescriptions. Some of the pious are highly critical of customary religious practices which they consider as violating the teachings of Islam. Others, however, see no contradiction between their obedience to the formal tenets of the religion, such as the performance of the obligatory ritual prayers five times a day and seeking spiritual assistance at the graves of Muslim saints in the case of illness or personal misfortune. Thus, my data reinforces the notion that individuals may simultaneously adhere to various modes of religious practice and belief (Ellen 1983). This observation already points to the problematic nature of the assumption of a clear-cut divide between 'official' and 'popular' Islam put forward in Soviet scientific accounts on Central Asia.

However, by employing the 'popular' versus 'orthodox' dichotomy, Soviet scholars reinforced the long-held and widespread notion in oriental and Islamic studies, which posits that Muslim religious life can be divided into two exclusive spheres, one representing normative aspects of the faith and the other its local 'aberrations'. This is based on the idea that what is formulated in the main scriptural corpus of Islam and defended by the learned experts of the faith is often contradicted by what is believed and practised by ordinary people. What is particularly problematic with this distinction is the implicit notion that 'popular religion is always rural, primitive, unreflective, and traditional, as opposed to the urban, civilized, intellectual, and modern religion of the elite' (Badone 1990: 6).[14] However, recent studies of Islam as it is practiced in specific local contexts indicate that the two spheres are often strongly interconnected and that non-scriptural under-

[14] Among modern anthropologists working on Islam, Ernest Gellner strongly emphasised this dichotomy, claiming that the whole history of the Muslim world consists of the flux and reflux of cycles in which scriptural and popular variants of Islam dominated in turn, the former prevailing among the merchant classes of the urban centres and the latter in tribal societies (Gellner 1981: 1-85). For a profound criticism of this approach, see Varisco 2005.

standings of the faith can equally be found in rural and urban milieux, as well as among the religiously educated (for example, see Ibrahim 1989; Holy 1991; Knysh 1997; Saroyan 1997).

Conscious of the implications of the term mentioned above, some authors prefer to speak of 'practical religion' (Roy 1983; Holy 1991) rather than 'popular'. Their use of the term is congruent with that of 'lived religion', as developed by the contributors to a recent volume about religion in America in which the term 'encompasses the tensions, the ongoing struggle of definition, which are constituted within every religious tradition and that are always present in how people choose to act' (Hall 1997: xi). Similarly, my use of 'everyday religion' in this book refers to the variety of ways people in a given local context appropriate Islam and to the indigenous discourses connected to them.

Religious practices not confirmed by the sacred texts of Islam are often perceived as local variants, with their roots in the indigenous culture of the population under study. While this might be true in a number of cases, local manifestations of Islam – and, for that matter, any other world religion – cannot be explained in terms of ethnographic peculiarities alone. Although I am not concerned with the question of the origin of the beliefs and associated practices described in this book, nonetheless I do refer to similarities in other parts of the Muslim world in order to demonstrate that what is labelled 'local' is often part of equally widespread though not necessarily canonical Islamic traditions.

In Chapter 2, 'Islam and politics in Uzbekistan', I outline developments in the field of religion in Uzbekistan from the late Soviet period up to the present. I describe the process of Islamic reassertion, which had already begun in the 1980s and gained new impetus after independence. Since it has a direct impact on the public expression of Muslim religiosity, special attention is given to the ambiguous policy of the new Uzbek government towards Islam. While the regime continues to control religious institutions and activities in much the same way as its Soviet predecessor, it makes wide use of religious symbols in order to consolidate the nation state and strengthen national identity. The regime's discourse on Islamic 'extremism' has created an atmosphere of uncertainty as to what forms of religious expression are permissible. It will be apparent that this situation not only influenced my fieldwork but also largely determined which research topics it was possible to pursue.

Chapter 3, 'Khorezm – a province and its people', situates the project by describing Khorezm and its inhabitants, offering an overview of the province in terms of its history, language, ethnic composition, and prevailing family and gender patterns. As for the latter, I argue that the process of re-

traditionalisation, often postulated as a result of the post-Soviet state's stress on traditional family roles in Uzbekistan, is less pervasive in Khorezm but is often contradicted by increased mobility and new economic and educational possibilities that include women.

Chapter 4, 'The religious situation – general context', discusses the effects of the overall political changes in the field of religion on the local level and introduces indigenous categories used to describe various modes of Muslim religiosity. The chapter describes local views on Soviet religious policy, which reveal deep-rooted secular sentiments inasmuch as people continue to think of religion as a matter of private consciousness.

Chapter 5, 'The main contours of religious life', outlines various attitudes towards the normative tenets of Islam and introduces the major life-cycle celebrations that relate to birth, male circumcision, marriage and death. Special attention is given to mortuary ceremonials and domestic rituals that aim to maintain the social relationship between the dead and the living. I argue that concern for the dead is central to the religious life of the Khorezmians, as honouring the spirit of deceased relatives reinforces the ties of mutual obligation between kin which are believed to supersede even death. However, the prevailing ritualised celebrations of life-cycle events have increasingly come under criticism not only by the defenders of 'pure' Islam but also by the state itself. While the former criticise traditional life-cycle events (especially commemoration rituals) as un-Islamic, state propaganda condemns them for the financial waste that is incurred by the obligatory, lavish hospitality of them. The chapter discusses the ways in which these celebrations are perpetuated and reshaped by state regulations, religious reformism and the force of tradition.

In Chapter 6, 'Dealing with the supernatural', I discuss ideas and images which are connected with the evil eye and various kinds of spirits that are thought of as the main supernatural agents underlying illnesses and misfortune, and the practices aimed at repelling them. In addition, the chapter explores the issues surrounding magic and divination, including the people's discourse on whether or not these practices are permissible from the viewpoint of Islam. I show that magic accusations mainly operate in the field of social relations and often serve as a means of transferring social and moral responsibility for a personal calamity or for one's own deeds onto a rival. Although Soviet ethnography relegated these practices and the underlying beliefs to the field of 'local remnants of pre-Islamic religious traditions', for the most part they are informed by Islam and can be found in more or less similar manifestations throughout the Muslim world.

Chapter 7, 'Sacred places', outlines the worship of Muslim saints and the associated institution of *ziyorat* or shrine visitation, and describes the

variety of places regarded as sacred, *ziyorat* practices and underlying beliefs, as well as the reasons that motivate people to visit such places. I show that the veneration of saints in Khorezm is strongly connected in general to the cult of the dead and that saintly shrines are almost exclusively located in cemeteries, which are referred to by the term *avliyo* that is used throughout the Muslim world to designate people who are regarded as holy. Since independence, saints and their shrines have gained official acknowledgment as part of the Uzbek national heritage, which has rendered shrine-based religious activities socially and politically acceptable. On the other hand, those who follow legalistic interpretations of Islam are opposed to *ziyorat* altogether or – like the officially approved imams working at the major shrines – they condemn some of practices observed by the visitors as un-Islamic. I explore the articulation of these competing discourses and the conflicts they generate in respect of the most popular shrine in the province, the one devoted to the great Islamic mystic Yusuf Hamadani.

Chapter 8, 'Religious healing', explores religious modes of coping with illnesses, describing various categories of healers, their methods and modes of legitimisation as well as their contested reputation. Providing an overview of Soviet and post-Soviet health-care policies, I show that the current revival of religious healing is due in large part to the dramatic decline of the health care system since independence. Although religious healing depends heavily on tradition to attract its adherents, its current upsurge is not a straightforward revitalisation of pre-Soviet traditions. Rather, religious healing in present-day Khorezm evidently involves reconstructions and re-inventions of traditions that have the capacity to incorporate new methods and modern meanings as well. Most of the healers introduced in this chapter rely on the intervention of spirits for their healing practices. Although the literature in Central Asia on this type of healers almost unanimously describes them as 'shamans', I prefer not to talk about 'shamans' but rather to employ local concepts and terminology. In the context of Central Asia, use of the term 'shaman' implies the notion of a direct and organic connection of particular healing practices with specific traditions of the pre-Islamic Turkic peoples of Siberia, thus obscuring the variety of influences that contributed to the shaping of the religious healing system in Khorezm. I show that the phenomenon is embedded in a Muslim system of meaning and is perceived by both healers and their clients as a thoroughly Muslim way of coping with illness and misfortune, not least because the healers' practices incorporate overtly Islamic elements.

# *Chapter 2*
# Islam and politics in Uzbekistan

In 2004, when I started doing fieldwork in Khorezm, Islam was evidently a delicate topic for public discussion, and people were cautious when speaking about religious issues, particularly with foreigners. I received my first lesson in this regard shortly after my arrival. My field assistant, a young Uzbek student, and I were on the way to a village wedding party by car, when we passed a shrine. It was a small domed structure in good repair, surrounded by a neat garden and identifiable as a holy site by the pieces of cloth tied to the top of a long wooden pole rammed into the earth beside it. Everything seemed to indicate that the shrine was newly erected or at least reconstructed. We decided to stop for a short visit, in order to learn something about the holy person to whom it was dedicated and the circumstances that led to the (re)construction of the site. As we approached, we met the shrine's guardian (*shix*), who was sitting at some distance from the entrance. After having received her blessings, I asked her to tell us something about the holy person whose tomb she was tending and the history of the shrine. For a while, she did not say anything. Then she offered us some tea and bread, asked us to wait, and left. Soon, she returned, accompanied by the village headmen, who asked both of us for our passports and me also for a document from the provincial government (*hokimiyat*) that would allow me to 'go around and ask people questions'. At that time, I did not yet have official research permission. However, a letter from the local university confirming the scientific cooperation with my home institute in Halle, which I carried with me all the time, proved to be sufficient to appease both the guardian and the headman who then willingly told us about the recovery of the saint's grave and the erection of the shrine some years ago. During a subsequent visit to the shrine, when I was in the company of some village women, the *shix* apologised for her initial distrust, explaining that by calling the headman, she merely wanted to avoid trouble that might have arisen if she were to speak to a foreigner about 'such things' without permission.

To be sure, in seeking assistance 'from above', the *shix*'s reaction remained an exception. However, during my fieldwork it was often the case that religious figures of different kinds (village mullahs, imams, spirit healers, clairvoyants and the like) refused to talk to me about their activities. It was particularly difficult to come in contact with people who were known in their environment for their strict religious observance, especially if they were young. Sometimes people tried without success to arrange a meeting for me with their relatives or neighbours who were *namazhon*, which means that they observed the five obligatory daily prayers of Islam. When individuals regarded as particularly religious refused to meet me, people explained this with reference to their fear that they could possibly be accused of propagating religion.

These incidents illustrate the overall atmosphere of uneasiness that surrounded the issue of religion in Uzbekistan at the time of my fieldwork and which even determined, to a certain degree, the topics about which research was possible at all. Johan Rasanayagam, whose research on religion in another part of Uzbekistan coincided temporally with mine, has coined the label 'everyday vulnerability' for this situation (Rasanayagam 2006a), which is induced by government policies to control people's mode of religiosity and restrict the space in which religious expression is legally possible. Maria Elisabeth Louw, who had similar experiences during her fieldwork in Uzbekistan at the end of the 1990s, speaks about a 'paranoid atmosphere' in the country with regard to Islam (Louw 2007: 8). In the next section, I review the vicissitudes which people experienced in the course of the last two decades with respect to the authorities' attitude towards religion and their corresponding feelings of insecurity about the permissibility of certain expressions of individual religiosity.

## 2.1 Islam under *glasnost* – the delayed liberalisation

*Glasnost*, the new policy of 'openness', introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev soon after he was elected General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in March 1985, was slow to arrive in Uzbekistan. Before the communist elite's attitude towards Islam finally softened in 1988, the republic even witnessed the harshest anti-religious drive since the Stalinist era. From the late 1970s onwards, the communist leadership became increasingly concerned with the 'Muslim question' in Central Asia, fearing that difficulties with the economy, the growth of national sentiment among the elites of the Muslim nationalities, and also developments in Iran and Afghanistan could lead to a politicisation of Islam in the region (Bräcker 1991: 263-265; Anderson 1994: 95-96). In the early 1980s, there actually appears to have been a 'fresh awakening of Islam' in Central Asia, particularly in

Uzbekistan; this development manifested itself first of all in an upsurge of the celebration of religious rituals in the domestic sphere and in increased shrine pilgrimage (Babadzhanov 1999: 114). While in the preceding decades such practices were largely tolerated as 'national customs,' they were now thought to strengthen 'national isolation' and to 'obscure the consolidation of the friendship of the Soviet peoples' (Bräcker 1991: 264).

In the early 1980s, under the supervision of Third Party Secretary Rano Abdullayeva, the Communist Party of Uzbekistan adopted a new programme consisting of 'widespread and determined work to introduce progressive traditions and ceremonies into the life of every family' (Hanks 2001: 231). Not only were 'backward customs' vigorously condemned in the media, but local party activists were ordered to prevent people from visiting shrines, observing Islamic marriage and funeral rituals, or circumcising their sons. There were also renewed attacks on the practice of the *qalin* (bride price), described as 'an ugly sickness and harmful vestige' (Hanks 2001: 233). In the era of Abdullayeva, the celebration of Navruz, the Iranian New Year festival, was once more prohibited. In spite of being non-Islamic in origin, this holiday had long been celebrated by the sedentary peoples of Central Asia. As a 'relic of the past,' it was severely discouraged in the Stalinist era, and it disappeared from the annual calendar only to reappear in the late 1960s as an officially sanctioned 'popular' holiday. As Fierman notes, 'Abdullaevas's policy with regard to the holiday was a *de facto* return to that of Stalin and Khrushchev' (Fierman 1989: 6).

However, the harsh policy of the Uzbek Communists was not without backing from Moscow. Rather, it coincided with a renewed campaign of the Kremlin against Islam, reinforced by a decree of the Central Committee from August 1986. In his speech in Tashkent, in November of the same year, Gorbachev himself underlined the continued necessity of the 'critical and uncompromising struggle with religious manifestations' (*Pravda Vostoka*, 25 November 1986, quoted by Hanks 2001: 233). According to Anderson:

> Gorbachev's main target was the localism that had to some extent taken day-to-day running of the regions out of central control under Brezhnev. And it is arguable that it was in part this suspicion of the religious-national links that delayed the liberalisation of religious policy in the Muslim regions until some time after it was begun elsewhere (Anderson 1994: 145).

Other authors, however, provide different explanations. For example, Hanks suspects that Islam, 'with its strong external affinities,' was viewed by the Kremlin as a particular danger for the Soviet Union (Hanks 2001: 229). On the other hand, Khalid explains the late arrival of *glasnost* in Uzbekistan with reference to the local Communist rulers, who were more anxious than

their counterparts in Moscow about losing ideological control (Khalid 2007: 118).

## 2.2 The return of Islam to public life

A significant moderation in the attitude of Uzbekistan's ruling elites towards Islam began to make itself felt in 1988, some time after Abdullayeva was removed from her post as Third Secretary. From that time on, the policy of *glasnost* was increasingly extended to Central Asia. With the enactment of the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in 1990, shortly before the final collapse of the communist regime, the Kremlin had altogether dropped its traditional hostility towards religion. The law lifted most of the restrictions that had been imposed on religious life since the beginning of the Soviet era. Thus, the conditions for registration for religious organizations were considerably relaxed. Such organizations were also given the right to carry out charity activities, to make free use of the media, to establish international links, and to publish their own religious literature and the like.[15] The liberalisation of the political climate brought about a vivid religious revival among the Muslim population which, as Khalid notes, also entailed 'a very important element of recovery of *national* memories and national legacies' (Khalid 2007: 117).[16]

The most visible expression of this reassertion of Islam was the great increase in the number of mosques. Old mosques, which had been used for administrative, economic or other profane purposes during the Soviet era, were reopened and many others were newly constructed.[17] Their construction was supported by neighbourhood committees, local government bodies, and in many cases they were even financed by foreign Muslim organisations and countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Turkey. Those who formerly observed the canonical Islamic rituals could now do so openly, and many who never cared for religious observance, especially including many young people, started to pray or to fast in the month of Ramadan. Meeting the

[15] For details regarding the new law, see Anderson 1994: 178-79.

[16] Fierman provides an excellent analysis of the assertion of Uzbek national identity during the 1980s – including attempts at a positive reinterpretation of national history and the strengthening of the use of the Uzbek language (Fierman 1989).

[17] There are no reliable statistics concerning the number of mosques that opened during *glasnost* and in the first years of independence. According to Akiner there was an in increase in the number of functioning mosques in Uzbekistan from a total of circa 300 in 1989 to more than 5000 in 1993 (Akiner 1996: 118). Polonskaya and Malashenko estimate their number to have grown to approximately 3000 by the beginning of 1992 (Polonskaya and Malashenko 1994: 115). Citing informal sources in the religious administration of Uzbekistan, Krämer speaks of about 1800 mosques in 1993 (Krämer 2002: 85).

increased demand for information about the doctrinal and ritual aspects of Islam, mosques offered Qur'anic courses, a general practice in Muslim countries that had been outlawed in the Soviet era. *Ulama*, who had formerly provided Islamic education in secret, could now do this freely. In the first years of independence, schools offered courses in the Arabic script, which had been used to write the Central Asian languages in pre-revolutionary times. The media frequently published articles about religious issues, and radio and television broadcast programmes on Islam. A great number of books and booklets, providing basic information about the tenets of Islam were published and sold quickly, given the increased interest in everything that had to do with religion. Pre-revolutionary religious texts reappeared in Cyrillic transcription, among them many Jadidist works.[18] In 1992, the Qur'an was translated into Uzbek for the first time. In the first years of independence, there were even energetic public debates about replacing the Cyrillic alphabet, used since the 1920s for the Turkic languages in Central Asia, with the Arabic script. However, the Uzbek government later decided to introduce a modified Latin alphabet, as did also Turkmenistan.

Facing these overall developments, the regional leadership of Central Asia had little choice but to revamp its policy regarding religion in general and Islam in particular. At the end of 1990, the Communist Party of Uzbekistan declared that despite its continuing adherence to a scientific materialism, the Party dissociated itself from the crude anti-religious actions of the past (Polonskaya and Malashenko 1994: 115).

The political leaders of the new states of Central Asia responded to the region's religious revival by participating in the public display of Muslim piety in a manner unthinkable in the Soviet era. The presidents of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, both of whom had held leading positions in the Communist Party of their respective Soviet Republics, made their oath of office with one hand on the Qur'an and the other on the constitution, and both visited the holy city of Mecca after their accession to office, as did the president of Kyrgyzstan. It became common to see high state officials on television making religious gestures, employing pious phrases, and referring frequently to the moral values of Islam. The late president of Turkmenistan, Saparmyrat Niyazov, was particularly fond of surrounding himself with mullahs at public appearances (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006).

In the years following the liberalisation of the regime's policy toward Islam, holy sites also experienced a revival. Throughout the country, dilapidated shrines were renovated or reconstructed, and there was an enormous increase in the number of pilgrims visiting them. In part, the great upsurge in

[18] For a critical overview of the available religious literature in Uzbekistan, see Khalid 2003: 584-585.

interest in shrines was a consequence of the previous regime's attacks on holy places and of the violent measures it used to prevent people from visiting them. Independence also brought about a revitalisation of the region's old Sufi tradition, which had been particularly repressed during the Soviet period.[19] With the opening of borders, the remaining Sufi masters re-established links with their respective congregations in the outside world and began to rebuild *tariqas* (Sufi orders) at home. However, as some observers assume, given the eradication of the organisational basis of Sufism, particularly that of the *pir-murid* (master-disciple) relation, the reconstruction of the *tariqa*s remains a difficult tusk. As Khalid notes, 'the new adepts' knowledge of the intricacies of Sufi ritual is often superficial, whereas older practices of initiation are widely disregarded. Post-Soviet Sufism is not a return to the past but the creation of something new' (Khalid 2007: 120; for a similar assessment, see also Schubel 1999: 74).

Another important effect of post-Soviet political changes was the opening of the country to the outside world, which allowed for the renewal of contacts with the broader Muslim world. Uzbeks could now leave to study Islam abroad. Foreign Muslim missionaries, mainly from the Near East and Pakistan, came in great number to Uzbekistan and the adjacent regions to preach their own, often highly politicised version of Islam. Taking a strict literalist interpretation of Islam as their point of departure, they called for the purification of local practices through the elimination of 'corrupting' elements. This quest for a 'pure' Islam that is valid in every cultural context is a major characteristic of modern transnational Islamic movements. It entails, as Olivier Roy points out, 'an impoverishment of its content, which has to be thoroughly explicit and not linked with inherited cultural habitus or collateral knowledge (literature, oral traditions, customs)' (Roy 2004: 25).

The decline of the Soviet Union was also accompanied by the emergence of some political Islamic groups, whose spokespersons demanded the thorough Islamisation of state and society, whether peacefully or otherwise. Although external radical forces played an important role in this development, religious fundamentalism in Uzbekistan is in part a home-made phenomenon, the 'first seeds of which were sown already in the 1970s in the milieu of underground Islamic learning' in the Ferghana Valley (Khalid 2007: 144). Under the influence of fundamentalist/reformist literature that at that time had found its way into the Soviet Union through informal channels, some of the students turned against Hanafism, the dominant Islamic school of jurisprudence in Central Asia, criticising it for its traditional inclination to seek a balance between the Shari'a and local customs. These students of

[19] Several of the great Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandiyya, Yasawiyya, and Kubrawiyya originated in Central Asia.

religion, who soon became known as the 'Young Wahhabis', called instead for the cleansing of local Islam of unlawful innovations.[20] After 1988, the advocates of a 'pure' Islam emerged from the underground, and fundamentalist teachings in the tradition of Wahhabism[21] began to gain some ground in the region, due not least to ideological and material support from Saudi Arabia.

During the early 1990s, fundamentalist propaganda resulted in some places – particularly in the Ferghana Valley – in tensions within the society. One could find mutually hostile Muslim factions frequenting separate mosques. Advocates of a strict obedience to Islamic law urged their religiously indifferent compatriots to join the public prayers in the mosque, to fast in the month of Ramadan, or – in the case of women – to obey the Islamic rules of modesty in their outward appearance. Still, such fundamentalist activity was restricted to a small minority, and political Islam remains a marginal phenomenon in Uzbekistan where, as in the other countries of the region, the majority of the population continues to understand Islam in profoundly secular ways.

The religious boom that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union became less forceful in the course of the first half decade of independence. While there was a sharp rise in the attendance of religious services in the mosques from 1990 to 1992, attendance declined after 1993, once the newly gained religious freedom became routine.[22] As Akiner points out, nowhere in Central Asia has 'the extraordinary proliferation of mosques and other Islamic institutions been driven by renascent religious sentiments alone. One powerful motivation has undoubtedly been the desire to find new, non-Soviet expressions of national identity' (Akiner 1996: 119). On the other hand, increasingly repressive state policies towards some expressions of Islam have contributed to its increasingly marginal presence in the public space, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In both countries, the

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[20] Most of these 'Young Wahhabis' were descendents of traditional *ulama* families and graduates of the *madrasa* in Bukhara. Some of them also worked as imams and teachers, until they were expelled from the official institutions because of their divergent views (see Babadzhanov 1999: 114). For detailed accounts of the development of Islamic fundamentalism among some of the Central Asian *ulama*, see also Babadzhanov 2002 and Olcott 2007.

[21] The term Wahhabism refers to a reformist Islamic movement which emerged on the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century. Its adherents rely upon the puritanical teachings of the Hanbali scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), who called for a cleansing of the religion of 'pagan' elements such as the custom of visiting shrines. At the beginning of the 20th century, the ruling family of the Saudis adopted the teachings of ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's as state doctrine.

[22] Muminov made a similar observation with regard to shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan (Muminov 1996: 367).

governments have incorporated local forms of Islam into their state-building ideologies, while at the same time severely suppressing other manifestations (and interpretations) of the religion. However, before turning to the discussion of current religious policies, I shall outline the main features of nationalism that – albeit to varying degrees – the new Central Asian governments have adopted as the ideological foundation of their states.

## 2.3 Nationalism without socialism

During *glasnost*, none of the Central Asian Communist Party leaders showed much enthusiasm for democratic transformation; rather, they sided with those opposing the new political course in Moscow. At the time of the March 1991 referendum, initiated by Gorbachev, the Central Asian republics voted for the preservation of the Soviet Union. According to Polat, shortly before the Soviet system collapsed, the Communist Party leaders in Uzbekistan announced their determination to 'continue building communism even if the Gorbachev government introduced capitalism' (Polat 2000: 44). Only when the attempted putsch against Gorbachev failed did they take on the role of 'national leaders', declaring the independence of their republics from Moscow. As Khalid notes, the ruling political elites of Central Asia

> retained their grip on power, which was threatened by a democratized reconstitution of the Soviet Union, by claiming it in the name of the nation (…) Communist *apparatchiki*, all of whom had risen to power only recently, suddenly became founding fathers of new national states (Khalid 2007: 129).

They renounced Marxism-Leninism and replaced it with nationalism as the ideological underpinning of the state. Political elites began to invoke their respective nation's history and to call for a return to national values and traditions corrupted and discredited by Soviet colonial power. Each of the new nation states 'presents itself as the result of centuries-long striving of its nation to unite and gain political independence', notwithstanding the fact that the very emergence of the Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and other peoples of Central Asia as 'nations' is itself the product of Soviet nation-building policy, as are the territorial units they inhabit (Khalid 2007: 130).

The national demarcation of the people of Central Asia is a product of the late 19th and early 20th century. Originally, it stems from the efforts of Russian colonial administrators to categorise the populations of extensive territories in terms of the romantic European idea of the nation. With reference to the notion that a common language is the most important factor in defining the nation, in 1897 the people of Central Asia were divided into separate 'nationalities,' each of which was thought to have its own 'mother tongue.' As Ingeborg Baldauf notes, this occurred at a time when knowledge

of grades of linguistic differentiation (language vs. dialect) among speakers of diverse Turkic idioms was still quite underdeveloped (Baldauf 1995: 21-22).

On the basis of the assumption that the ethnic fragmentation of Central Asia was a source of political instability, the Soviets, beginning in 1924, sought to effect the 'national delimitation' of the region. What was formerly known as Russian Turkistan was divided into five 'national republics': Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Stalin followed earlier Russian authorities in assuming that language defines nationality; therefore, the territorial demarcation followed the principle of language affiliation rather than actually existing notions of collective identity.[23] However, as early ethnographic and historical accounts testify, language had not previously played a crucial role in the collective self-ascription of the people of Central Asia, many of whom were bi-lingual (Turkic-Iranian) and identified themselves with reference to tribal affiliation, religion, regional/local affiliation, settlement patterns, economic activities and ways of life (rural/urban, nomadic/agriculturalist). Thus, the Soviet regime created artificial national units within territorial boundaries which did 'not conform to any of the geographical units that have traditionally formed the basis for state-building in Central Asia' (van Schendel and Zürcher 2001: 2-3). Each of the newly created 'nations' became equipped with its own 'national' history and culture, which served as markers of its unity and particularity. Contrary to what many expected, the Soviets did not treat communism and nationalism as mutually exclusive ideologies. In the 1930s, according to Khalid:

> Official discourse came to accept – indeed to assert – that national and ethnic identities were permanent, but it still did not compromise on the basic universalism of historical progress. Although the final destination was the same for each nation, the Soviets also accepted as self-evident that different national groups had travelled different distances along that path – that some were more advanced then the others (Khalid 2007: 65).

Although the communist state supported selective regional nationalisms through the promotion of national cadres, the members of which were encouraged to investigate (and celebrate) their republic's particular history, culture, and traditions, it was careful not to give rise to political nationalism aspiring to sovereignty. The national leaders got the opportunity to create their own national subsystems on the condition that they remained loyal to the central government. According to Stalin's famous phrase, the peoples of

[23] For discussions of Soviet nationalism and nationality policy, see Baldauf 1995; Bölükbaşı 2001; Fragner 2001; Khalid 2003, 2007.

the Soviet Union had to be 'national in form and socialist in content'. As the ongoing state-supported revival of nationalism in Central Asia testifies, Soviet nation-building policy was highly successful, notwithstanding its arbitrariness. As Bert Fragner remarks, since Soviet nationalism developed independently of Marxist ideology, 'it can be easily continued at a time when Marxism-Leninism has been officially, and substantially, abolished' (Fragner 2001: 29).

Students of nationalism have repeatedly pointed to the crucial role of the past in the formulation and maintenance of collective identities, stressing that members of ethnic groups and nations usually base their consciousness of unity and peculiarity on the notion of a commonly shared history (for example, see Assmann 1999; Giesen 1999). As Veit Bader points out, although national histories do not necessarily lack objective plausibility, they are mainly the product of a selective accentuation and reconstruction and are 'often mobilised for the strategic stabilisation of collective identities, and projected back to time immemorial: histories are turned into *historical myths*' (Bader 1995: 133; author's translation). Current processes of state-building in Central Asia vividly illustrate the strategic use of history for the consolidation of the nation-state and for the legitimisation of political power. The new political elites of Central Asia attach great importance to the restoration and re-evaluation of their nations' heritage which, they claim, has been distorted and belittled in Soviet historiography. For example, according to the Uzbek president Karimov:

> Historical memory, the restoration of an objective and truthful history of the nation and its territory is given an extraordinary place in the revival and growth of national self-consciousness and national pride. History can be a genuine tutor of the nation. The deeds and feats of great ancestors enliven historical memory, shape a new civil consciousness, and become a source of moral education and imitation (Karimov 1997: 87).

All claims of breaking with the Soviet heritage notwithstanding, post-socialist national narratives reproduce Soviet ideology and historiography both with respect to the concept of the nation itself and to the notion of history as a continuous trajectory of progress. The main difference is that history is no longer seen as culminating in the realisation of the communist utopia but in the establishment of a politically independent nation-state. While the major outlines of 'national history', developed in the Soviet era, were left untouched, there are certain shifts in accent in the evaluation of particular historical events and personages, such as the transformation of Timur from a scourge of history to *the* national hero in Uzbekistan. As Louw writes:

> If Soviet historiography had read Central Asia's past as a prologue to the Soviet present, casting the Central Asians as temporal refugees, removed but not yet redeemed from a static past of custom and ignorance (…), now Central Asian nation builders reduced the Soviet past to the status of a temporal interruption in their national history (Louw 2007: 22-23).

The president of Uzbekistan has also undertaken systematic efforts to create, transmit and impose a new 'national ideology' that serves in part to legitimise his particularly authoritarian patterns of rule. 'The ideology of national independence' has been developed in a large corpus of texts and is published (with both the president and Uzbek scholars cited as authors) in a series of numbered volumes reminiscent of the Collected Works of Marx and Lenin. Some of these texts are compulsory reading at schools and universities, where students in all fields have to pass an examination on the dominant ideology, as had been the case in the Soviet Union with Marxist-Leninist ideology (see also March 2002: 371).[24] In the words of president Karimov:

> [The] ideology of national independence is based on age-old traditions, customs, language and the spirit of our nation, in close combination with general human values [and] should serve the task of bringing to the hearts and minds of the people confidence in the future, bring up love for the Fatherland, love for fellow-men, benevolence, courage and tolerance, feeling of justice and aspiration for knowledge and enlightenment (Karimov 1995: 133).

The entire ideological project is characterised by anachronistic references to the 'Uzbek nation' in times when a group bearing that name had not yet appeared in the historical record. In his writings and public speeches, Karimov stresses emphatically the 'huge cultural legacy' of the country, 'in the territory of which many civilizations passed down their values from one generation to the other, thus forming an uninterrupted time link and continuity of spiritual and cultural values' (Karimov 1995: 126). All famous personages who happened to live on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan become retrospectively 'Uzbeks' and are elevated to the status of 'national heroes' (*milliy qahramonlar*). Some of the heroes of what in the new official usage is called the nation's 'golden heritage' (*oltin meros*) were already positively valued figures in the Soviet era, such as the philosopher and physician Ibn Sina (980-1037) or the 15th century poet Alisher Navoi. Others, however, have become honoured only after independence. The most

[24] In the State University of Urganch where – as in many other educational institutions of the country – books from the Soviet era were nearly completely annihilated (in Urganch by burning) – the blue tomes of Karimov's collected works form almost three quarters of the library stock.

important re-evaluation of a historical figure concerns Timur (Tamerlane), the 14th century conqueror of Turko-Mongol origin who was born in present day Shahrisabz in Uzbekistan and who is now regarded not merely as a great Uzbek hero but as the founder of the first Uzbek state. To quote Karimov again:

> How many times in the past when we read and heard about 'Timur – a conqueror', and 'Timur – a destroyer' did we ask ourselves: 'How could such a culture and economy flourish on our ground during his reign? Only after gaining independence could we render proper veneration to and appraisal of our great ancestor' (Karimov 1997: 87).

Fragner has called the cult of Timur in Uzbekistan a 'bit of a masterpiece':

> Following up the (typically Soviet) theory that a nation's progress consists mainly of establishing national territory and statehood, it is natural that Timur is now officially perceived as the great forerunner of Uzbekistan, having united in his state three historical regions of Central Asia for the first time in history (Fragner 2001: 30).

In the new official reading of history, all cultural and intellectual activity since the time of Timur was directed towards national independence, which has been finally achieved under the leadership of the country's current president, portrayed almost as the incarnation of the great ruler and state-builder Timur himself. In the words of Karimov, with independence the nation had got 'powerful opportunities' to regain its 'genuine history and ethnic identity' and to rejuvenate its 'popular ethnic spirituality, morality and culture confirming the exclusive durability of the nation's mentality' (Karimov 1995: 122). As Andrew March stresses, the rehabilitation of Timur is 'the deliberate elevation of values associated with a (single) strong leader, centralized statehood and political order achieved through the manipulation of an untouchable symbol' (March 2002: 376).

## 2.4 Islam as national heritage

Given the region's old Islamic tradition and the increased popular interest in religion during the Soviet Union's decline and after its demise, the new regimes had little other choice than to incorporate Islam into their national rhetoric. The same political elites that opposed every public manifestation of Islam in their republics well into the *glasnost* era now celebrate it as an indispensable part of their nations' history and identity, thus making of Islam 'an adjunct of nation-building,' that thereby serves to counteract 'the supra-national appeal of the religion' (Akiner 1996: 117). The emphasis on national exclusivity is epitomised by the dissolution of the formerly unified Muslim Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM)

along state lines. Since the early 1990s, each republic has had its own religious administration, working in much the same way as in the Soviet era.

Turkmenistan provides perhaps the most striking example of post-independence processes of nationalising Islam. In his attempt to mark off the Turkmen from other Islamic nations, president Niyazov practically sanctified traditional religious customs and beliefs while at the same time suppressing any appeals to a 'global' Islam as alien to the Turkmen spirit and temperament. Thus, only through their ability to synthesise 'pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions with Islamic ones' could the Turkmen maintain their national character (Türkmenbashy 2003: 173). The official attitude towards Islam in Uzbekistan shares basic ideological features with Niyazov's evocation of a decidedly 'Turkmen' Islam. Thus, president Karimov stresses the necessity of the revival of the Islamic foundations of society as 'an important step on the path to self-identification and the restitution of historical memory and cultural-historical integrity' (Karimov 1997: 89).

> Without this holy religion, our nation cannot be imagined. Religious values and Islamic thoughts have so much penetrated into our life that without them we would lose our sense of self. (…) Even those who do not have any profound knowledge of the religion cannot live without [obeying] religious manners and customs (*urf-odatlar*), [cannot live] without Islamic feelings. Our Muslimness (*musulmanchiligimiz*), our relation to God is also clearly manifest in some of our national values (*milliy qadriyatlar*), to such a degree that all of our Muslim compatriots involuntarily conform to them. (…) It means that the religion has so deeply penetrated our hearts and self-consciousness that no power and no propaganda can ever tear it out (Karimov 2001: 213; author's translation).

Thus, within the discourse of the regime, Islam is not referred to as a divinely revealed religion addressing all mankind but rather as cultural and historical heritage, which also entails non-Islamic elements. President Karimov in his 'ideology of national independence' emphasises 'national traditions of Islam', which provide the nation with the spiritual and moral values necessary for its healthy and peaceful development (Karimov 1997: 89). This distinctly regional Islam – referred to mainly as the 'religion of our forefathers' (*oto-bobolarimizning dini*) – is portrayed as one based on humanitarianism (*insonga muhabbat*), spirituality (*ma'naviylik*), and ethnic, cultural, and religious tolerance (*sabr-bardoshlik*), unlike politicised versions of Islam 'imported' from the outside (Karimov 1997: 89). According to official discourse, these values are particularly present in the teachings of the great medieval Sufis of Central Asian origin:

> If we speak about Islam we first of all think of God and His Prophet and the great scholars and imams who are spiritually near to us. (…) We think of such perfect [Sufi] masters (*piri komillar*) as Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband, Ahmad Yasavi, Abdulkhalik Ghijduvani, and Zamanshah. Our spiritual life is most closely connected to these great names. Who could deny this truth? (Karimov 2001: 215; author's translation).

The Uzbek government has taken a noticeably benevolent attitude towards the revival of the region's Sufi tradition – particularly that of the Naqhsbandiyya – as a fundamental element of the nation's 'golden heritage' (see Zarcone 1995; Schubel 1999; Paul 2004; Papas 2005; Hilgers 2006). The shrines of some famous Islamic mystics have been renovated at the state's expense, and the government celebrates the anniversaries of famous Sufis almost as an act of state (see also Chapter 7).

With independence, there has been a rise in popular and scientific writings on the Sufi tradition, including the publication of a great number of hagiographic works. Scholars have repeatedly pointed to the highly anachronistic manner in which 'post-Soviet hagiography' portrays medieval saints, presenting them not only as particularly modest, morally pure, humanistic, or truthful, but also as patriots who strove for freedom and independence for their fatherland. As Jürgen Paul remarks, such qualities 'are taken from the arsenal of current political demands' and allow the Sufi heroes of the nation's cultural heritage to appear 'in the trappings of Uzbek nationalism' (Paul 2004: 630; see also Schubel 1999: 80). Popular writings also emphasise the 'worldwide fame' of leading members of Sufi orders (*tariqat*), which is a general characteristic of the regime's discourse as well. In his statement about the perfect Sufi, quoted above, president Karimov also stresses that 'in the entire world of Islam, their sacred names are spoken out with boundless respect' (Karimov 2001: 215; author's translation). Evidently, one aim of such statements, as Schubel suggests, is to present 'the Uzbeks – who have long been taught that their culture was inferior to that of the Russians – a vision of their culture as one that played a central role in Islamic and, thus, world history' (Schubel 1999: 79).

By re-evaluating the region's Sufi heritage and supporting shrine-based religious activities, the government of independent Uzbekistan sets itself in sharp opposition to the policy of its predecessor. As I have shown in the introductory chapter, the Soviets displayed a particularly hostile attitude towards this kind of Muslim religiosity, regarding it as especially backward and superstitious and as the most serious obstacle to progress. The Karimov government's benevolence towards saints (Sufi and other) and their shrines is obviously guided by the notion that it is less of a potential political threat

than scripturalist variants of the faith. The current regime's policy of 'nationalising' Islam, however, is by no means a novelty. Rather, the regime's emphasis on Islam as 'national heritage' is a heightened continuation of attempts that were already characteristic of Soviet nationality policies 'to present ritual and even religion more broadly in terms of national and not just religious identity' (Saroyan 1997: 69).

## 2.5 The new official Islam

The civil war in Tajikistan following the decline of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Taliban as a military and political force in Afghanistan have served to remind the new regimes of Central Asia of the potential danger political Islam could pose to the stability of the region and, for that matter, to their power. In order to suppress 'the wrong kind of Islam, one that makes political claims of any sort, or indeed one whose expression the regimes do not control' (Khalid 2007: 131), the governments of the newly independent states continue to oversee religious institutions and activities by administrative means inherited from the Soviet Union. State interference with religion is particularly strong in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, both countries being accused by human rights groups of most severely violating religious rights nominally proclaimed in their constitutions.

According to its constitution, Uzbekistan (like all the new states of the region) is a secular state. President Karimov even provides an 'Islamic' reasoning for the necessity of the separation of religion from politics, arguing that this provides Islam with the best conditions to flourish. According to him, Timur, who strived 'at any time and at any place for the strengthening of Islam', firmly believed that 'the state has to do the work of the state while religion has to do the work of religion. This [maxim] has not lost its significance in our days' (Karimov 2001: 91; author's translation). This rather anachronistic argument serves, to be sure, as a sideswipe at the defenders of an interpretation of Islam in which there cannot be a division between mundane and religious spheres, since all manifestations of human life are regulated by one and the same divine law. Juridical guarantees notwithstanding, Uzbekistan has established tight control over religious institutions, thereby applying a model of secularism in which – much in the same way as in the Turkish Republic – religion is not separated from the state but subordinated to it.

Overseeing religious institutions and activities is formally the responsibility of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (*O'zbekiston Musulmonlar Idorasi*, MBU), the successor of the Soviet era Muslim Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). Though formally independent, the MBU is subject to the directives of the Committee of Religious Affairs

under the Cabinet of the Ministers (CRA) which itself depends on the instructions of the presidential administration. The MBU is required to represent and propagate Hanafi Islam which is clearly preferred by the government since it traditionally accommodates local customs and 'does not impose a minute surveillance over the way of life or require everyday conduct to accord strictly to religious duties' (Babadzhanov 2004: 53). Similar to its Soviet era counterpart, the MBU issues *fatwa*s in accordance with the government's wishes, such as the one that supported the prohibition of the use of loudspeakers in mosques by arguing that it is not 'one of the fundamentals of Islam' (Khalid 2007: 171). Moreover, the MBU has control over the appointment of imams, the publication of Islamic materials, and the content of the Friday sermons (*xutba*). Thus, imams are not free in the choice of the subjects they address in the *xutba*, but have to follow the directives of the CRA via MBU.[25] Khalid argues that:

> The regime uses the MBU to counter the 'extremists' on religious grounds, arguing that those who seek to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan (…) are not good Muslims. It does so by turning to the Hanafi tradition of the religion, in which the regime can find a position that validates coexistence with the state and that it can wield against the claims of those who reject local customs and traditions for not being authentically Islamic. This stance has, in effect, turned the Hanafi canon into an orthodoxy that is quite new in the history of Central Asia (Khalid 2007: 171).

According to Talal Asad, there is a domain for orthodoxy in Islam 'wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct*[26] practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones' (Asad 1986: 15). In this sense, traditionalist Hanafi teachings have actually achieved the status of orthodoxy in present-day Uzbekistan. However, the dominance of the Hanafi school is by no means a novelty in Central Asia. As Ashirbek Muminov shows in his historical account of the theological schools in Transoxiana, Hanafi teachings were already firmly established in the region by the late 8th century and retained their dominance up to the Bolshevist take over. From the late 10th century to the 1920s, all Muslim judges in Transoxania came from the ranks of the Hanafi *ulama* who for their part

[25] Sermons typically address moral and religious issues, comments on the origin of particular Islamic rituals and holidays, and so on. On particular occasions, such as national holidays, imams of state controlled mosques are reportedly expected to praise the benefits of independence – and president Karimov himself – has brought for Uzbekistan. According to NGO observers, on 'Constitution Day, for example, imams discuss the Uzbek constitution and how because Uzbeks live in a secular state they must obey secular law' (ICG 2003: 8).

[26] Emphasis in original.

were strongly interconnected with the political powers (Muminov 1999: 102-104).

Hanafi teaching is at variance with the secondary nature of practices compared with belief. Based on this notion, the Hanafi *ulama* of Central Asia developed a highly tolerant attitude towards many customary practices that were not backed up by the sacred textual sources of Islam (Muminov 1999: 104). In making the traditional Hanafi doctrine the (quasi) official form of Islam in Uzbekistan, the Karimov regime has merely reactivated the region's particular Islamic tradition that was severely discredited in the Soviet era. However, the regime's demonising of any other interpretation of Islam as alien to Uzbek national character and as politically subversive, turns state supported Hanafi doctrine itself into the instrument of an intolerant, repressive religious policy. Actually, whoever calls for the 'purification' of local Islam of 'pagan' elements or for the strict observance of the Shari'a risks arrest on the grounds of religious extremism.

## 2.6 Combating religious 'extremism'

In 1990, before it could develop any serious political activities, the Karimov administration crushed the Uzbek branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party (see Olcott 2007). Islom Karimov, who became First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan in 1989, continued his harsh policy towards political Islamic organisations after being elected president in 1991. The prelude to the new Uzbek regime's clamp down on Islamist groups was a demonstration organised by *Adolat* ('Justice') in December 1991 in Namangan in the Ferghana Valley, only three months after the country gained independence from Moscow. *Adolat*, an Islamist group founded in 1990 and at that time consisting of roughly 5000 mainly young members, 'portrayed itself as a response to moral decay, corruption and social injustice, and demanded an Islamic revolution' (Louw 2007: 25). In the short time of its legal existence, *Adolat* established a number of mosques and *madrasa*s across the region and successfully engaged in law and order maintaining activities which, given the high crime rate at that time, reportedly earned them some popular support. During Karimov's visit to Namangan, a crowd of protesters called on him to resign from office and demanded the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, including the implementation of the Shari'a. The president reacted by banning *Adolat* and arresting 27 of its members.[27] Karimov justified his increasingly authoritarian patterns of rule,

[27] The most prominent figure of the movement, Tohir Yoldash, managed to flee to Tajikistan where he actively supported the Tajik Islamic movement during the civil war (Polat 2000: 47).

including limitations to the freedom of the press and the banning of all opposition political parties and groups by pointing to the (real or perceived) threat to the state from Islamist groups the warding off of which required a strong political leadership.[28]

From the mid 1990s onwards, the regime has hardened its policy towards groups and individuals whose practice and interpretation of Islam it regarded as extremist. The campaign against 'religious extremism' had its peak at the end of 1997, when security forces arrested over a thousand persons in Namangan (Ferghana Valley) in response to a series of murders obviously carried out by Islamic radicals.[29] On the whole, the measures affected mainly those who frequented mosques led by fundamentalist imams. In many cases, however, people were taken into custody simply because of their strict religious conduct or because they wore a beard, generally seen as a sign of Islamic piety. The Namangan events caused the regime to introduce, in 1998, a new Law on Freedom of Worship and Religious Organisations which 'imposed strict control over religious observance, making it the purview of officially recognised organisations and tightening the rules for their registration' (Khalid 2007: 175).

On the one hand, the new law confirms freedom of worship and the right of the citizens to profess or not to profess any religion (Article 3).[30] It also stipulates that the state does not interfere with the activity of religious organisations as long they do not transgress the law (Article 5). On the other hand, the criteria for religious organisations (including mosques) to gain legal status became more stringent. Thus, a mosque has to supplement an application with at least 100 signatures of Uzbek citizens over 18 in order to get registered with the state. The application also has to contain the protocol of the founding meeting, rules and regulations, a document certifying address and payment of the registration fee (Article 11). The law further prohibits 'the creation and activity of religious political parties and movements' (Article 5) and appearing 'in public places in religious attire', except for ministers of registered religious organisations (Article 14). Amendments to the law outlaw the private teaching of religion and also ban teaching in mosques, unless the latter have the special permission of the Muftiate (ICG

[28] For general accounts of the political situation in Uzbekistan, including the regime's policy toward Islam, see ICG 2001, 2003.

[29] During the Namangan unrest, altogether seven people, among them four policemen, were killed.

[30] The following quotations are taken from the English translation of the law, online available: http://www.stetson.edu~psteeves/ relnews/uzbeklaw.html. (Accessed 12 September 2006).

2002: 8).[31] As a consequence of the 1998 law, thousands of mosques that failed to meet the requirements were closed down as were also most of the *madrasa*s that were established in the first years of independence. Presently, ten legally operating *madrasa*s offer Islamic education in Uzbekistan.[32]

Despite employing a policy that suppresses any manifestation of 'independent' Islam, between 1999 and 2005 the country witnessed further violent attacks ascribed to militant Islamists. In addition to a series of car bombs in Tashkent in 1999 in which 16 people were killed and some 100 injured, there were two cases of suicide bombings and shootings in 2004 in the capital. The attacks elicited harsh reactions from government forces against suspected religious extremists. In particular, the 1999 bombings were followed by a dramatic increase in the number of arrests of people suspected of supporting 'independent' religious organisations. Louw, who carried out field work in the immediate aftermath of the 1999 Tashkent bombings, writes that it came to play a role in the lifeworld of the people in Uzbekistan that is similar to the significance of September 11, 2001 for many Westerners. She asserts that:

> For many people the date 16 February 1999 had become an important reference point: for some, it stood out as a reminder that evil may be just around the corner. For others, it stood out as a date that marked when it became particularly difficult to be a practising Muslim in Uzbekistan (Louw 2007: 30).

Four years after the Tashkent bombings, at the time of my arrival in Uzbekistan, religious practice was still surrounded by an atmosphere of uneasiness and sometimes even fear, as the events mentioned at the beginning of this chapter indicate. Much in the same way as described by Rasanayagam for the Andijon and Samarqand regions, worry about falling into the category 'Wahhabi' continues to affect 'the way people chose to express their spirituality' (Rasanayagam 2006a: 113). People are often unsure about the permissibility or otherwise of certain forms of religious expression which is due to the extremely vague character of the regime's discourse of 'true religiousness' (*haqiqiy dindorlik*) as opposed to 'false religiousness' (*soxta dindorlik*). Within official discourse, 'good' Islam is described as moderate, non-political, and in harmony with Uzbek mentality and traditions. However, as

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[31] This development is not restricted to Uzbekistan. By 1997, Turkmenistan has also strengthened its legal regulations with respect to registration of religious organisations which are now required to provide applications with at least 500 signatures. At the end of decade, the government demolished or closed down many mosques lacking official approval, abolished all but one of the newly established *madrasa*s, prohibited missionary activities of whatever kind and expelled roughly 300 foreign Muslims from the country (see Kehl-Bodrogi 2006).

[32] While schools are not allowed to offer lessons in religion, students in state educational institutions have to take a course in 'Religious Extremism and Fundamentalism'.

Louw points out, the 'more specific contours of the Uzbek "Muslimness" are in no way clearer and less ambiguous than the contours and contents of its alien "Wahhabi" counterpart' (Louw 2007: 37). Like in other parts of Central Asia, Wahhabism is used in Uzbekistan as a catch-all label to describe Muslim groups suspect to the regimes. Just as the synonymously applied terms 'extremist' and 'fundamentalist', the term 'Wahhabi' designates advocates of an Islamic state and the implementation of the Shari'a as well as people who – without following any political goals – display a strict observance of the canonical rules of Islam. Muslims openly proselytizing

> on behalf of Islam, encouraging others to observe the Islamic duties of prayer, abstinence from alcohol, and so on, have also been labelled Wahhabis by law enforcement agencies, whether or not they have any links to political or militant Islamic movements (Rasanayagam 2006a: 107).

For president Karimov, extremism and fundamentalism have nothing to do with religion but everything with striving for political and economic power. 'Political movements', he stresses, 'want to take advantage of our sacred values for political purposes' (Karimov 2001: 45; author's translation). His views on religious extremism – heavily propagated through the media, educational institutions, and neighbourhood committees – vividly illustrate the ambiguity of the concept as it is used in regime discourse. According to the president, in the current period of dramatic social, economic, and political transformations, parts of the population revert to the old Soviet mentality 'in calling for a return to utopia and illusionary equality' (Karimov 1997: 24). In this situation, ideas inherent in Wahhabism gained popularity, such as 'advocacy for justice', 'demands for the strict observance of Islamic ethics', and 'the rejection of luxury and greed. It is unfortunate that such slogans have received support and continued to spread in a number of areas of Central Asia in recent years' (Karimov 1997: 24).

While the Karimov regime justifies its authoritarian mode of rule with the impending danger of militant Islamism to the secular state, political analysts point to the low level of support for any kind of politicised Islam from the Uzbek public (for example, see Khalid 2003; Hanks 2007). My findings from Khorezm, to be presented in the following chapters, also demonstrate that the majority of the population understands and practices religion in ways that are 'traditional', rather than 'fundamentalist'.

# *Chapter 3*
# Khorezm – a province and its people

Near the town Pitnak, a few kilometres from the Turkmen border in the northwest of Uzbekistan, the Amu Darya (the antic Oxus) fans out into an extended delta plain forming a fertile oasis within the surrounding steppes and deserts – the Qaraqum in the south and the west, and the Qyzylqum in the north and the east. Since ancient times, this oasis with its countless river channels and irrigation canals that extend as far as the Aral Sea in the north has been known as the 'country of Khorezm' (Khwarazm). The name itself has been variously interpreted as 'lowland', 'the land of the rising sun', or 'fruitful land' (Bosworth 1997: 1061).[33] The natural conditions of Khorezm, reminiscent in many respects of the habitat of the Nile and Mesopotamia, allowed for the early emergence of irrigation-based agriculture with great artificial canals dating back to the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. Before the Russians constructed a railway in the late 19th century, communication between Khorezm and the outside world mainly existed via the caravan routes through the deserts. As Bregel notes, Khorezm's relative isolation from the rest of Central Asia contributed 'to various features of its culture that made it quite distinct from its larger neighbour, Mavarannahr' or Transoxiana (Bregel 2003: 66)

From the 10th century onwards, Arab travellers and geographers gave detailed accounts about the topography, climate, commerce, and culture of the region.[34] Prior to this time, there was a relative lack of written information on the history and culture of Khorezm, so the main sources of information came from archaeological findings. The most extended archaeological work was done by the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographical Expedition and was carried out between the late 1930s and 1960s, under the direc-

[33] For a discussion of legends of origin as well as of attempts to explain the name, see Lerch 1873: 445-448; Tolstov 1953: 82-84.

[34] For overview of early Arab accounts of Khorezm, see Lerch 1873: 478-482.

tion of Sergei Tolstov.[35] The oldest artefacts discovered so far date back to the 4th millennium B.C. The ethnographic team of the expedition also unearthed a wealth of information about material culture, family life, customs, as well as the religious life of the Khorezmians. The most comprehensive study of religion was done by Gleb Snesarev, the head of the ethnographical team of the expedition. Notwithstanding the ideologically biased nature of his work, Snesarev's accounts of what he called 'pre-Islamic remnants' (this included descriptions of healing, shrines, shrine-based religious practices, saintly legends, in addition to a wide range of domestic rituals) were of great value for my own research (Snesarev 1963, 1974, 1976, 1983, 2003). In more than one instance, his observations from the first decades of the Soviet Union made it possible to make comparisons with the present situation.[36]

The present-day province (*viloyat*) of Khorezm in Uzbekistan, where I did the major part of my research, occupies only a part of the larger boarder region known as Khorezm. The province came into existence as a result of the 'national delimitation' of 1924, when the Bolsheviks divided Khorezm between the newly created Soviet Socialist Republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, thus destroying a political entity that had existed in more or less the same form for centuries. Irrespective of which country they are now citizens of, the people of the region have a strong consciousness of their cultural unity. Their identity as Khorezmians derives in no small part from the notion of a shared history, which is summarised in the following paragraph.

## 3.1 Historical overview

In pre-Islamic times, Khorezm was a predominantly Iranian country. Its population spoke an eastern Iranian idiom, originally written in a modified Aramaic alphabet which was later replaced by Arabic characters. From the early 10th century onward, Khorezm came under the rule of various Turkish dynasties whose rulers assumed the old title Khorezm-Shah. Although this development 'inaugurated an accelerating process of ethnic and linguistic turkicisation', the Khorezmian language appears to have survived in some exclaves up to the end of the 14th century (Bosworth 1997: 1062-1063). At the time when Islam began to penetrate the region, the population adhered to

[35] The results of the expedition were presented in a wide range of publications of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. For a comprehensive account of the history of Khorezm from the earliest times to the 13th century, see Tolstov 1953.

[36] For further ethnographic accounts provided by members of the Khorezm Expedition, see Sazonova 1952; Zadykhina 1952. While reports about material culture, family life, agricultural techniques and the like appeared in early publications, the much more politically sensitive issue of religion in Snesarev's respective works were not published before the 1970s.

a local form of Mazdaism, but there is also evidence of Buddhist and Christian movements. In the era of the Khorezm-Shahs, Khorezm was not only a flourishing commercial and agricultural centre, but also a stronghold of Islamic scholarship, with traditionalists, lawyers, theologians, as well as experts of Arabic literacy and philological sciences working there in great number. The Mongolian invasion under Genghis Khan in the early 13th century appears to have caused only a temporary backslide. According to the testimony of Arab travellers, Khorezm in the 14th century had largely regained its former significance in the fields of Islamic learning, the arts, and commerce. Ibn Battuta speaks highly of the pious foundations, *madrasa*s, and hospitals of Khorezm, and also of its inhabitants, with whom he was particularly impressed. He wrote: 'Never have I seen in all the lands of the world men more excellent in conduct (…), more generous in soul, or more friendly to strangers' (Ibn Battuta 1971: 542).

As for economy and trade, these same witnesses mention fruit, dried fish, textiles, and cheese among the main export products from the region. Travellers of all epochs particularly praise the melons of Khorezm and Ibn Battuta even devotes a whole paragraph to them in his travel account. Cut into strips and dried in the sun, melons of his day were exported from Khorezm 'to the remotest parts of India and China, and of all dried fruits there are none which excel them in sweetness' (Ibn Battuta 1971: 547). Among the products that were imported from the steppes and forests were sheep, camels, honey and, above all, slaves (Bosworth 1997: 1063). Up to the end of the 19th century, when the Russians abolished slavery, Khorezm remained a leading centre of the slave trade in this part of the world.

Early sources provide little, if any, information about the particularities of the region's religious life. Ibn Battuta, however, mentions a custom obviously unknown in other parts of the Islamic world in the light of which the Muslims of Khorezm appear to have been rather neglectful in the observance of the normative tenets of Islam:

> They have a praiseworthy custom in regard to [the observance of] prayer-services which I have not seen elsewhere, namely that each of the muezzins in their mosques goes round the houses of those persons neighbouring his mosque, giving them notice of the approaching hour of prayer. Any person who absents himself from the communal prayers is beaten up by the imam (…) in the presence of the congregation, and in every mosque there is a whip hung up for this purpose. He is also fined five dinars, which go towards the expenses of upkeep of the mosque, or of supplying food to the poor and the destitute (Ibn Battuta 1971: 542).

Due to the invasions of Timur only a few years after Ibn Battuta's visit to the region, Khorezm once and for all lost its former importance as one of the main cultural, economic, and commercial centres of Central Asia. The five campaigns of Timur against Khorezm led to the destruction of a great part of the irrigation system, particularly in the north, and also brought about a rapid decline in urban culture throughout the region. More often than not, Timur's campaigns were accompanied by mass killings and the destruction of entire cities. However, as Barthold notes, nowhere had Timur taken such systematic measures to prevent a town from future development as he did it in the case of Urganch, the capital of Khorezm (Barthold 1962: 224). Lying on one of the main trade routes that extended from the Volga to Transoxania and Khurasan, Urganch was a flourishing commercial and cultural centre when, in 1388, Timur razed the city to the ground, sparing only the mosques and *madrasa*s. He transported the surviving population to his capital Samarqand and had barley sown on the place where Urganch had once stood.[37] As will be shown later in this chapter, to this day the inhabitants of Khorezm have continued to hold a deep resentment towards Timur because of this.

At the time when Khorezm was conquered by nomadic Uzbek tribes under the Arabshahids at the beginning of the 16th century, a considerable sedentary population existed only in the southern part of what is today the Uzbek province Khorezm. Having assumed the title 'khan', the Uzbek rulers made Khiva (the principal city in Khorezm since the Timurid period) their capital and from that time on Khorezm gradually became known in the outside world as the Khanate of Khiva, or simply as Khiva. The former capital Kunya ('old') Urganch, partly rebuilt after the devastations of Timur, was abandoned after a change in the course of the Amuy Darya. However, in the early 17th century a new town called Yangi ('new') Urganch was established some 25 kilometres to the north-east of Khiva and it soon became the most important trade centre in the region. For most of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Khanate suffered from political and economic instability, with different Uzbek tribes competing for power. Then, under the rule of the Qongrat Dynasty from the end of the 18th century onwards, political authority was re-established and the situation improved. Nomadic and semi-nomadic Uzbek tribes resettled in the southern part of Khorezm, which led to the expansion of the irrigation system and, thus, to the rise in agricultural productivity. From the early 19th century onwards, Khorezm even experienced a growing cultural revival and became an important centre of Turkic literature in Central Asia. A Russian officer who visited Khiva in 1819 describes its people as 'enjoying a lovely, varied cultural life, including

[37] For a modern Uzbek (Khorezmian) account of the effects of the Timurid invasion, see Jumaniyazov 1993: 115-116.

evenings composing verses, reading books, relating stories, performing music, hearing epic narratives and playing chess' (Allworth 1990: 115).

In the second half of the 19th century, due in part to increased warlike attacks by Turkmen tribes, the economic and political conditions in Khiva took a turn for the worse. A great part of the irrigated land fell barren again and the Khan had to relinquish control over part of his territory to the rebellious Turkmen tribes. Internally weakened, the Khanate could not hold off the rising tide of invasion from the north. In 1873, as the last of the three Uzbek khanates, Khiva fell to the Russians and was subsumed into their protectorate. Muhammad Rahim II declared himself the 'obedient servant of the Emperor of all Russians' and the Khanate's territories on the right bank of the Amu Darya were annexed to Russia.

The Russians interfered little with the internal affairs of the Khanate, with the exception of abolishing slavery. As in Central Asia in general, the effects of their conquest impacted most strongly on the economy. In the early 1880s, in need of better quality cotton, the Russians introduced American cotton into the region. In a few years, 'the area planted with American cotton became twice as large as the area under the local variety. (…) Central Asia was on the road to becoming a land of one-crop agriculture' (Bregel 1992: 203), a trend which was further capitalised on in the Soviet era. Railroads were built to make the transport of cotton to the textile centres in European Russia faster and cheaper, and this added further impetus to the growing of cotton. Under the Russian protectorate, Khiva was also brought into greater contact with other Muslims of the empire. Modernist ideologies, as pioneered by Jadidist intellectuals, also began to penetrate Khorezm and, in some circles, gave rise to pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist ideas.

Although attempts to introduce liberal reforms were made in Khiva under the influence of the 1917 revolution in Russia, acute internal divergences forestalled these efforts. Ultimately, assisted by Turkmen and Uzbek oppositional groups, the Bolsheviks invaded the Khanate in the spring of 1918. Two years later, the last Khan of Khiva was forced to abdicate in favour of a short-lived, nominally independent Khorezmian People's Republic. In 1924, when the Soviets redrew the internal frontiers of Central Asia along ethno-linguistic lines, the Khanate was divided between the newly created Socialist Soviet Republics of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The southern part of Khorezm on the left side of the Amu Darya became an administrative province of Uzbekistan with (New) Urganch as its capital and was henceforth known as the province (Russian: *oblast*; Uzbek: *viloyat*) Khorezm.[38] The left bank of the river together with northern Khorezm was

[38] The ancient capital Kunya Urganch fell within modern Turkmenistan. Nowadays a dusty village, it is home to some of the oldest architectural monuments of historical Khorezm.

incorporated into Qaraqalpaqistan, established as an Autonomous Republic inside the Uzbek SSR.

The territorial division from 1924 was retained when Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Thus, the previously permeable borders between both republics have become transformed into state borders, making communication between the people in each territory increasingly difficult. During the Soviet era it did not matter much on which side of the boarder people lived but, since independence, the relations between the Uzbek and Turkmen governments have soured. For Uzbeks, crossing the border to Turkmenistan became especially difficult after 2003, when the government in Ashgabat introduced new visa regulations, charging Uzbek citizens a fee of 10 US dollars for each day of stay. Families with relatives on both sides of the border can now only visit each other after paying a lot of money. Thus, the formation of two independent states on Khorezm's territory has sealed (at least for the time being) its division, a development that is further supported by nationalist policies on both sides.

## 3.2 Reviving the past

Both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan lay claim to the historical heritage of Khorezm in their respective national ideologies, whilst not bringing up the politically sensitive issue of the prevailing border regimes. Identical historical personages appear on one side of the border as Uzbek national heroes and, on the other side, as Turkmen heroes. To cite an instance, within the framework of an international conference in 2005, the Turkmen government celebrated the architectural monuments of the old Khorezmian capital (Kunya) Urganch as being outstanding examples of the civilising achievements of the Turkmen nation. Two years later, scholars from all over the world were invited to a conference in Ashgabat to honour the memory of the Khorezm-born Islamic scholar Zamakhshari (1075-1144), an excellent theologian and jurist of his time, and hailed him at the conference as a 'great Turkmen thinker'.

Meanwhile, on the Uzbek side of the border, under the motto 'Khorezm, a land with a rich past and a shining future' (*Xorazm – o'tmishi boy, kelajagi munavvar zamin*), efforts have also been made to revive the region's history by associating it with the 'golden heritage' of the Uzbek nation. In November 2004, Khiva's political elites celebrated the 1000$^{th}$ anniversary of the establishment of the 'Khorezm Ma'mun Academy', stressing that the 'light of knowledge and enlightenment has never been extinguished.' A press announcement marked the occasion as follows:

> With independence, a new period of development has begun in the history of Khorezm. Like everywhere in our country, in this ancient region too (…), a great deal of work is being done under the guidance of our president, fostering and propagating self-consciousness and national pride, appreciating the rich history of our country, its great scholars, its unique heritage as well as its centuries old traditions.[39]

Present-day Uzbek historiography celebrates Khorezm not only as the homeland of a number of great Islamic personages who, it is said, contributed to the spread of Uzbekistan's fame in the world, but also as the land where the Avesta emerged. The most prestigious new place in Urganch, where official celebrations are held, is named after the Avesta, which is represented by a huge gold-coloured sculpture in the form of a book.[40] The provincial government even erected an 'Avesta Museum' which is, in fact, in no way connected to the sacred Zoroastrian texts it is devoted to. Although there are official opening hours, the museum is hardly ever open. I managed to visit the exhibition – a medley of used utensils, lay paintings, old photographs, traditional costumes, and the like – only after personally making an appointment with its director.

Among the 'great sons of Khorezm' who are now revered as national heroes, Jalal ad-Din Manguberdi, Muhammad al-Khwarazmi[41], Abu'l-Rayhan al-Biruni[42] and Zamakhshari hold the highest position. Manguberdi, the Khorezm-Shah who fought a series of battles against the troops of Genghis Khan, is particularly honoured as a great patriot. In the words of president Karimov: 'He did not bow to the enemy (…) but died with the word "fatherland" on his lips' (Karimov 2001: 98).[43] School children learn the legend of Manguberdi's deep commitment to and love of his country. According to the story, on arriving in Khorezm Genghis Khan captured Man-

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[39] Official press announcement from 4 February 2004 (my translation from Uzbek). Online, available at: http://www.nuu.uz/admin/ newsannounce/home.print.php?In=uz&new.

[40] Whether Khorezm can be identified as the country where parts of the sacred Zoroastrian texts were written down, as some scholars have suggested, remains unproven up to the present (Bosworth 1994: 1063).

[41] Muhammad al-Khwarazmi (in Uzbek spelling: al-Xorazmiy), mathematician, geographer, and astronomer, lived in the first half of the 9th century. Though originally written in Arabic, his Algebra and other mathematical works were translated into Latin and Spanish and gained him worldwide fame.

[42] Abu'l-Rayhan al-Biruni (in Uzbek spelling: Abu Rayhon al-Beruniy), was born in 973 in Kath, the then capital of Khorezm. He was one of the greatest scholars of medieval Islam, versed in mathematics, astronomy, physics and geography as well as being a distinguished historian and linguist.

[43] My translation from the Uzbek original.

guberdi's little son and sent the following message to the father: 'If you surrender Khorezm without fighting, you will get your son back.' Manguberdi replied unwaveringly: 'You might kill my son, but I will never give my country and my people into the hand of the enemy without defending it to the last drop of my blood.'

Plate 1. The monument of Jalal ad-Din Manguberdi in Urganch.

The Urganch administration dedicated the largest monument in the city to Manguberdi. To herald the fame of al-Khwarazmi and al-Biruni, the great Islamic scholars who worked in the territory of Khorezm, two monuments – each in the form of a mausoleum – were erected after independence. Moreover, following a recent initiative of president Karimov, Al-Khwarazmi is to be honoured by a lifelike statue, located in front of the provincial administration in Urganch. Thus, he will replace the gold-plated phoenix – the bird which symbolises good fortune and also appears on the national coat of arms of Uzbekistan – that has adorned this site since the early years of independence. An acquaintance of mine commented ironically on the initiative: 'They

removed the statue of the bird because it did not bring us luck. Perhaps our president thinks that remembering al-Khwarazmi every time we pass by the monument will better motivate us to perform great deeds for our fatherland.'

In spite of the incorporation of a selected number of their historical personages into the new national pantheon, many Khorezmians are reluctant to identify with Uzbek history as it is presented in the new official discourse. By proclaiming Timur as the central national hero and propounding the Timurid period as the golden age in Uzbek history, the national ideology ignores the particular experiences of Khorezm and marginalises the identity of its people. Given the disastrous effects of the Timurid conquest for Khorezm, it should come as no surprise that the official cult of Timur is held in check there. In Urganch, this new 'national hero' of Uzbekistan is merely represented by a small, inconspicuous bust, almost hidden from view on a side path of a small city park, where most people are not even aware of its existence. My friends to whom I spoke about the statue were of the opinion that even this is too much, since Timur is not worthy of being honoured at all. In the words of a 40-year-old teacher from Urganch:

> How can we honour Timur all of a sudden? In the Soviet era we were taught that he was a cruel ruler who razed Urganch to the ground and sowed barley where it had once stood (*yer bilan bir etib, haydatib arpa ektirdi*). Let them sing his praises in Tashkent. But nobody would dare to call him a hero here.

As a result of the combination of the everyday struggle for survival and the general suspicion about the intentions of the politicians, most people pay little attention to the official celebration of their history. Many of those with whom I discussed the issue disapproved of so much money being spent on monuments, particularly because improvements to the education system and maintenance of the city's infrastructure appear to have been largely neglected since independence. As one of my friends put it: 'Yes, we have now a lot of monuments. But we do not have a single cinema or theatre, and most of our streets are unlit at night.' Notwithstanding, the people of the province have a strong consciousness of being the descendants of an ancient political entity with a venerable history. They continue to think of Khorezm as a unity that transgresses the boundaries of the present-day province and I was often admonished not to think that Khorezm ends at the boarder to Turkmenistan or Qaraqalpaqistan. Regardless of the rather reserved attitude towards the political centre in far-away Tashkent, secessionist ambitions appear to be non-existent. However, in the presidential elections of 1991, the only one so far in which opposition parties have been allowed to participate, Khorezm voted almost unanimously against Islom Karimov in favour of the local

candidate, Muhammad Solih, the leader of the still-banned Erk ('Freedom') party.[44]

While official ideology mainly focuses on events and figures from the past in its attempt to invoke Uzbekistan's glorious history, at the local level there has been an upsurge in interest in the more recent history of the region, especially in Khiva. Here, the figure of Said Muhammad Rahim Khan (r. 1864-1910), popularly known as Feruz II, has undergone a radical re-evaluation. Formerly portrayed as an evil despot who mercilessly exploited the peasants, Feruz is now revered as an enlightened ruler, the author of beautiful poems, the patron of the arts and, particularly, Khorezm's famous musical tradition. Nowadays, being able to claim descent from one of the Khivan khans or from any other high ranking official in the former khanate seems to be a source of prestige. On one occasion, I overheard a middle-aged tourist guide introducing himself to a group of visitors as the grand nephew of Abdallah, the last of the Khivan khans. In other similar situations, people were eager to mention their kinship relationship to one of the khans or to those close to a khan. Referring to the 'radical facelift' Feruz II underwent since the decline of the Soviet Union, Theodore Levin notes: 'Samarqand had Timur, Ferghana had Babur, Bukhara had Bahâ'uddin. Khorezm needed its own heroic figure. It was an opportunistic game' (Levin 1999: 162). However, while both Timur and the 14th century Sufi master Bahauddin Naqshband are assigned crucial importance in the official national ideology, the importance of Feruz II is restricted to the region which points to the relatively peripheral role of Khorezm in the overall political landscape of Uzbekistan.

## 3.3 *Xorazmcha* - the language of Khorezm

> When the communist policy to partition Central Asia necessitated the invention of a modern Uzbekistan in Central Asia to replace the Turkistan, Bukhara, and Khiva of the mid-1920s, Russian cultural officials looked for a logical language base. They soon would standardize the Soviet Uzbek language for its writers on the basis of what specialists conceived to be the cleanest, most distinctive, most Uzbek version of the tongue (Allworth 1990: 237).

This decision was taken in favour of the dialect spoken in the Ferghana Valley, Bukhara, and Tashkent and at the expense of other dialects, including those of Khorezm. As result of the Soviet language policy, the Khorezmian idiom, once a recognized literary language, came to be regarded as an impure, backward form of Uzbek. Although Khorezmians learn standard

[44] Accused of fundamentalist tendencies, Muhammad Solih was later forced into exile.

Uzbek at school, many have difficulty expressing themselves properly in it, which can be the basis of perceived or real discrimination when away from the region. For example, potential disadvantages include limitations in prospects of employment and on university entrance exams. University teachers in Urganch have told me that their students who want to pursue advanced studies in Tashkent sometimes fail their exams because of their inability to express themselves adequately in standard Uzbek.

While their dialect is hardly understood in other parts of Uzbekistan, Khorezmians often pointed out to me that they usually have less difficulty communicating with their Turkmen neighbours in their own idiom. Knowing my ignorance of the Turkmen language, when I left Khorezm for a short trip to Turkmenistan my acquaintances encouraged me: 'Don't worry. Just speak Khorezmian (*Xorazmcha*) and everybody will understand you.' What people referred to as the 'language of Khorezm' (*Xorazm dili*) or simply *Xorazmcha*, is classified by linguists as an Oghuz dialect, and, thus, belongs to the south-western branch of the Turkic language family.[45] As such, it is strongly related to Turkmen, Gagauz, Azeri and Anatolian Turkish. On the other hand, the Khorezmian idiom is in itself divided into various sub-dialects. This situation can be highly frustrating for an anthropologist who, like me, has just learned to communicate in the dialect of a particular village or town, only to discover that some kilometres away people speak another version of *Xorazmcha*, and that to understand it will require yet more time.

## 3.4 The population

With regard to its ethnic composition, Khorezm is probably the most homogeneous province of Uzbekistan. About 95 percent of its inhabitants perceive themselves as Uzbeks, notwithstanding their strong regional identity as Khorezmians (*Xorezmlik*). There is a small minority of ethnic Turkmen, living mainly in and around the town Honqa and in the zones that border on Turkmenistan. The rest consist of Russians, Koreans, Tatars, Qaraqalpaqs, and some (Uzbekicisied) Iranians. According to my informants, Russians were far more numerous during the Soviet era. Since independence, however, most of them have left for Russia but those who remain are mainly to be found in the provincial capital, where most of them live in prefabricated apartment blocks in and around the city-centre, as do also the Koreans who were forcibly settled in Khorezm by Stalin in the late 1940s. By contrast, the Uzbeks of Urganch prefer to live in the more rustic outer districts of the city, in houses made of clay or brick that are large enough for three generations to live together. Like everywhere in Central Asia, most Russians have no

[45] Standard Uzbek belongs to the south-eastern branch of the same language family.

command of the local language; nor do the Koreans, who long ago gave up their mother tongue and now speak primarily in Russian. Private contact between the Russian speaking minority and the Uzbeks appears to be very limited. None of my numerous acquaintances in Urganch counted any Russians among their friends. It is highly unusual to encounter Russians or other non-Uzbek nationalities at the festivities of the Khorezmians – such as life-cycle ceremonies and birthday parties – and inter-ethnic marriages are also the exception. Social distance notwithstanding, most Khorezmians, particularly members of the middle and the old generation, display no malevolence towards the Russians who are, however, more respected then beloved. One of my interlocutors, a collage teacher in his mid-50s made this observation:

> Russians are generally better educated, have more organisational ability and more know how than we Uzbeks. Look at the staff of the international organisations working in Khorezm. You will find no Uzbeks but there are Russians, Tatars and often also Koreans. In the Soviet era, when the Uzbeks made a mess of things, the Russians put it in order. Since they left, things have got worse in this country.

The social delimitation has its roots in cultural rather than in religious distinctions. In spite of the Tatars being Muslims, Khorezmians perceive them to be significantly alien; arguing that 'they are like Russians', my interlocutors referred to the lifestyle and behaviour of their Tatar acquaintances as well as to their often insufficient (or non-existent) command of the local language. As a result of the strongly pronounced traditional-mindedness of the Khorezmians (see below), most of them also display a negative attitude towards those Uzbeks who adopt a more European lifestyle, accusing them of Russification.

While the older generation accepts the reluctance of the Russians to learn Uzbek, the generation under 35 appears increasingly disturbed by it. Younger people are less at ease with Russian, due to the radical reduction of Russian language lessons at school and the limited opportunities to practice the language since the exodus of most of the Russians. Every time my Uzbek friend, a 32-year-old English teacher at the university was forced to speak Russian with a Korean waiter or a Russian clerk at the post-office, she was visibly uncomfortable: 'My Russian is not very good, but what disturbs me most is their arrogance. They expect us to speak their language but they are not, themselves, prepared to learn ours. They still behave as if they were the masters of this country.' Let me now turn to the question of sub-ethnic or quasi-ethnic stratification inside the majority population.

### *3.4.1 The 'ancient' Khorezmians*

A few days after my arrival in Khorezm in summer 2004 I made the acquaintance of a professor of folklore studies at the University of Urganch. He was the first to point out to me that, in respect of their historical origin, the indigenous population is divided into two groups, one living at the northern edge of the province (in and around Gurlan) and the other inhabiting the area south of it: 'Those living in the south are the ancient inhabitants of Khorezm. They lived in the region long before the Uzbeks arrived here in the 16th century.' In the course of my fieldwork I repeatedly heard people speaking about the 'true' (*haqiqiy*) Khorezmians, who were the descendants of the old population. 'True' Khorezmians, I was told, differ from those living in north, both in dialect and physical appearance. They are said to be tall, fair-haired, light-skinned and to have 'great eyes'. However, only few would go so far as to formulate this division in terms of ethnic distinctness, as did a young teacher from Ellikkala, a small township in Qaraqalpaqistan, only a few kilometres from the province's border. He explained emphatically: 'The Khorezmians are not Uzbek. We originate from the ancient segment of the population, while the Uzbeks came much later.'

Actually, the identification of all Khorezmians as Uzbeks, both by themselves and by outsiders, is a relatively recent phenomenon that is the result of Soviet nation-building policy. Sazonova, member of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition mentioned above, writes that at that time (the 1940s) the process of national consolidation of the Khorezmian people was already far developed (Sazonova 1952: 247; see also Bregel 1978: 144). According to the same author, only members of the older generation still used to differentiate between the descendants of the Uzbeks, who penetrated the region in the early Middle Ages, and the 'Sarts', the descendants of the ancient population. The latter were town-dwellers and farmers and had, unlike the nomadic or semi-nomadic Uzbeks, no clan or tribal affiliation (Sazonova 1952: 248). Other members of the expedition also provide evidence for the term Sart being in use in the first half of 20th century. For example, Zadykhina quotes an informant as saying that in the south of Khorezm, 'behind Urganch up to Khiva, Honqa, and Xazorasp lived a people called Qara-Sart. After the revolution both the Aral-Uzbeks and the Qara-Sarts began to be called Uzbeks' (Zadykhina 1952: 332).[46] Snesarev also maintains that among the population of the districts Khiva, Urganch, Shovot, Yangiariq, Honqa, Bog'ot, and Xazorasp, the term still existed as a self-definition (Snesarev 2003: 116).

[46] My translation from the Russian original. According to the same source, the people living north of Gurlan up to the Aral Sea were just called 'Arals' (*araly*).

In Central Asia, the term 'Sart' has assumed different meanings over history. The Mongols and the Turks used the word to designate the Iranian speaking population of Central Asia, while the Uzbeks applied it to the sedentary population, both Turkic and Iranian, in order to discriminate them from the (Turkic) nomads. In Khorezm, however, the term Sart appears to have been used, at least from the 17th century onwards, to differentiate the formerly Iranian speaking older segments of the society from the (nomadic or sedentarised) Uzbeks in the region.[47] According to 19th century travellers, relations between both parts of the population were rather antagonistic. As an anonymous report about Khiva notes: 'The Sarts (…), the original inhabitants of the country, live in the towns and engage mainly in trade. (…) They are held in contempt by the Uzbeks' (Chiwa und seine Bewohner 1825: 149).[48] Vámbéry, the Hungarian orientalist who, disguised as a Turkish dervish, visited Khiva in the early 1860s, confirms this observation and also provides the reader with a stereotypical characterisation of the Sarts:

> These [the Sarts] are called Tadjik in Bokhara and Khokand, and are the ancient Persian population of Khorezm. Their number here is small. They have, by degrees, exchanged their Persian language for the Turkish. The Sart is distinguishable, not less than the Tadjik, by his crafty, subtle manners. He is not great favourite with the Özbeg, and in spite of the Sart and Özbeg having lived five centuries together, very few mixed marriages have taken place between them (Vámbéry 1996: 218-219).

Nowadays, the term Sart has disappeared from everyday speech.[49] With the exception of particular 'honour groups' to be discussed later, most of the people lack a deeper knowledge of their genealogy, which is why none of the 'ordinary' Uzbeks I spoke to were able to determine to which of the two groups their forefathers actually belonged. While the marriage barrier mentioned by Vámbéry and others appears to have long since been given up, in respect of another segment of the society, the descendents of Iranian slaves, it continues to be of relevance.

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[47] Originally, the old Turkic word 'Sart' meant 'merchant'. For a more detailed discussion of the various implications of the term and the social and political status of the Sarts in Khorezm, see Bregel 1978.

[48] My translation from the German original.

[49] I heard the term only twice. In both cases it was mentioned in reference to the 'real' Khorezmians by university teachers well-versed in historical sciences. The disappearance of the word is obviously the result of the policy of the Soviets who banished the word on the grounds that it had a pejorative implication.

### *3.4.2 The 'slaves'*

The slave trade played an important role in Khorezm up to the late 19th century, when it was abolished by the Russians. Most of the slaves appear to have been Persians captured by Turkmen tribesmen during regular raids into the border regions of Iran, but there was also a great number of Russians among them. The above quoted anonymous report from 1825 estimates the number of Persian slaves in Khiva at 30 thousand and that of the Russians at three thousand (Chiwa und seine Bewohner 1825: 156). Vámbéry provides a detailed account of the merciless way the Persian captives were treated by their Turkmen owners, until they were sold at the slave markets of Khiva, Gurlan, and other towns of the Khivan state. Men were usually employed in agriculture, while girls and women worked as servants or were incorporated into the harems of the rich. According to Vámbéry's generally clear-sighted observations, the slaves were relatively well treated by their Khorezmian masters. They received some amount of money for their services and, after seven years, had the right to redeem themselves. More than half of the freed Persian slaves, Vámbéry writes, remained in Khorezm, where many of them managed to accumulate considerable wealth. However, neither the released slaves nor their descendants got rid of the label *kul* ('slave') but remained the object of general contempt. According to Vámbéry, even the poorest Uzbek would refuse to give his daughter to a *kul*, notwithstanding his economic position (Vámbéry 1868: 177).

Today, the descendants of the released Persian captives live mainly in the district of Ko'shko'pir where they inhabit a village of their own. A number of families live in neighbouring settlements amongst the majority population that continues to call them by the pejorative term '*kul*', albeit not in their presence. Although I have not researched the issue, on various occasions I observed that Vámbéry's surveillance with regard to the social status of the former slaves has retained at least some of its validity up to our days. I first heard the word '*kul*' from children. One day in the village I went out for a walk in the company of seven or eight children who had formed a noisy group around me. Suddenly, we arrived at a group of houses built some distance from the others, at the edge of the village, and the children began to whisper secretively. Indicating with a nod of her head two boys in front of one of the houses, a nine-year-old girl in my group said to me in a low voice: 'They are *kul*. We do not play with them.' In response to my question as to who the *kul*s are, she said: 'They are not like us. I do not know. They come from somewhere else. They are dark and build their houses differently.' While neighbourhood relationships between the '*kul*s' who have long since given up their Persian mother tongue and the majority population appear to be normal, including mutual help and invitations to greater festivities such as

weddings and circumcision feasts, marriage alliances are rare. Let me briefly quote two illustrative cases:

> *Case 1*
>
> The parents of 19-year-old Madina were asked to give their daughter in marriage to a young man from a township some fifty kilometres away from their own village. (The young people new each other from the university.) The family council, consisting of Madina's father and three of her patrilateral uncles, discussed whether or not they should accept. One of the uncles was inclined to refuse, arguing among other things that they did not know the family of the potential bridegroom. 'They could be *kul*s', he said and suggested that Madina's father should go to the village and gather pertinent information.
>
> *Case 2*
>
> One of the first weddings I attended in Khorezm was held in the house of the neighbours of my host family in a village in the district of Ko'shko'pir. The bridegroom was a young '*kul*' and his bride was the 17-year-old daughter of a respected Khorezmian family from a neighbouring village. Some 100 guests joined the wedding party (*to'y*), astonishingly few if one considers that an average *to'y* consists of at least 400 guests. As I learned a few days later, the low level of attendance was only in part due to the low status of the bridegroom's family as descendants of former slaves. Many people were rather reluctant to attend the wedding because of the bride's bad reputation. The girl, I was told, had been raped when she was 15 years old. She became pregnant and gave birth to an illegitimate child who died soon after. The event was widely known and according to the traditional moral codex the girl was regarded as polluted, which destroyed her chance of a good marriage. 'Under normal conditions, her father would have never given the girl to a *kul*', my interlocutors said.

The stigmatisation of the descendants of Iranian captives as slaves is especially strong among hereditary 'honour groups'[50] for whom lineage continues to be of great importance. In what follows I briefly introduce these groups, many members of which still ascribe themselves to a higher social status which, alongside the discrimination of the '*kul*', underscores the limitations of the effects of seventy years of egalitarian socialist ideology.

[50] The term is Basilov's (1984).

### *3.4.3 The xo'jas*

In Khorezm, as in most other parts of Central Asia, those who trace their genealogy back to Ali ibn-Talib, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, are usually called *xo'ja* (khoja) and also, though less often, *sayid*. They belong to the wider phenomenon of Muslim elites claiming Alid descent, and are referred to as *sayid* and *sharif* all over the Islamic world[51]. Together with other groups of noble origin, like the *to'ra* (members of the ruling families), the *xo'ja*s formed part of the pre-Soviet Khorezmian aristocracy called *oq suyak* ('white bone') in contrast to the *qoracha* ('blackish'), the common people. They comprised a large part of the religious elite and also often held high positions at the court, sometimes even that of a vezir. As one of my informants stressed: 'Up to 1924 there were a lot of *xo'ja*s in Khiva. They possessed documents issued by the Khan that confirmed their origin, and they were assigned land in the Khanate.'[52]

The various *xo'ja* lineages of Khorezm claim descent from local Sufi saints of alleged Alid origin.[53] For example, the lineage of Rahmatulla-*xo'ja* is said to derive from a certain Pirim-*eshon*[54], believed to be a son of Ali who was sent to Khorezm to conquer the region for Islam and whose shrine in Xo'jayli in Qaraqalpaqistan is a popular pilgrimage site. To be sure, the genealogies are highly fictive and, of the *xo'ja*s I spoke to, none could trace their ancestors back more than four or five generations, at most, and many of them could not even go back that far. Sometimes, *xo'ja* families preserved nothing more than a vague memory of their once privileged descent. Mahmud-*xo'ja*, for example, a man in his mid-40s who makes a living as a Qur'anic healer and taxi driver in Shovot, said:

> My grandfather and his brothers were well-known experts of religion at the court of the last khan of Khiva. We *xo'ja*s come from one and the same ancestor but I do not know who it was. Almost all the adult males in our family were killed by the Bolsheviks. Those who sur-

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[51] The term *sayid* refers to the prosperity of Husain, son of Ali and Fatima. *Sharif*, on the other hand, designates the descendants of Ali and Fatima through their second son Hasan. Contrary to *sayid*, the term *sharif* was not in use in Central Asia.

[52] *Xo'ja*s and *sayid*s lived in great number also in the other Uzbek khanates. According to Abashin, at the beginning of the 20th century, 2,3 percent of the population of the Khanate of Bukhara and 1,4 percent in the Ferghana district (*oblast*) consisted of 'descendants of Muslim saints' (Abashin 2001: 65).

[53] Privratsky mentions the same about the *xo'ja*s (*qoja*s) in the Kazakhstani town Turkistan, suggesting that they might come from families of shrine guardians that 'have become hereditary descent groups with economic and political privileges' (Privratsky 2001: 37-38).

[54] The name refers to a Sufi sheikh. In Central Asia, masters of Sufi orders used to be called both *pir* and *eshon*.

> vived were either too young to know anything or they were afraid to speak about such things, even to their children.

Along with other members of the religious elite, the *xo'ja*s suffered a lot from the crude anti-Islamic campaigns of the early Soviet era. Zafar-*xo'ja* recalled:

> The Soviets began the persecutions with the *xo'jas*. Anyone who came from the family of the Prophet, or who was otherwise considered to be a knowledgeable person, was either imprisoned, sent to work camps, or expatriated. They [the Communists] wanted to annihilate all educated people, all who had culture (*madaniyat*). (…) They took away all males who were older than twelve. Both my father and my mother grew up as orphans. My grandfathers were taken to prison in 1934. They never came back again.

Of course, not all *xo'ja*s enjoyed the same social and economic standing; many of them were simply craftsmen or agriculturists without any formal religious training. Since the campaigns against Islam merged with that of dekulakisation – 'confiscation of the wealth of the richer members of the society' (Akiner 1996: 108) – it appears that the less distinguished and well-to-do *xo'ja* families were more likely to escape persecution. Among those who survived, religious knowledge tended to be better preserved than in the general population. Apparently, most of those in Khorezm who studied Islam in the Mir-i Amir *madrasa* in Bukhara, the only institution for higher Islamic learning in the Soviet Union, came from the ranks of the pre-revolutionary *ulama*, among them many *xo'ja*s. Significantly, most of the imams and *madras*a teachers I spoke to in Khorezm came from *xo'ja* families. Zafar-*xo'ja* is one who learned the basics of Islam and Arabic script from his mother. After independence, he left for Egypt to study Islamic law and theology and now works as a consultant for religious issues in the district (*tumon*) administration. Similarly, Rahmatulla-*xo'ja* got his basic religious education in the family before he was sent to the *madrasa* in Bukhara, from 1978 to 1983. Prior to independence, he held different positions in official religious institutions, in various regions of Uzbekistan, and is currently responsible for the affairs of an important holy site in Khiva. Yet another example is Habibulla-*xo'ja*, who teaches mathematics at the provincial university, where he also gives instruction in comparative religion. However, many other *xo'ja*s, do not stand out from the rest of the population, either with regard to their religious or professional qualities, even though they may continue to consider themselves as belonging to the 'white bones' of society.

However, not everybody called *xo'ja* comes from a 'sacred' lineage. Rather, in everyday usage, the term often designates individuals who possess

some degree of religious knowledge, regardless of their descent. Confronted with this usage, Rahmatulla-*xo'ja* explained:

> There are two categories of *xo'ja*. The first are the upper (*yuqori*) xo'jas, whose status derives from blood and family ties. The second category is comprised of individuals who are called *xo'ja* by the village people because they have some religious knowledge. They are not real *xo'ja*s and their title is not hereditary.

Until recently, the *xo'ja*s protected the purity of their 'blood' by not merging with outsiders. Although there has been an overall preference for inter-group marriages, men were in principle free to take wives from the ranks of the 'common' people (*qoracha*) because of the rule of patrilineal descent. Accordingly, in order to ensure that the offspring of a *xo'ja* woman remain within her patrilineage, girls were not given in marriage to outsiders. In the words of one of my interlocutors: 'The *xo'jas* accept girls from outside but they do not give girls to other (*xo'jalar kiz algan, kiz bermegan*).' In contemporary practice, however, only a minority appear to adhere to the rule of group endogamy. 'Even the *xo'ja*s are becoming modern,' Habibulla said.

It is difficult to generalise about people's attitude towards the *xo'ja*s. Many people do not care much about them but, like Feruza, a 50-year-old bookkeeper from Shovot, stress that: 'They are human beings like all of us. There is nothing particular about them.' When I asked a friend of mine whether she knew that a healer we had met a short time before was from a *xo'ja* family, she just shrugged her shoulders and said: 'What of it (*nishetibti shu*)?' There are others, however, who regard the *xo'ja*s as potential bearers of miraculous power (*karomat*) and say that although not all *xo'ja*s posses *karomat*, they are more likely to have it than others, a view which is confirmed by many *xo'ja*s.

Writing about *xo'ja*s (*qoja*s) in Kazakhstan, Privratsky mentions the belief that 'being cursed by a *Qoja* will bring people misfortune or death; so even *Qoja*s with no religious learning who are content to be farmers or civil servants may be treated with special deference' (Privratsky 2004: 183). Referring to his grandparents' generation, Abdulla-*xo'ja* made a similar comment. According to him, when a *xo'ja* told a quarrelling couple to make peace, they complied out of fear that otherwise they might be cursed by them. However, he pointed out that due to Soviet anti-religious propaganda, the *xo'ja*s have lost much of their former authority and reputation and nothing suggests that they, as a group, are likely to regain their former strength. Nowadays, most of the *xo'ja*s in Khorezm live in the Xazorasp and Bog'ot districts in the southeast of the province, because many were deported there from Khiva in the 1930s. Habibulla estimates the total number of *xo'ja*s in Khorezm to be no more than 1000 individuals.

### *3.4.4 The shixs*

The *shix*s (shaykhs) are another religious descent group in Khorezm, where they inhabit a village named after them in the Ko'shko'pir district, some 25 kilometres from the Turkmen border. The *shix*s regard themselves as the descendants of Ismamut Ota[55], an Islamic saint whose shrine is located in nearby Tahta in Turkmenistan.[56] Tradition holds that Ismamut Ota was a contemporary of the Prophet, who sent him to Khorezm with the task of converting the region's fire-worshipers (*otashparastlar*) to Islam.[57] It is said that he settled in the vicinity of Tahta and that his followers erected a shrine over his earthly remains. Many of the *shix*s live in Turkmenistan, in and around Tahta where the guardians of the saint's shrine are still drawn from their ranks. Until recently, the *shix*s of Ko'shko'pir maintained strong ties with their relatives in Turkmenistan. Every August, *shix*s from both sides of the border used to congregate at the shrine of Ismamut Ota to hold a three-day festival (*sail*) in honour of their saintly ancestor. The festival was a means of maintaining group identity and solidarity, and of fulfilling the general obligation to commemorate the dead, since until very recently, the *shix*s used to burry their dead around the shrine. However, due to the political conflicts between the two countries, it has become increasingly difficult to cross the border into Turkmenistan since 2003. Consequently, the Uzbek *shixs* had to build a new cemetery on their side of the border and the tradition on the annual *sail* came to an end as well.

The significance of the *shix*s as a religious honour-group appears to be limited to the immediate region they inhabit. As the putative descendants of Ismamut Ota, they are particularly revered by the people who live in the vicinity of the shrine, many of whom are Turkmen from the tribe of the Yomut. By contrast, in the Uzbek part of Khorezm, the *shixs* are less well known outside the district where their village is located. Nevertheless, they perceive themselves as part of the old Khorezmian aristocracy (*oq suyak*) and remain strongly conscious of their distinctness. Although they are believed to be the descendants of a companion of the Prophet, the *shix*'s – like the *xo'ja*s and other 'holy' groups of Central Asia – do not claim to be

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[55] *Ota* (*oto* in the Khorezmian dialect), literally 'grandfather', is an honorific title for aged persons as well as saints.

[56] Among the Turkmen, religious honour-groups claiming descent from the Prophet or the first four caliphs of Islam are called *öwlat* ('offspring'). Turkmen tradition recognises six *öwlat* groups, one of them bearing the name *shix*. Since this group traces back its origin to the second caliph Abu-Bakr, it is to differentiate from the *shix*s of Khorezm. Basilov (1984) too mentions the existence of several honour-groups in Turkmenistan known as *shix*s.

[57] See, for details and variants of the legend, Karimog'li 1997.

Arabs. Rather, they ascribe themselves a quasi-ethnic status, insisting that they are 'neither Uzbek nor Turkmen, but Shixs.'

In spite of being well-integrated into Soviet society, until very recently the *shixs* adhered to the rule of group endogamy, preferring marriage between first cousins. Even nowadays, the first choice of influential *shixs* families is to look for spouses for their children from within the group and then from among members of the old religious aristocracy. As one of my interlocutors stressed: 'I would not give my daughters in marriage outside the group of the *shix*s, except to a *xo'ja* or the offspring of a famous *eshon*.'[58]

## 3.5 Domestic life – change and continuity

Among their compatriots, the Khorezmians are considered to be particularly 'traditional', a term which signified to my interlocutors in Tashkent and Samarqand a predominantly rural way of life, a pronounced gender hierarchy, high birth rates, arranged marriages, and the like. Khorezmians, for their part, usually confirm these perceptions. However, while the outsiders' view of tradition-mindedness often implies the notion of backwardness, the Khorezmians regard respect for local customs (*odat*) as an indispensable part of being Khorezmian as well as a means of positively distinguishing themselves not only from the Russians but also from their 'Russified' compatriots. Theodore Levin, the American expert of Central Asian traditional music, quotes a Khorezmian intellectual who suggests that the traditionalism of the province is probably relative to its peripheral location: 'Khorezm wasn't affected as much as Tashkent, Samarqand, or Bukhara by the Soviet "struggle against the old". If it had been the center of attention, they would have tried harder to modernize it' (Levin 1999: 163). In the following I focus on two selected fields that appear to have most effectively resisted Soviet attempts at modernisation: family and gender relations. When speaking about traditional forms of family organisation and gendered patterns of behaviour, I do not suggest that they remained stable over time. Khalid correctly points out that 'it is difficult to claim that customs and traditions can remain unscathed by the kind of devastating traumas that Central Asian societies faced in the Soviet period' (Khalid 2007: 99).

[58] *Eshon* in the local terminology refers to a man of great piety possessing the power to do miracles.

### *3.5.1 Family structures*

The embrace of tradition is notably emphasised in respect of the significance of the family, of which the patrilineal extended family – usually comprised of three generations – is the predominant form. Nowadays, however, the number of people living together in a single household appears to be considerably fewer than in pre-Soviet and early Soviet times. According to Sazonova, who conducted ethnographic research in the province of Khorezm in the 1940s, large extended family households (*xo'jalik*) that included up to 60 members were the predominant social and economic units in pre-revolutionary rural communities. Big *xo'jalik*s consisted of the household head, his wife (or wives), his sons and their wives and children, and also his brothers with their respective families (Sazonova 1952: 301-305).[59] As the author states, although the disintegration of this type of household had already begun in the late 19th century, traces of it were still to be found as late as the 1920s and 1930s. Several elderly informants of mine confirmed this information. For example, the 79-year-old Otavoy-*aka*[60] from Khiva remembered that when he was a child, there were still many households in the town that consisted of 30 or more people. 'The women of a *ho'jalik* prepared the meals in huge cauldrons for the entire family,' he said. Nonetheless, with collectivisation and the establishment of villages inside collective farms (*kolkhoz*), the decline of big families continued. According to my informants from a village in Ko'shko'pir, prior to the 1940s, rural settlements consisted of large clay buildings (*xouli*) that stood at a considerable distance from one another, scattered over the village's territory. Each *xouli* was built around a courtyard and consisted of a number of living rooms (one for each nuclear family), one or more rooms for guests, a kitchen, storerooms and premises for the animals. In the course of collectivisation, however, a new settlement pattern was imposed, requiring that houses be built next to each other on either side of streets in the territory of a particular *kolkhoz*. 'It was argued', my informants remembered, 'that this type of settlement is more suitable for the connection of the villages to electricity, gas, telephone, and the like.' The plot of land assigned to each family no longer allowed for the building of *xouli*s comparable in size to those of former times.

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[59] According to Sazonova, big extended families included also the married daughters with their spouses and children; this information, however, has to be taken with suspicion.

[60] In Khorezm, a*ka* means father. The term is used also classificatory to address men belonging to the generation of ego's parents. In other parts of Uzbekistan, *aka* means 'elder brother'.

At present, in keeping with the rule of patrilocal residence, after marriage daughters leave their natal families to live with their spouses in the house of their parents-in-law while sons usually set up separate households a few years after marrying. The youngest son continues to live with his parents until their death and, thus, he inherits their house. The preference of living in extended families is one explanation for the Uzbeks' dislike of the Soviet type apartment blocks which are mainly inhabited by Russians and Koreans. Urganch gives the impression of being a huge village, most of its parts consisting of large, one-storied houses, each one providing enough space for three generations to live together. Uzbeks regard the mode of living as a kind of cultural determinant between themselves and the outsiders who live in their midst. As one of my interlocutors put it: 'Of course, apartments are much cheaper. Living there, the Russians save money, which they can spend for other things that make life easier, such as a car, holidays, and the like. For us Uzbeks, however, the family comes first. We do all we can to have a house of our own where we can live with our children and grandchildren.'

These days, there are fewer and fewer extended families where all the married brothers continue to live in the paternal household; my host family in a village near Ko'shko'pir was one of them. There are 18 people in the family: the household head and his wife, three married sons with their wives and children, and two unmarried daughters. All the sons and their wives, who work as village teachers or state employees in the provincial capital, hand over their wages to the household head who decides how the money will be spent. In addition to these earnings, the family cultivates a leasehold estate of two and a half hectares on which they produce vegetables for their household requirements. If there is any surplus, they sell it for additional income. It was only during my last visit in 2006 that a separate house was established for the eldest son, who had already been married for fourteen years and had four children. Nevertheless, the family continued to function as a production and consumption unit. My host explained: 'Nowadays it is even more important than ever to keep the family together. None of my sons earns enough money to sufficiently provide for their families, but living and producing together enables us to have a good life.'

Within the family there is a strongly pronounced age and gender hierarchy, in which daughters-in-law (*galin*) have the weakest position. Tradition requires that a *galin* does not speak either to or in the presence of her parents-in-law, at least not until she gives birth to her first child. In practice, however, *galin*s are often allowed to verbally communicate with their mothers-in-law some months after the wedding. As for the father-in-law, however, a *galin* must avoid addressing him directly and continue to remain silent in his presence, even after the speech taboo has long been formally

lifted. Given the gender-segregated spheres of family life, the *galin*s and the adult male members of the family usually only encounter each other *en passant*, in spite of living under the same roof. I observed the most rigorous patterns of *galin*/in-law avoidance within *shix* families. The three *galin*s of my host family carefully avoided speaking in the presence of male in-laws, including their husband's brothers. While the elder two at least had been given permission to speak to their mother-in-law after the birth of their first child, the younger one – the mother of two small girls – still had to obey the speech taboo, which included not only the parents and her husband's brothers but also her co-*galin*s, one of whom was her patrilateral cousin. If necessary, the *galin*s used one of the numerous children of the family as 'translators'. Thus, for example, when I asked the youngest *galin* something in the presence of her mother-in-law or an elder *galin*, she whispered her answer to a child she was allowed to speak to, who then imparted her words to me. Similar patterns were followed in other *shix* families known to me. More than once I was told: 'It is better not to allow the *galin*s to talk to their mother-in-law or to each other. This helps to avoid quarrels.' When I asked for an explanation for the speech taboo, others merely referred to the tradition, saying that 'our custom is like this' (*odatlarimiz shundin*).

Several authors have pointed out that in spite of the communists' attempts to create a new form of society, the Soviet system actually reinforced traditional patterns of family and kinship solidarity:

> The economy of distribution, with its perpetual shortages, rendered kin based solidarities essential to produce goods and services that money alone could not obtain. (…) The extended family was the basis of these networks, and family ties and celebrations were the glue that held them together. These networks were validated in the name of tradition. Adherence to tradition thus became an absolutely essential skill for inclusion for the various solidarity networks that allowed life to be lived in the Soviet state (Khalid 2007: 100-101).

Since independence and with changes in the economy, including the availability of a wide range of imported goods on the market, money has assumed greater importance than social connections. Nowadays, money rather than kinship relations is necessary for getting a good job, entering university, passing examinations, overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, and the like. A friend complained to me: 'In the past, to achieve a certain goal it was sufficient if you had a relative working in the right position. Nowadays, even your close relatives will expect money for help.' As in the case quoted above, for the 'losers' of the post-Soviet economic transformation, the extended family seems to retain its significance, while for the profiteers of these developments, the effects tend to be diverse. The following is an

illustrative example about an acquaintance of mine who held a leading position in a state-run factory during the Soviet era. As a result of starting up a private enterprise when the factory was closed down after independence, he succeeded in accumulating considerable wealth, which made it possible for him to provide three of his four married sons with a house, luxurious furniture, household appliances, a car and other luxuries. What's more, with his financial backing, his sons were able to establish themselves in the market as more or less successful businessmen. In keeping with tradition, after marrying the youngest son stayed on in the paternal home, which at that time consisted of the household head, his wife, his elderly mother, and one son with his wife and two children. At the time of my last visit to Khorezm, to the consternation of the whole family, the youngest son confronted his father with his wish to set up a separate household, arguing that he is now able to provide for his family on his own. His mother and grandmother voiced the strongest disapproval, not the least because they did not want to lose their *galin* who managed most of the housework for them. During the negotiations (which were ongoing when I left), the father asked one of his older sons to move back in with his family, in the event that the youngest son stuck to his decision. However, respecting the wish of his wife – who did not want to take up the role of the *galin* in the house of her mother-in-law – the son refused. As money acquires greater importance in obtaining goods and services, the supremacy of the extended family (and kinship networks in general) is inevitably unravelling and, as this case illustrates, there are already signs of its gradual decline.

### *3.5.2 Gender roles*

Levin summarised his impressions of Khorezm as follows:

> Of all the regions of Transoxania I visited, it was in Khorezm that women's lives seemed most separate from men's (…). (…) I am sure that part of the feeling of strangeness and alienation that always overcame me in Khorezm was due to my complete removal from contact with women. Khorezmian men saw women and spoke with women in the intimacy of their private family lives, but as a guest, even of people whom I considered friends, I was kept away from women, and women, for their part, kept away from me (Levin 1996: 189).

To be sure, Soviet modernisation and emancipation policy also left its mark on women in Khorezm. All girls attend school and many go on to study at university. Ever greater numbers of women are working outside the house in almost all spheres of production; they are farmers or factory workers, traders, clerks, doctors, saleswomen, school and university teachers, among

others. Nevertheless, household work and childrearing continue to be regarded as the main duties of women, even when they practice a profession outside the home. Traditional patterns of gender hierarchy and norms of behaviour for a socially acceptable woman also remained largely untouched by the officially promoted emancipation of the Soviet era. Women are expected to be modest, quiet, hard working and, above all, respectful and servile towards men, particularly their male relatives and husbands. The hierarchical order between the spouses is reflected in the mode of address: when addressing his wife, a man uses the same familiar form '*san*' as for his children, while a woman has to use the formal '*siz*' vis-à-vis her husband.[61] Classmates at university and the same age, Sarvinoz and Azamat used to address each other by the term '*san*'. However, when they married, Sarvinoz adopted *siz* when addressing Azamat, thus indicating that with marriage their equal status had come to an end.

As a result of women's participation in public life while simultaneously the emphasis of tradition holds firm, a remarkable division of everyday life – between the 'modern' and 'traditional' spheres in which people behave according to different norms of conduct – has emerged. Thus, at their places of work – or at school or university – men and women intermingle relatively freely. However, at *to'y*s – feasts that mark important life-cycle events, such as births, circumcisions, and weddings, and which are attended by hundreds of guests – and at any other occasion when people meet in the privacy of a house, the rule of gender segregation is generally observed. Inside the house, male and female guests are normally entertained in separate rooms: men are served by men and women are served by women. When *to'y*s are held in restaurants or on the street[62], the spatial segregation of the sexes is symbolic, with men and women sitting at different tables but having visual contact with each other. Spouses, friends, and relatives who often arrive in gender-mixed groups at a particular *to'y* are assigned to different places for the time of the celebration and are only united again when it is time to go home. Sometimes colleagues are treated differently. On one occasion I accompanied a friend to a circumcision feast (*sunnat to'y*) that a colleague of his from university was hosting in his home village. While most of the 500 guests were seated according to their sex, the male and female colleagues were seated together at one table, pointing out that their relationship to the

[61] The same usage applies for age hierarchy: children use towards their parents as well as their elder siblings the respectful '*siz*' form of address which is also the socially required form when addressing a person elder than the speaker.

[62] Since nowadays few houses are big enough to entertain the usual number of 400 to 600 guests inside the house and its yard, desks and stools are set up alongside the street in front of the house where a wedding or a circumcision feast is held.

host and each other was outside the 'traditional' sphere of everyday life. Thus, the separation of women's life from that of men, so painfully experienced by Levin in the earlier quotation, largely depends on the particular context. Had Levin encountered the wives of his Khorezmian hosts outside the privacy of their homes, for example at their place of work, he most probably would have been able to talk to them.

The *to'y*s are closely associated with local traditions. During the Soviet era, their basic function was to provide the Khorezmians a way of differentiating themselves from the Russians and other nationalities that also did not practice the local customs. However, although *to'ys* are observed by the majority of the people, many innovative elements pointing to Soviet influence have been incorporated into them. Thus, Khalid writes with reference to Uzbekistan in general: 'In the Soviet period, vodka drinking became an integral part of these celebrations as did the use of audio equipment. Indeed, vodka drinking was assimilated to national tradition through the use of 'national' tea bowls for drinking the shots' (Khalid 2007: 101). Moreover, the emphasis on tradition is not free of paradox in other situations. For example, while the pressure on women to conform to traditional norms governing both their behaviour and appearance remains strong, they are not expected to refuse alcohol. I attended countless *to'y*s and birthday parties but the bottle of vodka was never missing on the tablecloth (*dasturxon*) in front of the women, nor was it merely a decoration.

Distancing itself from its Soviet predecessor by criticising it for its disregard of native norms and values, the new Uzbek state emphasises 'national culture', which is described in terms of traditions. As Koroteyeva and Makarova note, 'the state-endorsed stress on Uzbek identity, defined in opposition to Soviet modernity' inaugurated a process of re-traditionalisation that first impacted on women (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 594). It is undeniably the case that traditional norms and values that have religious connotation in respect of women are widely propagated in the mass media and supported by popular literature. In this context, Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal talk about 'a meta-discourse which circulates nationwide and superimposes itself on the local' (Saktanber and Ozatas-Baykal 2002: 341). Proper Uzbek women are portrayed as affectionate (*nazokatli*), chaste (*iffatli*), bashful (*iboli*), patient (*sabr-bardoshli*), skilful (*oqila*) and obedient (*qobil*), qualities that differentiate Uzbek women from their Russian or russified Uzbek counterparts. A popular publication entitled 'On the threshold of marriage', which aims at the preparation of girls for their role as wife and daughter-in-law, mentions these required qualities dozens of times. 'The disobedience of a daughter', its author states, 'is worse then death' (Shomansurova 2002: 22). According to Koroteyeva and Makarova, in Samarqand

the effects of the official stress on national values has resulted in a change of the 'standards of modesty and proper behaviour required for girls and women', which entails the expectation that women always wear traditional clothes (pants worn with a dress) in public and the 'trend to marry off girls at an earlier age, sometimes as early as 16' (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 594).

In Khorezm, the effects of post-Soviet changes on the lives of women appear to be more controversial. Since Soviet attempts at women's emancipation had relatively little impact on the patriarchal family structures of the region, what we observe is more a continuation of traditions rather than 're-traditionalisation'. Much as during the Soviet era, families seek to marry off their daughters at a relatively early age, usually between 18 and 22. Almost all female Uzbek students at the University of Urganch wear long dresses (pants worn under the dress are mainly characteristic of the rural population) which clearly differentiate them from their Russian, Korean and Tatar fellow students who, as a rule, wear short skirts or blue jeans. I was told that the same 'national' dress-code for women was also generally adhered to during the Soviet era, with the exception mainly of those students who had attended Russian schools. It is not unusual for girls to be given in marriage while they are still studying at university. Both the customs of marriages arranged by the parents and the *galin*/father-in-law avoidance prevail.

Nevertheless, in many cases women have benefited from post-Soviet developments. Nowadays, many women successfully engage in business and other commercial activities through which they can substantially strengthen their position in the family. For example, after independence Manzura, a lawyer in her early 50s, set up her own notary office. While her husband's earnings as a taxi driver are rather modest, her flourishing enterprise has enabled her to own a car and employ four relatives (one of her sons, two sisters and a niece) and they all depend on her for their livelihoods. More and more frequently, female students apply for stipends and go abroad, even if they often meet with resistance from their families. Another example is Sanobar, a teacher of German language. She had to fight for more than a year to get her husband's permission to study in Germany for six months. Since men still refuse to run the household and look after the children, in such cases it is the extended family that makes it possible for women both to continue with ongoing studies and to go abroad, as in Sanobar's situation. Most women with whom I discussed this issue were of the opinion that independence has increased the chances for 'developing themselves'. Inevitably, the state-endorsed emphasis on traditional family roles will be contradicted by the increased mobility as well as by the new economic and educational possibilities that are emerging for women.

# *Chapter 4*
# The religious situation – past and present

The anti-religious purges of the Soviet era successfully eliminated almost all public manifestations of Islam in Khorezm. Altogether there were three functioning mosques in the province, located in Urganch, Khiva, and Honqa, and each had an officially appointed imam designated to lead the communal prayers and deliver Friday sermons. People who lived beyond the reach of these mosques had to rely on the services of local mullahs whom the residents of a particular neighbourhood selected from their own ranks. Lacking formal education in Islam, the mullahs mainly acquired their religious knowledge inside the family. They were responsible for the recitation of the Qur'an at particular religious ceremonies such as the *maraka*s (feasts for the commemoration of the dead) and the performance of the most widely observed Islamic rituals: the *janoza namozi* (funeral prayer) and the *nikoh* (Islamic marriage); many of them also acted as healers and were engaged in various magical practices (see Chapter 6). In addition, there were female religious figures (*xalpa*) who specialised in the recitation of religious texts.[63] When there was a death, they performed this task during *marakas* for the female part of the mourning congregation, as well as at other occasional religious gatherings held by women where they sought divine intervention in overcoming their difficulties.[64] Sometimes the *xalpa*s also gave basic religious instruction to girls and young women in their neighbourhood.

While male circumcision (*sunnat*, *hatna*) and religious rituals connected to marriage and death were almost universally observed, only a very few people – mostly of the older generation – appear to have adhered to the

[63] Kleinmichel provides an insightful study about contemporary *xalpa*s in Khorezm and the texts used by them (Kleinmichel 2000). In other parts of Uzbekistan, this kind of female religious specialists are called *otin*, *otin oyi*, or *bibi xalfa*. For a comprehensive study about *otin* and *xalfa* in Uzbekistan, see also Krämer 2002.

[64] Such gatherings were devoted to a female saint named Mushkul Kushod (literally 'the one who solves difficulties').

formal tenets of Islam. An acquaintance of mine, a man in his early 60s, recalled the situation in his village as follows:

> Out of the ten thousand inhabitants of our village, there were no more than perhaps 15 people who performed the *namoz* [the daily ritual prayers prescribed by Islam]. My father, a mullah, was one of them. On Fridays, he used to pray in the old mosque of the village together with some other old men. The mosque was a simple building made of clay like all our houses here. Officially, it was closed but it was no problem to open it. Nobody cared about the old people gathering there. I myself gave my father a ride to the mosque every Friday and picked him up when he finished. As my father got older, he became anxious that there would be no one left in the village who would be able to recite the *janoza namozi* for him, which is why he taught me how to do it. It is still the only prayer I have command of.

When I asked my acquaintance why his father – himself the son of an educated religious man (*oxun*) – had not endeavoured to transmit his religious knowledge to his children, he replied that at the time neither he nor his brothers were interested in 'such things'. I often heard this kind of answer when I asked people about religious practices during the Soviet era. On one occasion, during a conversation with a man in his mid-50s, he answered my query about the frequency of visitors to shrines in the pre-independence era by saying: 'Only a few old women came here. At that time, we did not believe much in saints and things like this. Actually, most of us did not believe at all.' A university teacher expressed a similar view, stressing that in Khorezm the people were far less religious than in other parts of the country. This often stressed indifference towards religious practice, a fundamental part of the self-image of the Khorezmians, also manifested itself in people's judgement of Soviet anti-religious policy, as the following discussion illustrates.

## 4.1 Remembering the Soviet past

Thus, while almost all my interlocutors explained that practicing religion has become much easier since independence, only a minority complained about the suppression of Islam during the Soviet era. This criticism came mainly from the ranks of the old Islamic establishment, where the memory of past persecutions appears to have been more rigorously kept alive than among the 'ordinary' population. Many *xo'ja*s and *shix*s recalled how, in the early 1930s, the communists went from house to house and collected all religious books in order to destroy them. 'Many people hid their Qur'ans in the cemeteries. Later, when the situation became more relaxed, they wanted to take them again, but most of the books were of no use anymore,' explained

Zafar, for example.[65] In another case, a *shix* told me the miraculous story of the execution of his grandfather, who was a famous *eshon*, a pious man capable of performing miracles (*karomat*). I quote the story from my field diary:

> Soldiers of the Red Army came to the village of the *shix*s in order to take away all males above the age of 12 from those families they considered to be kulaks. When they also wanted to take the *eshon* into custody, the people asked them to set him free, explaining that he was a holy man who never exploited anybody but rather helped the poor. When they heard about his religious virtues, the soldiers became even angrier and decided to shoot the *eshon* on the spot. However, after three hails of bullets did not harm him, he asked a soldier to hand over his gun. The soldier was perplexed but did as he was asked. The *eshon* spat at the gun and then gave it back to its owner, saying: 'Now it will work. Try it again.' The soldier shot once and, this time, the bullet immediately killed the *eshon*.

When asked why his grandfather had not used his *karomat* to save his life, my acquaintance answered that the knowledgeable (*ilimli*) man understood that a new era was dawning, against which resistance was futile. In spite of memories like these, the *eshon*'s grandchildren did not hold a grudge against the Soviet system, which my acquaintance recalled as having brought justice, prosperity, and social solidarity. As he has put it: 'The regime treated the people equally. Whoever made a mistake had to answer for it, regardless of his position. But nowadays, if you have money you can do almost everything. It is corruption that prevails.' Like him, many of my interlocutors expressed benevolent sentiments towards the Soviet era, in spite of the communist regime's religious policy.

Once I discussed the issue of Soviet anti-religious policy with Dilfuza, a 65-year-old retired schoolteacher who had been a practicing Muslim for some 15 years. She said that she could not recall any pressure being exercised by the authorities. When her daughter insisted that there must have been propaganda against Islam, Dilfuza almost became angry. She put an end to the discussion by saying that there was no reason to complain since the state only prohibited public expressions of religiosity and did not interfere with people's private beliefs and practices: 'Believe me, nobody was prevented from observing Islam, as long as he/she did not make a public issue of it and did not endeavour to propagate the religion.' A similar statement was made by an old man who had been serving as a village mullah since the middle of the 1980s. I met him at a saintly shrine, where he was

[65] Zafar proudly showed me the mouldy exemplar of the Qur'an which his grandmother managed to save by immuring it in a wall of her house.

accompanying a group of male pilgrims. When I asked whether or not religious observance was allowed during the Soviet era, he answered in a few words: 'Whoever wanted to pray [the *namoz*] could do it; nobody said that you should not pray.' (*Har kim qilsa qilavergan, qilma degan odam bo'lmadi*). A 45-year-old physician, a member of the same group of pilgrims, confirmed the mullah's statement but with one qualification: 'It is true, normal people had no problems. But for party members, practicing religion was very difficult, and actually impossible.'

Condemning the Soviet regime for its suppression of religion has become part of the official discourse in independent Uzbekistan. Thus, people who met me for the first time were sometimes scrupulous in talking positively about the religious situation in the Soviet era. One person I was interviewing asked me to switch off the tape recorder before he would answer my questions about his experience of the religious situation in the Soviet period: 'Our government says that in the Soviet time [the state of] religion was bad. But it was good. Nobody told you not to go to the mosque or not to pray *namoz*.' Others, while generally approving of the situation in the Soviet period, qualified their answers as they differentiated between the various political periods. Thus, I frequently heard about severe restrictions that were imposed on certain aspects of people's everyday religious life during the last anti-religious drive that preceded *glasnost* and *perestroika*. People particularly complained about the ban on Islamic funerals and the prohibition on visiting the graves of one's relatives on religious holidays. An acquaintance told me how a relative of his, the then head of the local *kolkhoz* (who occupied the post of the village headman at the time of my fieldwork), personally waited for the villagers at the entrance of the cemetery on the morning of the first day of the feast of Ramadan and sent them back home. I learned of several cases where, out of fear of the consequences, party members did not dare to attend the funeral of even a close relative if the Islamic funerary prayer was recited.[66] My village hosts described how in those years many of them disguised *sunnat to'y*s (feasts given on the occasion of the circumcision of a boy) as birthday parties (*yosh to'y*) for children: 'Of course, not everybody was concerned about the prohibition. But party members and state employees had to be cautious. Otherwise they would have risked their job or their membership in the party.'

My village host, a university teacher in his late 50s, felt that their traditions were exposed to the severest attacks since the end of the Stalinist era in the decade preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. 'Actually,' he said,

[66] Sometimes people managed to pray for the deceased somewhere outside the cemetery while they conducted the funeral according to Soviet 'traditions', in order to enable party members to take part in it.

'we had a good life under the Soviets. But this trampling upon our traditions turned most of us against the communists. We were fed up with them.' Like many others who reported the Soviet restrictions on religious life, he also stressed that the responsibility for all these hard measures was attributable to the native communists rather than to the Russians: 'It was our own Uzbek people who did it to us.'

When, for whatever reasons, people felt the necessity to apologise for their admitted lack of interest in and knowledge of Islamic rituals, they often claimed that it was Soviet policy and ideology that had deprived them the opportunity of learning their religion. However, such complaints did not often arise spontaneously; in general, it was uncommon to hear people complaining about the 'time of the Russians' in whatever respect. What's more, for some like 79-year-old Otavoy-*aka*, blaming the Russians for people's disinterest in Islam was a convenient pretext. He was a retired school teacher from Khiva, the descendant of a long line of hereditary shrine guardians. For him, the blame lays with the Khorezmians themselves because of their fawning willingness to align themselves with the official ideology:

> Before the Soviet era, the Khorezmians were very religious. Khiva was something like a second Bukhara, with countless mosques and *madrasa*s. True, they were closed down by the Russians. True, a lot of men of religion were killed, imprisoned, and exiled. But many *eshon*s and *oxun*s also survived; they preserved the knowledge of the religion. But our people were not interested in learning from them. Unlike in the Ferghana Valley or Bukhara, where people remained faithful to the *eshon*s notwithstanding what they were told by the atheists, our people slavishly carried out every order of Moscow and turned their back on religion. They sold our holy religion.

Others expressed the same view but in more positive terms, like one of Levin's informants who said: 'We believed. We were close to communism. We believed that you had to change people's consciousness' (Levin 1999: 163). In Khorezm, the ideological roots of communism actually seem to have grown deeper than anywhere else in Uzbekistan, which Levin interprets as revealing 'the contradictory side' of the province's 'embrace of tradition' (Levin 1999: 163).

While some, like Otavoy-*aka*, portrayed Khiva as a second Bukhara, others cited the notorious laxity of religious observance of the Khorezmian people as evidence of the historically weak development of Islam in the region. For example, a retired journalist explained that due to its spatial isolation, Khorezm had been less influenced by Islamic orthodoxy and, thus, remained immune to all forms of religious fanaticism. Similarly, the dean of

the faculty of chemistry at Urganch University stated: 'Khorezm is the least religious region in Uzbekistan. This has historical reasons. We were not subjugated to Islam by the sword. Once Khorezm accepted Islam, it went its own way. Here, Islam merged with other religious traditions and you can still find traces of fire worship.' Such statements, heard mainly among the intelligentsia, point out the existing awareness of the Soviet scientific discourse on the predominance of 'pre-Islamic survivals' in the religious life of the Khorezmians, of which remnants of Zoroastrianism were the most notable.

On the one hand, the decidedly positive manner in which many of my interlocutors recalled the religious situation in the pre-independence era is part of a general nostalgia towards the socialist past, observed in many parts of the post-Soviet world.[67] Louw comments on similar experiences in present-day Bukhara:

> Nostalgia coloured many people's memories of life under the Soviet system. 'The Soviet past' should not be understood in this context as what actually happened, but rather as a mode of present experience. Memory is not a copy of past events, but a reconstruction of the past formed by new experiences and concerns (Louw 2007: 146).

As these examples illustrate, nostalgia triumphed over negative memories of actual experiences in respect of religious practice, which is why people could recount the severe restrictions and, at the same time, praise the system that had imposed them. On the other hand, the approval of Soviet religious policy based on the argument that it allowed expression of religiosity in the private sphere indicates how the ideology of secularism had been widely internalised: the majority of people I spoke to expressed their conviction that religion is a profoundly personal matter of private consciousness. As the grandmother of a friend of mine put it: 'We carried our belief in our hearts. And this is the most important thing.'

Once more, the case of Khorezm confirms the notion that the Soviet attempts to destroy both the institutional basis and the learned traditions of Islam were less dramatically experienced in regions where mosque-based religiosity appears to have been relatively weakly developed. Turkmenistan, where there was not a single mosque in the capital city during the Soviet era, provides a further example. During my two visits there, people often told me that they did not experience the lack of mosques as a great loss, since traditionally the Turkmen used to pray at home rather than in mosques.

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[67] For a discussion of Soviet nostalgia in Azerbaijan, see Yalçın-Heckmann 2005: 435.

## 4.2 The new vitality of Islam

The general upsurge of interest in religious issues that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union throughout Central Asia also caught on in Khorezm, despite all the claims of a traditionally low level of religiosity. 'All of a sudden, everybody became occupied with religion. The staunchest communists began to present themselves as pious Muslims in public,' one of my interlocutors recalled. The reawakening of religious interest manifested itself in various ways similar to that in other parts of the region. Throughout the province, new mosques were established and decayed holy sites renovated or restored, mainly with local people taking the initiative and paying for the costs. Popular religious textbooks, hagiographical and other religious literature, newly available in bookshops, mosques, and at the bazaar, found a ready market as did audiotapes that carried the words of famous Muslim preachers from the Ferghana Valley, Tashkent and elsewhere in the country, into people's homes. Schools introduced courses in Arabic, and the old practice of religious education in mosques was taken up again. The increased interest in Islam also brought about a blossoming of private teaching of religion and many parents sent their children to Qur'an courses, even if they themselves remained indifferent towards religion. As one of my acquaintances explained: 'We are Muslims. Islam belongs to our culture. Thus, our children should learn something about it.' The results, however, did not always accord with the parents' intentions. For example, Amina, the then 13-year-old daughter of a rather secularly minded music teacher in Urganch, started wearing the Islamic headscarf (*hijob*) while she was attending a private Qur'an course in her neighbourhood. This was too much for her father who did his best to talk her out of it:

> I explained to her that wearing the *hijob* does not make her a good Muslim. Rather, she had to pray five times *namoz* a day. Moreover, if she wears the *hijob*, I told her, she must not eat *kolbasa* [Russian sausage made of pork] anymore. Since she did not want to renounce *kolbasa*, my daughter finally agreed to take off the headscarf.

In other families, the children's discovery of Islam caused other problems. An acquaintance told me that when his son started to occupy himself with Islam, family life became seriously disturbed: 'He criticised us for not observing the rules of the religion. He wanted us to start praying, fasting in Ramadan, stop drinking alcohol and things like that.' Openly criticising people older than oneself, let alone one's own parents, is almost scandalous in traditional Khorezmian society. However, by referring to God's will, it became admissible for young people to transgress the traditional boundaries of age – as well as gender – hierarchy. Convinced that visiting the graves of relatives on Islamic holidays contradicts 'true' Islam, a friend of mine, a

schoolteacher in her early 30s, refused to join her family on such occasions. Although her husband does not share her view, he accepted her departure from tradition, as did her parents. The case of Gulbahor, a housewife and mother of three small children, presents another example. From the time she devoted herself to Islam in the mid 1990s, she started wearing the *hijob* against the declared will of her husband, a teacher of mathematics. When she and I became acquainted in 2005, she was still wearing the *hijob* and she told me that, because of this, her husband refuses to go out in public with her. I was told that during the 1990s, it was not unusual to see women wearing the *hijob* in Urganch as well as in other places in the province. Nilufar, at that time a student at university, said: 'Alone in our class, there were five or six girls wearing the *hijob*. You know, one started and the others imitated her. It was a bit like a new fashion.'

Plate 2. A saleswoman at the bazaar in Urganch wearing the *hijob*.

The spread of puritanical Islamic ideas among young Khorezmian Muslims resulted from religious knowledge they imbibed outside the province. My informants told me that soon after independence Islamic missionaries appeared in Khorezm to recruit people for religious seminaries in the Ferghana Valley. 'They came also to our village. About a dozen young men followed

them to Namangan,' one of my interlocutors said. On their return, many of them began carrying out missionary work, calling on the locals to abandon religious practices that had, for centuries, been the foundation of the Muslim consciousness of the people. For example, Karomat, a frequent visitor to holy places, told me how her neighbour's son tried to convince her to stop making *ziyorat*s (visits to saintly gravesites): '"You should not make *ziyorat*," he told me every time he saw me. '"It is against our religion."' The 'Wahhabis', as these Islamic missionaries are retrospectively called by the people, not only targeted the tradition of *ziyorat* and visits to cemeteries on Islamic holidays but also the almost universally followed practices of playing music, dancing, and consuming alcohol at *to'y*s (marriage and circumcision festivities). It appears, however, that only a minority acted on their advice by carrying out *to'y*s in the 'proper' Islamic way, that is, without music, dance, alcohol, and by separating male and female visitors with curtains.

Plate 3. Selling religious literature at the bazaar in Urganch.

Apparently, some of Khorezm's 'born-again' Muslims had found their way through radical Islamic organisations, but this was an issue I could not get any clear information about. Once there was vague talk about some young men in our neighbourhood in Urganch who were imprisoned because of 'Wahhabism' and a friend mentioned that her cousin 'disappeared' with her husband at the end of the 1990s: 'They were very religious. Their families suspect that they went to Tajikistan or joined the Taliban in Afghanistan.' However, different to other parts of Uzbekistan, there have been neither public protests of religious or other nature, nor militant riots in Khorezm. People repeatedly told me that 'such things could not happen here', given the peaceful character of the inhabitants of the province and the absence of religious fanaticism among them. An acquaintance explained that the disinclination of Khorezmians to rebel against the government is because of the hierarchical structure of the family:

> We learn early in our life to obey the authority of the elders. Look, as the head of a large family I make all important decisions. Even if my adult sons disagreed with what I say, they would never protest against my decisions, because I am the father. This is the same with the president. He is the head of this country, as I am head of my family. One has to obey him, whether or not one agrees with him. That's how we think.

## 4.3 Islam retreating – the 'Wahhabi' shock

By the time I made my first visit to Khorezm in 2003, Islam had already largely retreated from the public sphere and, in the everyday context, only a few signs of the post-independence awakening could still be detected. Many of the previously constructed mosques were already closed, because they did not meet the conditions required by the law passed in 1998. Neither rural nor urban neighbourhoods were able to come up with the one hundred signatures that were required for re-registering their mosques.[68] For example, in a village in the Ko'shko'pir district of roughly 12 thousand inhabitants, those who wanted to attend the communal Friday prayers hired a car that took them to the closest Friday mosque in town, some 20 kilometres away. As one of the villagers said: 'Of course, it would be comfortable for them to have a mosque in the vicinity. But the number of those who regularly per-

[68] If a mosque is registered with the state, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan appoints an imam to it who leads the communal prayers and conducts the Friday sermons. Mosques lacking official approval may remain open and people can enter to perform the *namoz* individually; having no imam and unable to legally perform the communal prayers, such mosques do exist at some pilgrimage sites for exceptional instances when male visitors feel the need to perform the ritual prayer.

form the *namoz* is not sufficient to get a mosque registered.' The situation was not much different in the towns. Some 300 metres away from the house where I lived in Urganch, there was a closed up mosque that was big enough to accommodate four to five hundred of the faithful. When I asked about the state it was in, my host shrugged his shoulders and said: 'It was donated by a rich man in our *elat* (neighbourhood unit) but they closed it down. I do not think that there were any attempts to register it.' This was the most comprehensive information I could get about the mosque and the circumstances of its closure. In all other cases I only got answers like 'I do not know, I did not care' or 'I had no interest in what was going on around the mosque.' Such reactions may indicate a real lack of interest in religious matters or, as considered below, they may indicate reluctance to discuss issues of a politically sensitive nature with an outsider.

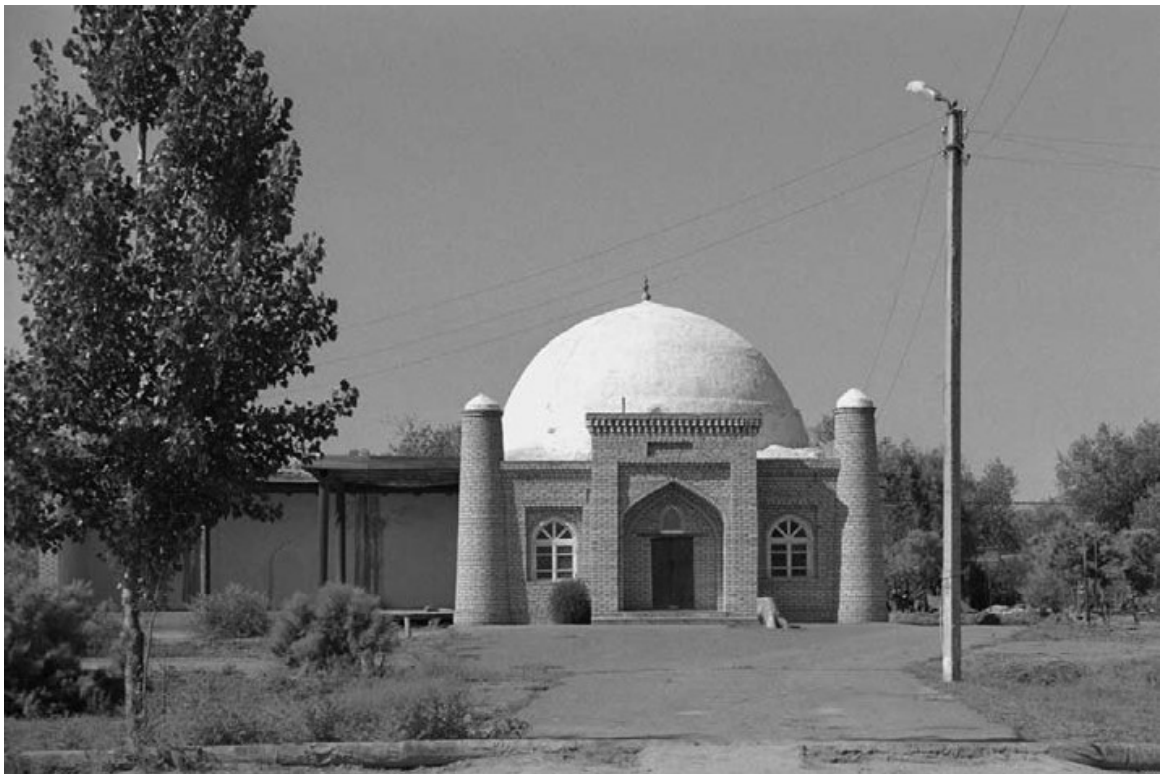

Plate 4. A closed mosque in the countryside.

At the present time there are 88 registered mosques operating in the province, with three of them in the provincial capital Urganch, of 120 thousand inhabitants. The most important of them, the *Ohun-Bobo machiti*, was one of the three official mosques that functioned during the Soviet era. According to its imam, the mosque can accommodate about two thousand people, but only during great Islamic holidays such as *qurbon hayit* (the Feast of Sacrifice) and *ro'za hayit* (the feast following the fasting period in the month of

Ramadan) do such numbers of people attend. Sources told me that on normal Fridays no more than 400 to 600 men visit the mosque.[69] The province has only one Islamic secondary school (*madrasa*) that is situated in Urganch. In 2003, the school had 50 male students. In previous years there was also a class for girls but by the time of my fieldwork it had already been dissolved.

The regime's discourse on religious extremism – commonly referred to as 'Wahhabism' – increased noticeably by the end of the 1990s and signalled to many that 'the times had changed'. A friend told me that after the Tashkent bombings her mother-in-law searched her house for all the religious books of her sons and burned them: 'She was convinced that the situation would be the same as it was during the early Soviet era. "They should not find them when a search of premises is made", she said.' Mosque attendance dropped dramatically after 1999. One of my acquaintances explained how, after a series of militant attacks that were attributed to radical Islamists, people were shocked: 'Many people began to regard religion as something potentially dangerous. Out of disappointment, they stopped praying and going to the mosque. Only those with strong belief remained.' Others suspected that many of those who stopped visiting mosques were afraid that they might be considered to be religious extremists. Makset, a 30-year-old businessman and a committed Muslim for seven years, was of a different opinion:

> Though sometimes the fear of being accused of Wahhabism might actually prevent people from regularly visiting mosques, this is not the real issue. Most of our people are just not willing to devote themselves to religion. In the first years of independence, nearly half of the men in our neighbourhood started to perform *namoz* and take part in the Friday prayers. However, after the initial enthusiasm was over, they just returned to normality. Today, not even ten percent fast during Ramadan and even less regularly pray *namoz*, not to speak about drinking alcohol. With the exception of me, nobody in my family pays attention to religion. I am also the only one among my friends observing the rules of Islam.

Most of the women who after independence began wearing the *hijob* took it off, either because they lost interest in religion or in response to external pressure. Thus, female students were faced with the alternative of renouncing the *hijob* or leaving university. I was told that only a few opted for the second alternative. In fact, during my stay in Khorezm I seldom came across women wearing the Islamic headscarf. Muhtaram, a young woman who became a close friend of mine in the course of my fieldwork, had begun to

[69] Traditionally, mosques in Uzbekistan have no separate places for women who are expected to pray at home.

take interest in Islam at the time when public display of Muslim piety was increasingly being interpreted as a sign of religious extremism. She told me that although she wanted very much to follow the Islamic prescriptions in her way of dressing but she could not do this because she would have had to quit her job at the university. Like a few other professional women in her environment, Muhtaram opted for a compromise: one year after we first met she began wearing a tight fitting headscarf bound in at the nape which, unlike the *hijob*, leaves her neck exposed.[70] In light of the overall discourse of the 'Islamic threat', such nuances are significant. Wearing a headscarf (*ro'mol*) is regarded as entirely traditional, the sign of a 'proper' Uzbek woman's modesty, while the *hijob* is associated with 'alien' Wahhabism and religious fanaticism. Binding her *ro'mol* in a way that does not allow a single hair to be seen, Muhtaram signals attachment to Islam in a way that is considered moderate and, as such, is socially and politically accepted. Muhtaram reported that since she began wearing the headscarf at the university, she has sometimes been taken aside by male colleagues who have recommended that it would be better for her to take it off. 'One said that it does not fit a modern woman, another that it is a pity that I hide my beautiful hair which was clearly an impertinence. But nobody threatened me with dismissal. Of course, they can't do this. After all, I do not wear the *hijob*.'

In her article entitled 'Extreme conversations', Julie McBrien insightfully analyses how the Kyrgyz regime's discourse on Wahhabism was interpreted and reinforced among the people in the town of Bazaar-Kogon, where she conducted research in 2004. According to her, in Bazaar-Kogon people discussed ideas about Islam and Muslimness in relatively open and often confrontational ways:

> Some of the more influential notions people brought to the debate were those regarding the nature and place of religion in society; appropriate means and levels of religiosity and religious expression; and how (and in what form) Islam specifically fitted into modern nation-states. In each of these arenas the notions of extremism, Wahhabism, and 'bad Islam' figured prominently. Thus an important part of people's attempts at redefining, for themselves and others, what Muslimness and Islam meant was an interaction with the discourse of terrorism (McBrien 2006a: 62).

In Khorezm, where I carried out research at the same time as McBrien in Kyrgyzstan, such issues were not discussed openly. Talking to me privately,

[70] Actually, the few women I saw wearing the *hijob* were mainly housewives, among them the wives of imams and other official religious functionaries such as employees of the local branch of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan; once I encountered a saleswoman at the bazaar who was dressed in the 'proper' Islamic way.

people sometimes addressed the issue of Wahhabism, but I never witnessed it being discussed in an open forum. The same applied for the issue of religion in general. With the exception of professional religious figures such as imams and *madrasa* teachers, 'ordinary' Muslims usually avoided discussions about religion, unless they knew me closely. Muhtaram offered an explanation for this phenomenon. One day, shortly after renewed bomb attacks by suspected Islamists on the police in the spring of 2004 in the city of Tashkent, I visited Muhtaram who was watching a television programme when I entered her house. It showed a man, an imprisoned 'religious extremist', who confessed to having – for criminal reasons – led people astray under the cover of Islam. When the programme ended Muhtaram turned to me and said: 'You wondered why people do not speak about religion. Now I think you understand that they are simply afraid.' As illustrated by my experience with Gulbahor, fear might indeed have played a role in people's avoidance of the politically sensitive issue of Islam. Gulbahor, introduced earlier, was a practicing Muslim and one of the small minority of women in *hijob*. Her niece, a close acquaintance of mine, asked her to meet me. After weeks of hesitation, Gulbahor finally agreed and visited me in the house of my hosts in Urganch. We were alone in my room and I asked her for permission to make a digital recording of our talk, which she agreed to. Our discussion went on for over two hours and centred on how she had become a practicing Muslim as well as about her views on some traditional religious practices that I was particularly interested in.

Gulbahor told me that she was born into a family of *xo'ja*s in which nobody practiced Islam. After independence, however, her father started to regularly observe the *namoz* prayers and a few years later he also went on the *haj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are expected to undertake at least once in their life). Around this time, Gulbahor's mother died and she herself started to pray five times a day *namoz* in order to find comfort. Later, against the will of her husband, she also took on the *hijob*. When I asked Gulbahor whether she had ever been suspected of being a Wahhabi because of her mode of dress, she said no. However, she took up the topic, explaining to me that Wahhabis cannot be regarded as Muslims since they engage in terrorist attacks; Muslims were not allowed to harm anybody. Later we talked about diviners and spirit healers, whose activities Gulbahor considered 'a great sin'. She also condemned *marakas* and various elements of the traditional wedding ceremony as un-Islamic. When I asked her where she got her knowledge of Islam from, she assured me that everything she knows is from books legally available on the market. Late that same evening I got a call from Gulbahor, asking me to hand over to her the compact disk I used for recording our discussion. The next morning I went to her house and, after

I demonstrated that it was the correct disk, she destroyed it. For Gulbahor, the whole matter was awkward and she repeatedly apologised for it, saying that it was her husband who wanted the disk destroyed. Actually, Gulbahor said nothing that could not be said by any official imam or could not be read in publications of the government controlled Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. However, the vagueness of the regime's discourse on religious extremism/Wahhabism often made people, particularly practicing Muslims, unsure about what was acceptable behaviour in the eyes of the authorities.

Similar to Gulbahor, all of my interlocutors who started regularly performing *namoz* during the 1990s told me that they learned from books how to pray. Such textbooks introducing the correct form of the ritual prayers are actually sold in every bookshop, at the bazaars, and at most holy sites. Since private religious instruction became prohibited by the 1998 law, books are actually the only means by which people can legally acquire knowledge about the basic Islamic dogmas and rituals. What is striking, however, is that nobody ever admitted to having visited one of the numerous Qur'anic courses and study circles that I was repeatedly told had operated in Khorezm prior to the implementation of the law. Apparently, no one wanted to be associated with the Islamic missionaries of that time, who in retrospect all became labelled as Wahhabis. The latter, Karomat once told me, '(…) have hypnotised the people who believed everything they preached.' By pointing to officially approved religious literature as the source of their knowledge about Islam, my interlocutors obviously intended to avoid suspicion of having ever been engaged in activities now regarded as extremist.

The effects of the current political situation in Uzbekistan on scientific research on religious issues are vividly illustrated by the German Turkologist Sigrid Kleinmichel (2000), in her account on *xalpa*s and *otin*s in Khorezm and the Ferghana Valley respectively. Throughout the Soviet era, there was complete silence in public about the existence of this kind of female religious specialist. However, after independence the general upsurge in interest in all aspects of traditional and/or religious life attracted the attention of the media to the *xalpa*s and their activities. In Khorezm, *xalpa*s gave interviews to journalists and appeared on local radio and television programmes. Kleinmichel states that during her fieldwork in 1997, *xalpa*s were keen to talk to her and gave her insight into their books. However, when she returned to Khorezm shortly after the Tashkent bombings in 1999, she reported finding a completely different situation that was characterised by an atmosphere of fear in respect of everything that had to do with religion. Many *xalpa*s were now reluctant to meet her, and people's prior readiness to help her search for religious texts typically used by the *xalpa*s melted away (Kleinmichel 2000: 20-22).

As illustrated by the above examples, the general feeling of insecurity was still there when, four years after Kleinmichel, I began my fieldwork in the region. However, the feeling was not omnipresent. Although people displayed a wide range of attitudes towards my efforts to discuss religious issues, certain tendencies can be identified. For example, until a close relationship had been established between us, it was generally difficult to ask people about religion. Moreover, people who were strict in their religious observance tended to be more reluctant to have discussions with an outsider. The aforementioned tendency to avoid speaking about religious issues whatsoever in a relatively open forum such as women's neighbourhood gatherings, *to'y*s and the like, can in part be attributed to the sensitiveness of the topic 'Islam' under the current political conditions. In particular, those known for their strong attachment to religion might prefer to remain silent in order not to run the risk of being mistaken for an extremist or accused for propagating religion.

Initially, I ascribed the low public presence of Islam in Khorezm to the effects of the Uzbek government's repressive policy towards religion. However, a short trip to the Ferghana Valley made me realise that the explanation goes deeper. I was surprised to see that in the village near to Andijon, where Johan Rasanayagam (my colleague from the MPI) carried out research, had numerous neighbourhood (*mahalla*) mosques: when a *mahalla* expands, people set up a new mosque in order to meet the increased demand. By contrast, rural and urban *mahalla* mosques in Khorezm were the exception; the pious prayed at home and usually attended mosques, often at a considerable distance from where they lived, only on Fridays. Religious observance also appears to be much higher in Samarqand, where 20 registered mosques operated in 2004 (Rasanayagam 2006b: 385). According to Rasanayagam, both in Samarqand and Andijon there were 'private *qorakhona*s, schools where boys learn how to recite the Qur'an, and mullahs and *otinca*s hold classes for boys and girls in their homes' (Rasanayagam 2006b: 385). Although I repeatedly asked about the existence of such classes in Urganch, I got only negative answers. Muhtaram once told me that she turned to her teacher at the university whom she trusted with the question where she could learn more about Islam, but was merely advised to read books. 'Perhaps there are classes where people teach the religion', Muhtaram said, 'but I do not know about them. All those that existed in our part of the city ceased to exist after the terrorists attacks.' Since the Ferghana Valley is looked upon by the regime with particular suspicion, the considerably lower level of mosque attendance and the apparent lack of private religious schools in Khorezm can hardly be attributed solely either to state control or the fear of it.

Yet when I reported my impressions from Andijon on returning to Khorezm, people nodded in agreement: 'Of course, in that regions religion is much stronger.' In support of my observations, Otavoy-*aka*, the previously mentioned descendant of Khivan shrine guardians said the following:

> You are not the only one recognising this difference. Last year we had here a guest from Namangan. After he visited some mosques, he said: 'In Khorezm, [the state of the] religion is not good (*din yoxshi emas*).' We asked him why and he answered that while in Namangan 2000 men, young and old alike, attend the Friday sermons, in Khiva he saw no more then 250, and most of them belonged to the older generation. As I already told you, Islam is not so strong in Khorezm.

Like Otavoy-*aka* and his guest in the above quotation, when speaking about religion (*din*) and Islam, people almost exclusively have the Islamic 'great tradition' in mind. Thus, when Khorezmians describe themselves as being less religious (*dindor*) than their fellow countrymen, they merely point to their relative laxity in the observance of the normative Islamic practices prescribed by the Shari'a.[71] Statements like 'Islam is not so strong here' or 'Khorezm is the least religious region in Uzbekistan' must be understood in this context and should not be mistaken for either a lack of Muslim identity or for atheism. Significantly, when speaking about religious practice, my interlocutors rarely if ever mentioned customary practices, such as domestic rituals connected to life cycle events, magic, divination, religious healing, visits to saintly shrines and the like more, in spite of their wide occurrence. This conceptual differentiation made by the people between various elements of their religious life will be discussed in the following chapter.

## 4.4 Islam versus Muslimness?

With the exception of individuals with formal religious education and those purists who claimed to have privileged insight into the 'true' nature of Islam, people seldom used the word 'Islam' in everyday speech. Rather, when addressing religious issues, they talk about 'Muslimness' (*musulmonchilik*), a widely used term among Turkic speaking Muslims of the former Soviet Union. Louw interprets the usage among the inhabitants of Bukhara as referring to 'a home-grown, primordial Islamic tradition (…), a collective memory which might be partly forgotten but which nevertheless was embodied in the innermost corners of their very being as well as in the sacred places in the outside landscape' (Louw 2007: 2). Writing about the Kazakhs

[71] As Privratsky has recently shown, the Kazakhs too perceive themselves as poor practitioners of Islam. The Kazakhs, he writes, 'love to lament that, 'We have no religion' (...) or 'We don't observe religion very well'' (Privratsky 2001: 246).

of Turkistan, Privratsky also mentions that they usually speak of their religious life simply as 'Muslimness', a usage that for the author 'reflects discomfort with the abstraction of Islam as an ideology and a preference for Muslim life as an experience of the community' (Privratsky 2001: 78). Thus, according to these interpretations, *musulmonchilik* describes religion as it is lived rather than as it is defined by the theologians.

In Khorezm, however, people apply the term in a much broader sense. For them, *musulmonchilik* is a label that covers almost all aspects of 'traditional' life and, thus, is used in a more inclusive sense than 'Islam'; it includes normative Islamic rituals as well as a wide range of customary practices (*urf-odat*) which – although often disapproved of by the learned – are not considered by most people as being in conflict with Islam but rather as part and parcel of their being Muslim. For example, the first time I attended a commemoration ritual (*maraka*), held on the seventh day following a death in our neighbourhood, someone said to me: 'Now you have seen our *musulmonchilik*.' In addition to the *maraka*s, the most frequently mentioned elements of *musulmonchilik* are life-cycle ceremonies (*to'y*s), held on the occasion of the birth of a child, the circumcision of a boy, or a wedding. 'Visit our *to'y*s', I was told, 'and you will learn our *musulmonchilik*.' Besides this, the term refers to a multitude of social norms and values: hospitality, respect for elders, women's chastity, selflessness, charity, and the like.[72] A 40-year-old manager of a collective farm explained his understanding of *musulmonchilik* in the following way:

> I say a *potya*[73] after every meal, wishing that it might be of use for the dead. I celebrate *maraka*s: I let the Qur'an recite for those who left, for our deceased forefathers. I am circumcised. I live in piece with my neighbours. Last year I kept the fast in Ramadan for the first time. God willing, I will do so again this year. My goal is to be pure in my deeds, to act out of a pure heart. I try to avoid the path of the Devil. I think that I, at least to a great degree, follow the path of Muslimness (*musulmonchilikni yolini tutaman*).

On the one hand, *musulmonchilik* as a label reflects a traditional concept of Islam, in which community and custom are strongly tied to the religion. This is the prevailing way in which Muslims in most parts of the world have appropriated Islam and which, in modern times, has been challenged by various reformist movements that aim to divorce Islam from custom and tradition. Under the particular circumstances of the Soviet era, this kind of

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[72] Heyat describes similar values subsumed by Azerbaijani Muslims under the label 'Muslimness' (Heyat 2002: 110).

[73] *Potya*, the local form of the Arabic Fatiha, the opening sura of the Qur'an, is actually a kind of blessing said in the Uzbek language.

community-based 'customary' Islam persisted and even appears to have gained impetus. On the other hand, *musulmonchilik* also seems to be a term used by the Muslim population of Central Asia and the Caucasus to differentiate itself from the culturally and religiously alien Russians. An acquaintance of mine, a historian from Qaraqalpaqistan stressed that people used the term to describe almost everything which was not Soviet and Russian as Muslim: 'Our people even call a particular kind of carrot (*gavshir*) used for the preparation of *polav* "*musulmon gavshir*".'[74]

While public manifestations of 'orthodox' Islam were stringently discouraged in the Soviet era, the regime tolerated – at least most of the time – public display of some customary practices, in particular the *to'y*s. As Khalid points out, these feasts 'were all seen as "Muslim" celebrations, not only because they centered around religious rituals, but also because non-Central Asians did not celebrate them' (Khalid 2007: 101). Moreover, customary religious practices had and continue to have the connotation of 'national' traditions, which made it less politically suspect to celebrate them. It appears that – in the anti-religious climate of the Soviet Union – referring to their particular way of life as *musulmonchilik* was a safe way to avoid the politically sensitive issue of upholding Islam.

Using a terminological distinction to differentiate between how people who consider themselves to be Muslim practice their faith and what Islam is as a theological category appears to be a phenomenon that was limited to the territories of the Tsarist and later Soviet empire; to the best of my knowledge other Islamic societies do not introduce such emic categories even though they conceptually exist. Thus, while Privratsky's and Louw's interpretations of the concept of *musulmonchilik* remain basically correct, they do not cover the multitude of aspects it implies.

In present-day Uzbekistan, the term *musulmonchilik* is firmly established in the regime's discourse as a suitable category for connecting religion to national identity. President Karimov frequently uses *musulmonchilik* and *otobobolarimizning dini* ('the religion of our forefathers') in his speeches and publications, to give expression to the view that Uzbek 'Muslimness' is not Islam as such; rather it is inextricably bound up with national customs, norms and values. As Louw points out:

> Uzbeks are continuously presented with their government's ideas about proper 'Muslimness' in their ordinary engagement with a world apparently saturated with the works of the Uzbek propaganda

[74] *Polav* is regarded by many peoples of Central Asia as their 'national' food. It consists of rice, carrot and meat. Adam reports that under Tsarist rule, Turkic speakers in the Caucasus often referred to their language simply as *müsälmanca* or 'Muslim language' (Adam 2005: 24).

> machine. They are presented with them when watching television, listening to the radio and reading newspapers (Louw 2007: 35).

Thus, in large part the popular usage of *musulmonchilik* is shaped by the regime's discourse which implies the association of universalistic, 'global' Islam with fundamentalism and religious extremism. At least in the case of Uzbekistan, a common denominator for the continuity of the usage over changing political systems can be found in the anxiety caused by changing forms of religious repression. At the beginning of my research, friends suggested that when talking to people I should not say that I am interested in Islam but rather in 'religious customs' (*diniy urf-odatlar*) or in *musulmonchilik* in general. Muhtaram cautioned me: 'If you say Islam, people might be reserved and you might even get into trouble with the provincial administration.'

Anthropological studies of Islam in local contexts suggest that opposing ideas of Islam exist in almost every locale; Dale Eickelman speaks about them as universalistic conceptions on the one hand and particularistic conceptions on the other (Eickelman 1981: 203). 'Given this situation', as Ladislav Holy argues, 'the concepts of "norm" and "orthodoxy" cannot so easily be swept under the carpet for they are indispensable to the understanding of the lived religion or "practiced" Islam' (Holy 1999: 6). In Khorezm as well, people hold varying opinions about what correct beliefs, rituals and superstitious acts (*irim*) are. In recent times, due to the greater availability of textual sources as well as the activity of Islamic missionaries in the first years of independence, the awareness of universalistic alternatives to customary beliefs and practices has grown considerably. However, with the exception of religious professionals, I came across only a few who went so far as utterly to denounce them as un-Islamic.

# *Chapter 5*
# The main contours of religious life

As a people, the Khorezmians exhibit a broad spectrum of attitudes towards religion. It ranges from no religious sentiments whatsoever to strict religious observance; with the majority being somewhere in between. Although obedience to the formal tenets of Islam has become more pronounced since independence, for most Khorezmians Muslim identity manifests itself primarily in the observance of rituals connected with life-cycle events and the commemoration of the dead, in much the same way as it did during the Soviet era. Even those openly indifferent to religion take part in the rituals that people in general – with the exception of a small minority of Islamic purists – consider as much a part of Islam as the Shari'a law. Moreover and independent of one's individual religiosity, people conform to a set of daily practices that are overtly religious; thus, they open their hands when a blessing (*potya*) is said at the end of a meal; similarly, they pass their hands over their faces at the end of a prayer, a gesture of respectful imitation of the Prophet Mohammed. Another example is when passing a cemetery, whether walking or driving a car, people make the same gesture as a suggestion of praying. Such daily rituals are profoundly habitual, socialised into people's consciousness from an early age and almost unconsciously reproduced later as part of the self-evident order of normal life. Privratsky speaks about rituals such as brushing the face as the 'mnemonics of the body', as a kind of 'shared affectivity' which has served as a 'cultural mechanism' for the preservation of 'Kazak religion' (Privratsky 2001: 22). However, these and other ethnographic parallels in the domain of domestic and communal rituals from many parts of Central Asia and beyond serve to warn us not to overemphasise regional characteristics at the cost of a common Muslim heritage. Thus, notwithstanding certain regional peculiarities, it would be as deceptive to speak about 'Khorezmian religion' as it is to talk about 'Kazak religion'. In the following I discuss various attitudes that Khorezmians display towards the formal tenets of Islam known as the five 'pillars' and, subsequently,

towards life-cycle celebrations – including the commemoration of the dead – as the main elements of contemporary religious life in the region.

## 5.1 Upholding the Islamic prescriptions

As discussed in the previous chapter, when Khorezmians described themselves as collectively less religious (*dindor*) than their fellow countrymen, they were mainly referring to their poor observance of the five 'pillars' of Islam, called in Uzbek the five obligations (*besh shart*): the confession of the faith (*shahodat*), the five daily prayers (*namoz*), the annual tithe (*zakot*), the annual fast during the month of Ramadan (*ro'za*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*haj*). Although most people were aware of the existence of these five 'pillars', in practice relatively few could list all of them. When asked what one should do in order to be a good Muslim (*Yaxshi musulmon bo'lish uchun novvi ish atish garak?*), only four out of 43 visitors to a holy site mentioned observance of the five 'pillars'. Twenty-two of them could not list any while others mainly mentioned praying and fasting, and replaced the remaining ones with social and moral norms such as honouring the elders, commemorating the deceased (*oto-buvalarni shod atish*), respecting the rights of others (*birovni xaqqini yemaslik*), sincerity (*yolg'on so'llamaslig*), openheartedness (*ko'ngli ochik*), thoroughness (*vijdonli bo'lish*) and the like.[75] Since the interviews were conducted at a holy site, it is perhaps not surprising that many also listed *ziyorat* (visit to a saintly tomb) among the main duties of a Muslim. One woman who admitted not knowing any of the obligations of Islam was corrected by those standing around her: 'But you are just fulfilling one: *ziyorat*!' During an informal gathering of university colleagues, the dean of the faculty of chemistry told me that for him, rituals such as the *namoz* prayers or fasting are not really essential to being a Muslim. What is important, he said, is 'to believe with the heart and to have respect for the people (*odamlara hurmat*). And first of all, one has to know oneself (*boshdo o'zini bilishi garak*).' This approach to religion was, as the above quotations illustrate, not only characteristic of intellectuals but of people in general with whom I discussed the issue of 'Muslimness'. However, since independence knowledge of the five 'pillars' has increased on the whole. For those who were more resistant to accepting the obligations imposed upon them by the Shari'a, each of the 'pillars' held varying degrees of importance, as the following discussion illustrates.

[75] For similar observations among the Kazakhs, see Privratsky 2001: 82.

### *5.1.1 The confession of the faith*

Only a few people were aware of the exact content of the testimony of the faith (Arabic: *shahada*), the confession that 'there is no god but God and Mohammed is the Prophet of God', and even fewer were able to recite it in Arabic. Rather, when asked for their religious confession, people would repeat the short formula: 'Praise be to God, I am a Muslim' (*alhamdulilloh musulmonman*). Sometimes even the expression 'Praise be to God, I am an Uzbek' is heard which indicates the strong interconnectedness between religious and ethnic identity. Like most people I met, my field assistant Sarvar heard and recited the correct formula for the first time when he got married. Before the mullah started performing the *nikoh*, the universal Islamic marriage ritual that is part of every wedding ceremony, he asked the young couple whether or not they were able to confess the faith. While his bride had learned it as a child from her mother, Sarvar had to be prompted by the mullah in order to repeat the Arabic words. The mullah later told me that he only occasionally came across an individual like Sarvar's bride who was able to pronounce the confession; he himself had learned it from books when, as a result of a personal crisis, he had turned to religion some twelve years earlier.

### *5.1.2 Giving alms*

*Zakot* (Arabic: *zakat*) is the amount of money that, according to the Shari'a, every adult Muslim has to pay in support of the needy and the poor. It usually involves the payment of one and half percent of one's capital each year and, in some Muslim countries, it is collected and distributed by the state. As defined by the religious law, *zakat* is not practiced in Khorezm. However, most people pay the *fitir* (Arabic: *zakat al-fitr* – the *zakat* of breaking the fast) at the end of Ramadan, whether or not they kept the fast. This kind of payment is observed with particular carefulness throughout the Muslim world; it is considered to serve as a compensation for any involuntary negligence one might have committed during the holy month. I was told that some people even paid the *fitir* during the Soviet era, to the village or neighbourhood imam or mullah, who had the responsibility of distributing it among the needy. The same practice continues in the present day. In the village where I spent the last days of Ramadan, the neighbourhood mullah went from house to house and collected the *fitir*, which is traditionally two kilograms of wheat or its equivalent in cash, for each person living in a household. My interlocutors surmised that the mullah would give part of the *fitir* to the imam of a mosque who, after subtracting his fair share, handed the rest of the money over to the Muslim Board in Tashkent. Davronjon, the

imam of the Ulli Pir sanctuary nearby Shovot, disagreed. According to him, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan had nothing to do with the collection of the *fitir*. Rather, he said: 'Imams in some places go around voluntarily and collect money from the people, which they then put in their own pockets. Nobody controls them; the people are too credulous and think that their money goes to those in need.' In most cases, however, the reason why people pay the *fitir* without asking what it is used for is not that they are too credulous. One of my interlocutors explained: 'It is not important what the mullah actually does with the money. We do not ask. Important is that by giving the *fitir* you fulfil a deed that pleases God. What counts is your intention (*niyat*).' Nevertheless, as in the case of the pious donations that are often left by visitors to holy sites, rumours about the misuse of the *fitir* are not unusual. Those who consider the goal of the donation as being more important than the symbolic gesture – those who want to ensure that their money actually goes to the poor – personally hand it out to needy people. For example, that year Muhtaram gave 5000 *so'm* – the equivalent of four kilograms of wheat – to a neighbour of hers whom she personally knew was truly in need of help.

### *5.1.3 Performing the* namoz *prayers*

The term *namoz* (Arabic: *salat*), although usually translated as prayer, refers to a whole set of preliminary rituals and conditions that must be observed before praying. First of all, the individual performing the *namoz* must be in a state of ritual purity, which means that he/she has to have performed at least minor ablutions (*tahorat*). One must also be dressed in a way that conforms to the legal regulations: the body of a man has to be covered from the navel to the knees while, for a woman, it is the whole body, with the exception of the face and the hands. Moreover, the place where the *namoz* is performed must be marked off from its surroundings by some sort of 'prayer rug' (*namoz joy*). The *namoz* itself consists of various sequences of Arabic recitations and prostrations that are 'precisely prescribed and are identical throughout the Muslim world except for minor variations between the legal schools' (Privratsky 2000: 84). It must be performed five times a day: before daybreak (*bomdod*), at noon (*peshin*), in the late afternoon (*asr*), in the evening (*shom*), and two hours after sunset (*xufton*). Unlike in other Muslim societies, the call to prayer (*azon*) does not determine the rhythm of daily life in Khorezm. In Urganch for example, where the three Friday mosques are scattered over the town's large territory, the *azon* can only be heard by those who live in the immediate vicinity of the mosques.

With the exception of those who adhere to purist ideas about what constitutes proper Islamic practice, most people consider the *namoz* the

concern of elderly people. As one of my interlocutors put it: 'For people who reached the age of 60 and are already retired, it is desirable to perform the *namoz*. They have enough time and are anyhow more concerned with the afterlife. But for us working people it is difficult to manage this obligation.' Postponing the observance of daily ritual prayers is a custom that predates Soviet influence and is actually characteristic of many Muslims throughout the world (Privratsky 2000: 83, 92-93; Ro'i 2000: 441). This is confirmed by the case of Azamat and Nurulla, sons of a former village mullah and grandsons of an *eshon*. Eight years ago, then in his early 60s, Azamat began to occupy himself with religion. He acquired basic religious knowledge from books and learned how to perform the *namoz* from an imam. Later, he became the student (*murid*) of a Naqshbandi shaykh from Bukhara who introduced him to Sufi teachings and, since then, once or twice a year, Azamat visits his master in Bukhara where he takes part in Sufi ceremonies.[76] At the time when I was in Khorezm, Azmat's younger brother, Nurulla, was in his late 50s and was working as a teacher of humanities at the provincial university. Up till then, he had not fulfilled any of the formal obligations of Islam and showed no interest in religion. A few years ago, however, he started to keep the fast in Ramadan and has decided to start regularly performing the *namoz* after retiring. He said:

> At present, I am too much occupied with other duties and have a lot of responsibilities for my family, for my profession. But in a few years the situation will be different. So God willing, I can finish working and have enough time and energy to regularly observe the daily prayers like my brother. Such things can not be done half-heartedly.

Indeed, having no time was often given as an explanation for neglecting the daily prayers. Moreover, workplaces in Uzbekistan are not suitable for religious observance. Away from the mosques or the home, it is difficult to find a proper place for worship as well as water for carrying out the ablutions. In the early days of my research I once asked a friend at the university where people found water for the ablutions, given the notorious lack of flowing water in the toilettes. Amused by the naivety of my question he answered that nobody prays the *namoz* at his place of work: 'It would not at all be esteemed here. You could be taken for a Wahhabi.'

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[76] To the best of my knowledge, unlike in other parts of the country, organised Sufism has not witnessed revitalisation of Khorezm. Some of the imams I spoke to appeared to be strongly influenced by Naqshbandi teachings and spoke highly of certain sheikhs of the order as their *pir*s. However, all of them asserted that none of them lived in Khorezm. According to the imams, the tradition of the Sufi way (*tariqa*) died out in Khorezm and so far there were no signs of a reversal of this.

During my stay in Khorezm I got acquainted with only about 20 people – not including religious professionals such as imams – who regularly performed the five *namoz* prayers each day. My Urganch host Maqsud, a 30-year-old businessman mentioned in the preceding chapter, was one of them. Maqsud, son of an overtly secular family, devoted himself to the 'proper' Islamic way of life from his early 20s. As a businessman he is his own boss and can manage to leave his work place in order to perform the noon and afternoon prayers at home. He has difficulty getting up before sunset, but he usually makes up for the *bomdod* in the evening. For a year or two, his wife also performed the ritual prayers but gave it up when she gave birth to her first child. Like many others whose main intention was to fulfil the primary obligations, she could not incorporate the *namoz* rituals into her daily routine and, consequently, she only performs them occasionally. This kind of selective religious observance is not unusual. Several of my interlocutors, both young and old, explained that they only perform one *namoz* a day, usually the *bomdod* in the early morning. Early historical and ethnographic accounts from other parts of the region testify that the preference for the *bomdod* prayer follows traditional patterns. In her study of religious practices among the Uyghur in 19th century Xinjiang, Bellér-Hann mentions that contrary to normative ideals, 'in practice, local Muslims stressed the importance of the first, morning prayer, rather than the fulfilment of the five *namaz* per day' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 341).

The experience of a personal crisis, particularly illness, was frequently cited as a crucial factor in people's decision to turn to prayer, especially in the case of women. For example, Sanobar, a retired school teacher and former Communist Party member, began to suffer from a chronic illness in 1987 and started to perform at least one *namoz* prayer a day. Since that time, she has become a frequent visitor at holy sites as well as often consulting spirit healers in order to get relief from her pains; she believes that these observances are improving her well being through divine intervention. Similar to Sanobar, many of my interlocutors did not see any conflict between customary rituals and Islam which illustrates the interweaving of 'orthodox' and 'popular' conceptualisations of the religion, discussed in the introductory chapter of this book.

### *5.1.4 Keeping the fast in Ramadan*

Fasting (Arabic: *sawm*) in Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar in which the Qur'an is believed to have been sent down, is the fourth 'pillar' of Islam. It entails complete abstinence from eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse between dawn and dusk. As an obligation, the fast, which Uzbeks refer to as *ro'za*, is required of every adult Muslim who is in

full possession of his senses and, if a woman, is free from menstruation and the bleeding of childbed. Fasting, which went on publicly unnoticed during the Soviet era, now enjoys growing popularity.[77] Although the new Uzbek government declared the first day of Eid al-Fitr – the 3-day Muslim festival that marks the end of the fasting period – a national holiday, the celebration of it had to be brought in line with the official 'national ideology of independence' outlined by president Karimov.[78] Public organisations have been encouraged to celebrate the feast in line with 'national values' while the government-controlled mass media has been requested to cover the events of the day widely, bringing them into harmony with the nation's 'golden heritage'.[79]

In Khorezm, keeping the fast is the most widely observed Islamic obligation. I observed a steady increase in its popularity in the course of my research between 2002 and 2006. People who had never performed the *namoz* prayers nor kept the fast in Ramadan when I first met them, proudly explained that they had started fasting in the year of my second or third visit. Much the same as Privratsky notes for post-independence Kazakhstan, increasing participation in the fast contributes to 'feelings of pride in being a Muslim' (Privratsky 2001: 88). Keeping the fast seems to be an appropriate way of asserting Muslim identity, even for those who otherwise abjured religious observance. Many people fast part-time: some days at the beginning of Ramadan and some towards its end. Muhtaram commented on the growing importance of the fast as follows: 'People wish to demonstrate, to themselves and to others, that they are good Muslims. To fast for a couple of days or even for a month is easier to manage than performing the *namoz* during a whole year five times a day.' Muhtaram, who had given up regularly praying the *namoz* because of her manifold obligations as a professional woman and mother of two children, kept the fast every year, although for a varying number of days. Others suspect that some men prefer the fast to the *namoz* because they do not want to give up alcohol completely. As Maqsud said: 'Once you start to pray the *namoz* you have to stop drinking.

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[77] On the basis of archive material, Ro'i provides an overview of religious activities in Ramadan during the Soviet era (Ro'i 2000: 468-489).

[78] The date is determined by the Islamic calendar and so it varies from year to year.

[79] In September 2006 I watched a special TV programme on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr which included greetings from president Karimov, Qura'nic recitations and a speech of the head of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, a talk with a female student (in *hijob*) of the Islamic University, pictures of Karimov shaking hands with imams, as well as references to Timur, Jalal ad-Din Manguberdi, and other 'national heroes' who defended the fatherland against its enemies. The programme was further embellished with film spots showing historical sites, monuments, and post-independence achievements in the field of industrial production and high technology.

But if you keep the fast, you only have to abstain from alcohol for the duration of a month.' And yet, speaking about the growing popularity of the fast is relative. Maqsud estimates that no more than 20% of the adult men in his *mahalla* observe it.

Alcohol consumption was also an issue on national television during Ramadan. In one programme I watched, the imam admonished his viewers to moderate their drinking when the fasting period was over. Since consuming alcohol is forbidden (*harom*) by the religious law, one might be surprised that a learned representative of the faith does not call for complete abstinence. However, the imam's publicly displayed attitude towards drinking goes along with the government-supported interpretation of Islam which tolerates alcohol and does not demand rigorous everyday conformity to religious prescriptions. A friend of mine commented on what the imam said about alcohol by observing that rigid proscription of alcohol consumption was considered as characteristic of the 'Wahhabis'. He added: 'An imam cannot call for abstinence in a TV broadcast, even if he would like to do so. Otherwise he could be suspected of religious fanaticism.'

In many Muslim societies, especially in the Near East where a much larger part of the population keeps the fast, everyday life largely comes to a standstill, with people usually making up for the deprivations of the day during the night. By contrast, in Khorezm, the fasting period does not significantly alter the routine of daily life. Even so, certain activities clearly set the 30 days of Ramadan apart from the other months of the year. Most of these activities are of an overtly communal nature with almost everyone joining in, whether or not they have all fasted.

Three days before the beginning of Ramadan, neighbourhood children form small groups and go from house to house chanting the following rhyme:

*Romozon, romozon*
*oyto-oyto galdik bu o'ylara*
*Kim yetti, kim yetmadi bu gunlara*
*Mo'ringizdon tutun chiqqay*
*Yeddi galin yugurib chiqqay*
*Yeddisinam o'gli bo'lg'ay*
*Romozon omin!*
*Eshikingiz aldi o'y akan*
*Ichi do'li go'y akan*
*Ertang galib qorosoq*
*Gumburlama to'y akan*
*Olg'oylo-bulog'oylo*
*Eshikingizni oltin bilan suvog'oylo*

*Romozon omin!*
*Op chiqing, sop chiqing*
*Layanlara sop chiqing*
*Layanlara sig'moso*
*On so'm, besh so'm barip chiqing*
*Romozon omiiin!*[80]

We came to these houses by saying
Ramadan, Ramadan
Who witnessed these days and who did not
May smoke rise from your chimney
May you have seven daughters-in-law
May all of them have sons
Ramadan amen!
There is a ditch in front of your door
It is full of sheep
When we come tomorrow
There is a splendid feast
All in all
Your door should be painted with gold
Ramadan amen!
Bring it and put it into the bowl
If it doesn't fit into the bowl
Come and give [us] ten *so'm*, five *so'm*
Ramadan amen!

The last lines reveal the reason for the children's singing, namely to get a reward for their good wishes. During these and the days that follow people make sure that they always have some coins at hand in case the Ramadan singers knock at their door. Money is also kept for the stream of beggars – said to be gypsies (*lola*) from Bukhara – on the move during Ramadan. They circulate in the towns, reciting blessings and verses and asking for alms. The verses praise God, calling upon the Islamic saints to bless the charitable people of the house and to bring them well-being and prosperity. Giving money to a beggar, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan, is believed to win favour with God (*savob*). Similar to what Bellér-Hann notes for the Uyghurs: 'While almsgiving constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam, in local society generosity went beyond a compartmentalised understanding of religious obligations: it permeated local notions of a household's

[80] In Khorezmian dialect.

integrity and constituted an important source of prestige' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 351).

The daily breaking of the fast (Arabic: *iftar*) after sunset – generally referred to as *o'iz ochar* ('opening the mouth') by the people – can be done individually or in the company of others. During the fasting period I spent as a guest in Maqsud's house, he often broke the fast alone at home. He sat down at the table and recited a short prayer in a low voice, before starting to eat. Like many other 'new born' Muslims, Maqsud strongly tends 'to rely upon the self and its relation to God rather than upon a cycle of rituals'; a tendency that Ellen describes as a major characteristic of Muslim fundamentalists (Ellen 1983: 62). For Maqsud, keeping the fast is a private matter between him and God; moreover, he doesn't try to influence anyone in his family, including his wife, to adhere to the same religious observances as himself. For others, however, what particularly makes the month of Ramadan a holy period of the year are the evening meals taken in the company of others.

In the last decade and a half it has become popular to organise *o'iz ochar* gatherings and invite neighbours and relatives to take part in it. In the street where the house of my hosts in Urganch is located, *o'iz ochar*s are held every evening in a different house in rotation, with the women of the neighbourhood preparing the meal together. In the village where I spent part of my time in Khorezm, *o'iz ochar* gatherings are organised within the larger kinship group, every evening at the home of a different relative, though neighbours and village notables not of the family are sometimes also included. Keeping the fast was not at all regarded as necessary for taking part in such communal gatherings. Indeed, at the *o'iz ochar* meals I attended, only a small minority of the hosts and the guests was actually fasting. One evening in Ramadan I was invited to join the *o'iz ochar*, held at the house of a well-to-do businessman in our neighbourhood in Urganch. About 30 women had been invited but only two of them were keeping the fast; all the others were politely waiting to start eating and drinking with them. When the meal was over, one of the fast-keepers almost inaudibly recited some passages from the Qur'an (as already stated, women do not recite the Qur'an in a loud voice), and finished with a blessing (*potya*) in Uzbek. Then the fast-keepers went to an adjacent room to perform the ritual prayer. Meanwhile, the men – having been regaled separately – gathered in the large corridor hall (*dolon*) of the house where they performed the *tarovih* – a particular night prayer consisting of 20 *rakat*s (prostrations) – in each others' company. It is usual to invite a mullah to such communal fast-breaking rituals; he recites long passages from the Qur'an and also often entertains the male guests with readings from religious texts in Uzbek.

Many perform the night prayers (*tarovih*) in the mosque. In the years prior to the building of a mosque in their village, male members of the kinship group my hosts belong to used to stay half the night together. Those who actually prayed did it in a separate room and afterwards the whole group listened to pious texts recited by the mullah. In 2006, however, the fast-keepers left after the evening meal for the mosque in order to pray the *tarovih* there. Thus, the establishment of a mosque in the immediate vicinity contributed, at least in the case of the religiously more active, to shifting the focus of the Ramadan rituals from the kinship group and the residential unit to the *umma*, the community of the believers. This tendency is gaining strength among those who adhere to a universalistic conception of what is considered to be appropriate Muslim conduct and ritual, and what is not. Maqsud for example, is not fond of the *o'iz ochar* gatherings because he feels they satisfy social rather than religious needs. Muhtaram also told me that although she does not like to take part in these events, she occasionally joins in so as not to conspicuously violate the social norms that govern neighbourhood relations. In her view, the *o'iz ochar* celebrations in her neighbourhood have been divested of true religious meaning because of being merely social events. 'They celebrate *iftar*,' she said, 'although they do not keep the fast. It is a misuse of religion for the sake of entertainment.' She emphasises her sentiments by referring to the breaking of the fast with the Arabic word *iftar*, rather than using the local terminology. In her view, by using more 'proper' terminology, she expresses her dissatisfaction with the prevailing understanding of the event as a show of communal solidarity and reciprocity, rather than as an act of individual devotion.

### *5.1.5 Making the pilgrimage to Mecca*

According to the Shari'a, every able-bodied and able-minded adult Muslim, man and woman alike, who can afford it, has the obligation to undertake the pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Given the considerable expense and the physical burdens involved, the performance of the *haj* has never been a mass phenomenon in Central Asia. However, whereas during the Soviet era undertaking the pilgrimage was almost impossible for ordinary Muslims, nowadays the *haj* is organised and regulated by the state through the official religious organs of the country. Although the government of Saudi Arabia, the guardian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, allocated Uzbekistan a possible quota of roughly 25,000 pilgrims each year, the internal quota set by the Karimov regime is normally lower. In 2006, the

number of those allowed to make the pilgrimage was limited to 5000.[81] Like the other newly independent states in Central Asia (with the exception of Kazakhstan), Uzbekistan bans independently organised pilgrimages and prescribes the use the national airline for the travel to Mecca. But even without such state-imposed limitations, making the *haj* remains a privilege that only a few can afford. Over the last decade and a half, those Khorezmians who went on the pilgrimage came primarily from the ranks of the *nouveaux riches*. Performing the *haj* confers considerable prestige; since this kind of disposable capital is only available to those who have been able to accrue substantial financial resources, making the pilgrimage is also a means of strengthening social stratification.

In the three cases personally known to me, it was only after their return from Mecca that these individuals started observing the religious obligations. While by making the *haj* their status in the community is elevated, it is also the case that this recognition becomes dependent on the piety of their post-pilgrimage behaviour. In this respect, the strong emotional effect of the *haj* – which allows individual Muslims to experience being a member of the *umma*, the worldwide community of believers – should not be underestimated. Since making the pilgrimage is one of the most potent manifestations of affiliation with Islam, the post-independence political elite have tried to cash in on the symbolic capital generated by it. However, people have a good memory and often remain sceptical when their former communist leaders publicly display Muslim piety, like a friend of mine whom I joined at a wedding party in Urganch, held by a fairly well to do businessman in an expensive hotel of the city. When an elegantly dressed middle-aged woman, her hair covered with a transparent white scarf, stood up to propose a toast to the bridegroom's father, my friend leaned over to me and whispered:

> She was a high ranking Party cadre, one of the wildest communists and loyal to the line up to the very end. But she understood very quickly that new qualities are required now. She went on the *haj*, shortly after the Soviet regime fell. She soon became responsible for women's religious issues in the provincial administration (*hoqimiyat*). Look, how she plays the pious fine lady now. I still remember her wearing heavy boots, and scolding and drinking like a man.

[81] Forum 18 News, 7 December 2006. Turkmenistan exercises the most severe restrictions, each year allowing only 188 of its citizens to perform the pilgrimage, far below the quota assigned to the country by Saudi Arabia.

## 5.2 Life-cycle celebrations

In Central Asia, as in Muslim societies generally, the birth of a child, the circumcision of a boy, marriage and death are subject to ritual celebrations which display an essentially communal character. Life-cycle events involve an individual's entire kinship group and neighbourhood community and are permeated by the principle of reciprocity. Their religious significance aside, such celebrations provide the opportunity for maintaining and reinforcing social relations of mutual obligation and for affirming the host's status in society. In the Soviet era, life-cycle celebrations were often the only means for the public display of Muslim identity, and they were viewed increasingly as symbols of cultural and ethnic identity, serving to distinguish Central Asians from Russians and other non-Muslims living in their midst. As Koroteyeva and Makarova argue, the socialist economy of shortage not only reinforced traditional modes of reciprocity but also encouraged increasingly generous life-cycle celebrations (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998). In these authors' view, the gradual improvement of living conditions from the early 1970s onward, in combination with a permanent shortage of goods and limited investment opportunities, transformed life-cycle rituals into arenas of conspicuous consumption within which status in the community could be reproduced and demonstrated: 'Life-cycle celebrations were a long-standing local tradition, but their enormous scale, criteria of adequate dowries or ceremonial gifts and, above all, mounting pressure to meet them, were definitely new' (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998: 583). The notion that people 'often deprived themselves of their most elementary needs in order to pay for such ceremonies' is also supported by Soviet archive material (see Ro'i 2000: 458).

Given the scarcity of adequate information with respect to the pre-Soviet and early Soviet periods, estimating the increasing scale of life-cycle celebrations in Uzbekistan in the Brezhnev era remains difficult. It can be assumed, however, that, under conditions of growing prosperity and relative equality in the distribution of material resources, what was formerly a privilege of a wealthy minority became the 'property' of many. According to official Soviet reports, some people could afford to organize large weddings and circumcision ceremonials even in times of severe economic hardship. Ro'i quotes archive material from 1948, according to which the deputy chairman of a *kolkhoz* celebrated the circumcision of his son with a 3-day feast during which a horse and four sheep were slaughtered and '300 kg of rice and 700 kg of flour were consumed' (Ro'i 2000: 530-531). The repeated condemnation of such events by the government as well as by the official Soviet *ulama* suggests that ostentatious celebrations on the occasion of

weddings, circumcision and death were no exception in the period prior to the 1960s (see Ro'i 2000: 458).

In Uzbekistan, like elsewhere in the successor states of the Soviet Union, post-independence developments have brought about growing economic disparities which are also reflected in the field of rituals. As Kandiyoti and Azimova point out: 'Weddings became arenas in which the widening gap between the "new rich" and the "new poor" became increasingly conspicuous' (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004: 337). Fearing the negative effects of accentuated display of wealth at a time when a large part of the population was experiencing economic degradation, the Karimov regime banned large-scale entertainments on the occasion of life-cycle rituals as socially harmful and as discrediting national values. In an appeal in December 2002, president Karimov called for the abandonment of excessive and wasteful *to'y*s, arguing that under the present circumstances families with many children particularly suffer because they feel pressurised to keep up appearances. Karimov further proclaimed that flaunting wealth during religious ceremonies contradicts the nation's centuries old traditions as well as the religion of Islam.[82] Following Karimov's appeal for a joined struggle against ceremonial excesses, the chief mufti of Uzbekistan, Abdurashid Qori Bahromov introduced a *fatwa* (legal opinion) in respect of the correct celebration of *to'y*s and *maraka*s (commemoration rituals). In the main, the *fatwa* reiterates the president's arguments and admonishes people not to overspend for the *to'y*s, but rather to make donations for charitable aims.[83] Such calls for moderation during life-cycle rituals and commemoration ceremonies were regularly transmitted by the media, and especially by television, during the time of my field-work in Khorezm.

However, the government and the official religious establishment were not the only ones to challenge the prevailing mode of life-cycle celebrations. The latter had come under heavy criticism from Muslim fundamentalists, who particularly oppose music and dance performances and the consumption of alcohol. Moreover, they called for the complete abandonment of the *maraka*s on the grounds that their celebration utterly contradicts proper Islamic teachings. I was told that in the first years of independence some people actually began to hold wedding parties and circumcision ceremonies where the sexes were strictly segregated and music and alcohol were

[82] For a summery of the presidential appeal (in Russian), see www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1424 (Accessed on 13.06.2007). Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004: 337) mention a presidential decree from October 1998 'banning ostentatious ceremonies as "offensive" to the general public'.

[83] The *fatwa* was introduced on 28. December 2002. For an abstract (in Uzbek), see www.ferghana.ru ibid.

banned. Some of my interlocutors also recalled that at these *to'y*s 'Wahhabi' preachers were sometimes present, to introduce the guests to Islamic doctrine and practices. As McBrien reports, such 'wedding speakers' were very active in Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s:

> The wedding speaker, an Islamic preacher typically from outside the community, was invited to the wedding to deliver a religious message which called the guests to observe more closely the way of Islam. This addition of the speaker turned the celebration into a decidedly religious event directed at transforming the beliefs and practices of the wedding guests (McBrien 2006b: 342).

From the mid 1990s onwards, Islamic missionary activities came to an end in Khorezm and 'Muslim weddings' (*musulomoncha to'y*) were largely given up by the people. During the three wedding seasons I spent in the province, I only heard of one such wedding, held in a village near Shovot by a *xo'ja* family. Thus, as purist Islamic propaganda had no long lasting effect on either life-cycle celebrations or the religious life in general in Khorezm, governmental appeals for moderation were more likely to be followed. Economically weak families sometimes endeavour to reduce the costs of a *to'y* by shortening its length to two rather than three days. This is mainly achieved by holding certain rituals that are traditionally carried out on two subsequent days, on a single day. This tendency confirms the observation that Kandiyoti and Azimova made in other parts of the country:

> Whereas the exhortations of Soviet bureaucrats to reform ritual life in the name of rational modernity fell on deaf ears at a time of relative economic stability, the rising cost of living, widespread impoverishment, and the existence of alternative avenues for investment and more individualistic forms of consumption are now making ordinary people more receptive to these messages (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004: 337).

### *5.2.1 Early childhood rituals*

According to the widely held convictions that Khorezmians share with most of their co-religionists throughout the region, a father has three major duties towards his sons: to give them a good name, to circumcise them and, finally, to marry them. In Khorezm, name giving is not marked communally and is not accompanied by any elaborate ceremony. Shortly after mother and child return from the clinic (women no longer give birth at home), the family invites a mullah to speak the *azon* (the call for prayer) into the baby's ear, followed by his or her name. This simple ritual is referred to as *azon aytish* ('to say the *azon*') and can also be carried out by an elder male relative who knows the right words to recite. In the days following the return from the

clinic, female neighbours and relatives pay a first visit called *yuz go'rimlik* ('to see the face') to the mother and her new born child and leave a small amount of money as a present. During the *chilla*, the 40-day period after birth, mother and child are believed to be particularly subject to the influence of malevolent spirits and the evil eye. In order to minimise this danger, they should not leave the house during this period of time.

The birth of a first child is celebrated with a great feast called *beshik to'y* ('cradle ceremony'), held a few weeks after birth. The cradle is provided by the newborn child's maternal grandmother; it will be used for all the other children of the couple for whom no *beshik to'y*s are held. On the occasion of the cradle ceremony, the close relatives of the baby's mother also present the child with bedding and clothing and further contribute to the feast with a sheep. Nowadays, cradle ceremonies are almost as large in scale as circumcision feasts, with a great number of guests invited, who are regaled with an opulent meal and often also entertained by professional musicians and dancers.

The ritual of placing the newborn into the cradle occupies only a small part of the whole festivity and takes place inside the house, in the presence of some female neighbours and relatives. Before the baby is laid down in the cradle, the mother hands it over to an old woman who turns the baby three times to the left and three times to the right accompanying her actions each time with the question: 'To the right? To the left?' Those present call 'To the right' and she lays the baby down on its right side. The woman who performs this ritual has to be somebody with a great number of children and grandchildren, in hopes that the old woman's fertility might be transferred to the young mother. This simply ceremony is concluded by a blessing prayer (*potya*) spoken by one of the baby's grandmothers or another respected elder woman.

Like all other *to'y*s, the *beshik to'y* is based on the principle of reciprocity. On arrival, the guests present their gifts (nowadays often in the form of money) to the hosts and, on leaving, they receive a small present in return for their participation in the feast and their good wishes: usually a piece of cloth, bread and some sweets wrapped in a tablecloth (*dasturxon*). Such presents symbolise the wish of the hosts that their guests would themselves soon celebrate a *to'y*, which is why such presents are accompanied with the words: *to'y bo'lsin* ('a feast should be'). The amount and quality of the gifts exchanged are determined by the nature and proximity of kinship between host and guest. While early childhood ceremonies such as name giving and *beshik to'y* '(…) imply the ritual acknowledgment of a person's multiple community ties, which accompany him or her throughout life' (Bellér-Hann

2006: 235), circumcision, to which I will turn now, symbolises a boy's incorporation into the wider Muslim community.

### *5.2.2 The feast of circumcision*

The Soviets severely criticised the Muslim practice of circumcision as a harmful relict of the past which, in their view, 'was likely to lead to complications, infection and even death' (Ro'i 2000: 527). Nevertheless, in spite of the official ban most Soviet Muslims circumcised their sons. Even party members and local officials let their sons be circumcised, in order that they not be socially isolated. 'They tended, however, to perform circumcision secretly or to conceal it with some plausible excuse, saying it was being done for reasons of hygiene, or dubbing the ceremony as one of name-giving' (Ro'i 2000: 530).

As among many Muslim peoples, in Uzbekistan circumcision is usually referred to by the Arabic word *sunnat* ('tradition'),[84] which indicates that, unlike daily prayers or fasting, it is not incumbent on confessors of the faith. Although the practice is not prominently treated in the books of Islamic law, it is a highly esteemed popular custom; together with the abstention from pork, circumcision in popular opinion has come to be seen as an indispensable criterion of adherence to Islam. The weight attached to the practice derives from the tradition which states that the Prophet was born circumcised – a *hadith* which was told to me by imams but which is not known by everybody. When asked for the meaning of *sunnat*, people usually explained it as a tradition handed down to them by the forefathers.

In Khorezm, it is held that a boy should be circumcised before the age of six, by 12 at the latest. The age of 12 is considered to be the time when a boy reaches majority (*kamolga yetish yoshi*): circumcision after this age is considered *harom* or ritually forbidden. As my assistant Sarvar explained: 'It would be a sin (*gunoh*) to look at the *harom* part of the body of a boy who is older than 12.' There is a preference to circumcise boys in odd numbered years, at the age of three, five, or seven. In practice, however, economic considerations also play a role when a family decides to let a son be circumcised. *Sunnat to'ys*, feasts celebrated on the occasion of a circumcision are costly, given the great number of guests that have to be entertained, and are often almost as big an event as a wedding, lasting two or three days, depending on the financial situation of the hosts. If a family lives separately (*bo'lak*), I was told that it is the father's responsibility to arrange for his son's circumcision, whereas in the case of an extended family, the responsibility for this rests with the head of the household. This was the case for

[84] Sometimes people also refer to circumcision as *hatna* (from Arabic *khitān*).

Alijon whose circumcision party was organised and paid for by his grandfather, head of a big extended family living in Ko'shko'pir.

On the eve of the circumcision, about 40 guests, mainly close relatives and the notables of the village enjoyed a lavish meal. While they were being served inside the house, preparations for the next day went on in the courtyard: young men (relatives, neighbours, friends of the father of the boy who was going to be circumcised) peeled 100 kilos of carrots and cut them in small pieces for the *polav* to be cooked the next day. Meanwhile, girls and women from the family and the neighbourhood baked bread (*non*) for about 400 guests who were expected to come over the next two days. The circumcision itself took place in the early morning hours in the room in which the boy, his parents and three sisters lived in the house. It was carried out by the village barber in the presence of male relatives. The five-year-old boy had no idea what was going to happen to him until the operation itself had begun. (In order not to frighten them, people usually do not prepare the boys for the act of circumcision beforehand.) During the operation, the mother stood outside with one of her fingers in a cup of oil in order to ease his pain.[85] After the operation was done, one of the boy's paternal uncles, a mullah, recited a blessing prayer (*potya*). The room was fumigated in order to protect the boy against evil influences such as magic or the evil eye, and the women of the family were allowed to enter. The foreskin was wrapped in a peace of cloth and put aside.[86]

The boy spent the entire day on the mattress in the room, accompanied by his mother and some female relatives, and a stream of visitors went in to see him, handing him money and saying comforting words such as 'Do not cry; now you became a man, you became a big child (*yeg'lomo, indi arkak bo'lding san, ulli bolo bo'lding san*).' Each visitor in turn was given a piece of cloth, a symbolic reciprocal offering for *to'y*s in general and an expression of the wish that the visitors might themselves celebrate a *to'y* of their own.

All the while, a professional cook prepared two huge vessels of food in the courtyard, assisted by a group of (male) neighbours. On that day, two groups of guests were entertained: at noon, the relatives (some of them came from neighbouring villages in Turkmenistan), the inhabitants of the host's *o'rom*[87], and village notables, and, in the afternoon, colleagues of the household head from Urganch. The next day was reserved for entertaining the

[85] A similar custom is described by Snesarev (2003: 77). According to the author, during the operation, the mother puts one finger in fat and another in flour.

[86] According to my informants, in case the boy's future bride would not be become pregnant, her mother-in-law would fry the foreskin and give it to her to eat, in order to make her fertile.

[87] *O'rom* is the local term for a neighbourhood unit that forms part of the greater residential unit *alot*, now officially called *mahalla*.

boy's father's friends and colleagues from the village. Altogether, the expenditures for the feasts included 100 kilos of rice, 100 kilos of carrots, 1 cow, 20 kilos of additional meat, 70 bottles of vodka, 15 bottles of Uzbek cognac and wine, countless bottles of soft drinks, and plenty of cakes, nuts, raisins and the like. Additionally, 5000 *so'm* and a shirt were given to the cook as compensation for his services, and 2000 *so'm* for slaughtering the cow. A small part of the costs was covered by the money that every visitor handed over to the host of the feast who was responsible for deciding how to spend money that had been given, or whether to give part of it, to the child. The amount of money given by the guests varies in accordance to the degree of their relationship to the host of the celebration.

Other *sunnat to'y*s include professional music and dance performances or even occasional performances by a jester who entertains the guests with silly jokes and funny anecdotes transmitted by huge loudspeakers. I was told that in villages such *tomosho*s (amusements offered for the guests of a *to'y*) sometimes also include performances by wrestlers and ram fights (*qo'chqor urushtirma*) or dog fights (*it urushtirma*).[88] The boys whose circumcision the *to'y* is celebrating play a marginal role in these events. Unlike what Privratsky describes for Kazakhstan, where the circumcised boy is seated on a horse 'covered with a ceremonial rug as an announcement that a boy in the family has been circumcised' (Privratsky 2001: 95), at all *sunnat to'y*s I attended, the boys stayed inside the house and were in no way the subject of particular attention. The primary significance of such celebrations as a means of strengthening social relations and solidarity inside the community was evident in the words of the host of the above described feast. On the day following the *to'y*, he said to me: 'You have seen how many people came. You have seen how relatives and neighbours helped us with the preparation of the feast. Such things make life somehow easier, particularly in these difficult days.'

### *5.2.3 The wedding*

In Khorezm, as in most parts of the Muslim world, marriages are the concern of the families involved rather than of the future couple; love matches are still the exception in the region. As a rule, the family of a young man sends two or more female *sauvchis* or representatives to the family of a girl to ask for her hand. A positive answer is never given on the occasion of a first visit; otherwise the parents would arouse the suspicion that they are in a hurry to marry off their daughter. However, when the gift that the *sauvchi*s have

[88] Target-shooting and performances by tightrope-walkers, described by Snesarev (2003: 77) as part of the *tomosho*s that concluded the *to'ys*, are apparently no longer common.

brought with them – a *dasturxon* consisting of flat bread and some sweets wrapped in a tablecloth – is not given back, they interpret this as a sign that their request is looked on favourably and will pay further visits to the family. Neither the future bride nor the groom is present at such occasions; sometimes, they do not even know each other at this stage of negotiations. The final answer is given on the occasion of the third visit, when relatives of the groom come bearing traditional gifts: bundles of *patir* (flat bread made with fat and milk) and pieces of raw crystal sugar as a symbol of the future couple's happiness; in turn, the bride's family offer them hospitality. The occasion itself is called *o'g'ri* ('thief') *patir*, because it takes place 'stealthily', in the presence of only a few relatives on both sides.

During the *o'g'ri patir*, details of the planned wedding are negotiated. In the case I witnessed in Khiva, the future couple's representatives agreed on the following items as the contribution of the groom's side to the marriage arrangement: 200 thousand *so'm* as bride price (*qalin puli*); 50 thousand *so'm* as the monetary value of a cow, the traditional gift for the bride's mother; a golden earring and diverse items of clothing and fabrics for the bride to the value of 500 thousand *so'm*; ten skirts, 50 meters of fabric and one suit for the bride's relatives to the total value of 300 thousand *so'm*. For their part, the bride's side agreed to present a suit to the groom after the wedding. The groom's presents are traditionally taken in a chest (*sandiq*) to the bride's house some days before the wedding, along with various *ko'rpa-do'shak* (mattresses, pillows and quilts) as additional contributions from the groom's family to the new household and are displayed there so the relatives and neighbours can look at them. Such occasions serve as a yardstick of the relative social status of the families involved.

By local standards, the amount of gifts in the case mentioned was rather moderate. The groom's side made it clear that their material situation did not allow for more generous offerings; since this was a love-match (the only one I witnessed during my stay in Khorezm) and the girl was firmly resolved to marry the boy, her family accepted. The bride's side also agreed to relinquish the sheep that they are traditionally entitled to, on condition that they will not be required to provide a sheep for the cradle ceremony (*beshik to'y*) of the couple's first child.

Marriage negotiations often extend beyond financial details and can entail additional terms that serve the bride's interest. In the case of my field assistant for example, his bride's mother made it a condition that her daughter must be allowed to complete her university studies after marriage. The bride price is not subject to negotiation; in each district there is an agreed-

upon amount which the groom's family is expected to pay in all cases.[89] In part (and sometimes even completely), the *qalin* is spent on gifts from the bride's side to the new couple: items of bedding and clothing, which the young woman takes with her into her new family.

The *o'g'ri patir* is usually followed by the *potya to'y*, a feast organised in the house of the bride. On this occasion, the family publicly announces the engagement of a daughter. At the *potya to'y* I observed in the house of a well-to-do businessman in Urganch, about 100 guests were offered lavish hospitality. The groom's side contributed a huge amount of *patir* to the feast, which were, together with sweets, distributed among the guests. However, I did hear of a few cases where a bride's family were not able to hold a *potya to'y* for financial reasons.

On both sides, members of the kin group and the neighbourhood community contribute labour to the wedding preparations. For example, during the *gangash* (also: *yigit yengnar*), the traditional gathering of the groom's contemporaries on the eve of the wedding, it is the duty of the young men to peel the huge amount of carrots needed for the wedding meal the next day. On the eve of the wedding, a so called henna feast (*xina yoqor*) is held in the house of the bride. Formerly, this was a rather simple celebration during which the bride bid farewell to her girlfriends, but nowadays *xina yoqor*s tend to be almost as lavish as the wedding ceremony itself that is organised by the groom's family; at the *xina yoqor* hundreds of guests are offered hospitality and entertained by professional musicians and dancers. The custom of spreading henna (*xina*) as a symbol of fertility on the hands of the bride and all those present is increasingly receding into the background.

Although a wedding is composed of a complex mesh of hospitality and exchanges, and it includes a wide range of magic rituals aimed at guaranteeing abundant offspring and protection of the young couple against harmful influences, in the following my focus is on summarising its main components. In spite of the major political and social upheavals of Soviet times, especially as far as magic practices are concerned, there is a strong continuity in ritual practice when compared with Snesarev's (2003: 61-71) research in the 1950s and 1960s.

On the morning of the day of the wedding, the women of the groom's family ceremonially prepare the wedding bed by encircling it with twine to ensure that no evil whatever can pass it. While the preparations for the

[89] The *qalin* remains with the girl's family. It is thought of as compensation for the loss of a member and for the efforts of the family in raising the girl. In 2003, the usual sum in Urganch was 80-100 thousand *so'm*, in Khiva and in Ko'shko'pir 200 thousand *so'm*, while in the north of the province, in and around Gurlan, 600-700 thousand *so'm* was the norm. In summer 2003, 100 USD was roughly equivalent to 100 thousand Uzbek *so'm*.

evening meals go on in the groom's house, the future couple, accompanied by friends and some relatives (but not the parents) perform the official marriage ceremony at the registration office; on their way it is customary to stop at a holy site in order to receive the blessing (*potya*) of the mullah or *shix* in attendance.[90] Back at the bride's home, the bride-takers are offered hospitality, while the groom has to wait outside in a car that will later take his bride to her new home. Tradition requires that before the wedding, the groom and his bride's parents do not communicate with or even see each other.

Meanwhile, the bride takes off her white, European style wedding dress which she wore during the official marriage ceremony, and an old woman who has many children helps her put on the wedding skirt (*nikoh go'ylak*) – a simple cotton cloth sewed by the groom's mother the day before – and an embroidered caftan and ties a white scarf around her forehead. The scarf will be laid on the wedding bed and handed over to the groom's mother the next day as proof of the bride's virginity (or lack of it). After the bride says farewell to her relatives – she will not see them for a couple of days to come, since members of the bride's family traditionally do not take part in the wedding ceremony – she is wrapped in a colourful cloth (*ko'shana*) – said to protect the bride against evil influences, it is always sewn by an elderly, healthy woman who has many children, usually the same woman who helped dress the bride – and escorted outside. (The important role played by older women in wedding rituals is based on the belief that their strength and fertility will be transferred to the bride.) The farewell ceremony in the bride's house is accompanied by the singing of the *yar-yar*, a traditional song that describes the sadness of a bride on leaving her natal home for an uncertain future life.[91] Then representatives of the groom escort the bride, by car, to her future home. The items provided by her parents – usually a bed, bed linens, household items and clothing – as well as the chest with the groom's presents are taken by a separate car. The only person who accompanies the bride from her own family is her *yenga*, a married female

[90] In Soviet times, this practice became strongly secularised, people usually visiting socialist monuments instead of shrines. A similar practice can also be observed nowadays: sometimes, the wedding group stops at a new, post-independence monument, especially when shrines are far away from where the wedding is taking place. For example, in a village near Ko'shko'pir, when the couple was on the way back from the registration they stopped at the monument of the 'mourning mother', a World War II monument that replaced the small Lenin statue of the village after independence.

[91] The *yar-yar* is performed by the *hadim*, a woman entrusted by the members of a neighbourhood unit with the supervision of life-cycle ceremonies. In return for her services, the *hadim* receives gifts and a small amount of money from the hosts of a *to'y*.

relative who will assist her during the ceremony and stay with her for the following two or three days.

In an act of symbolic purification, before coming to a stop in front of the groom's house, the car that brings the bride must pass over a small fire. As she gets out of the car, care is taken to assure that she steps on a jacket or another piece of clothing of her future mother-in-law, a symbolic gesture to guarantee that her future attitude toward her husband's parents will be positive. Before finally entering the house, the bride has to perform the greeting ceremony (*galin salom*) to her new family in front of the whole wedding congregation. Nowadays this ceremony is led by a professional moderator referred to by the Russian word *diktor*. He begins the performance with a humorous speech in the form of a poem reminding the bride of her duties towards her new family. Then he summons each member of the groom's kinship group – on both the father's and the mother's sides, including the deceased – by name and kinship degree, while he also mentions friends and neighbours present at the ceremony. The bride herself stands some distance from the entrance gate where the groom's relatives gather; she is covered by the *ko'shana*, the front edges of which are held by her *yenga*, who is standing in front of her. Each time the *diktor* ends a stanza in which the name of an individual is included, the bride and her *yenga* perform three bows, with their hands on their knees. This procedure, during which the bride remains in a bowed position behind her *yenga*, takes almost an hour. The *galin salom* is fundamental to the standard repertoire of Uzbek weddings, no matter what individual textual variations there may be. The texts recited by the *diktor* are 'a concise catalogue of traditional social roles' (Macrae 2004: 172), as the seemingly endless stream of bows performed by the bride is a clear, symbolic expression of the subordinate role she will occupy in her new family.

The Islamic marriage (*nikoh*) takes place a few hours after the bride has been presented to the groom's family. Unlike the *galin salom*, this ceremony is performed inside the house with only a few close relatives of the groom and the bride's *yenga* present. Attendance at the *nikoh* is restricted in order to minimise the danger of malevolent influences such as the evil eye and magic to which the couple is thought to be particularly vulnerable during this ritual. During the *nikoh*, the couple are seated next to each other, before the mullah, who first recites some verses from the Qur'an and then asks the couple to pronounce the confession of faith in Arabic; since in most cases the young people are unable to this, they repeat the words after the mullah. Then, he asks for a cup of water and, after taking a sip, he passes it over to the couple and the witnesses who all drink from it. He then preaches to the young people on their respective duties as Muslim husband and wife and concludes the ceremony with a blessing in Uzbek.

The typical Khorezmian ritual of *toqo toshosh* ('throwing on the wedding bed') is considered to be the entertaining highlight of every wedding ceremony, and can be carried out before or after the Islamic marriage ceremony. While the bride, clothed in her wedding skirt, sits on the floor behind a curtain, the groom is pushed into the room by his friends, followed by other wedding guests, both men and women, all of them laughing and shrieking and pushing each other forward until there is no more place to stand in the room. The bride's *yenga* now has to untie the knots in the strip of cloth that a short time before the groom's friends secured around his stomach. The ritual of untying originates in the fear of a knot that somebody could tie in the clothes of the groom in order to prevent the couple from having intercourse on the wedding night. When the *yenga* finally succeeds in untying the belt, the groom opens the curtain, lifts the bride, and flings her on the wedding bed, before he lies down beside her. (I was told that in the past, the groom used to lie on top of the bride to indicate that the man is above the woman.) Some of those present cover the couple from head to toe with a blanket; then, amidst laughter and applause, they push a small boy between them. The purpose of this and similar rituals – in the north of the province a boy is seated on the bride's knee – is to insure that the bride will first give birth to a boy and, in general, to guarantee that they will have many children. Then all the people leave and the *yenga* fumigates the room to ward off potential evil forces. Before she leaves the room, she holds up a mirror so that the bride and groom can gaze into it at the same time, in order that 'the young couple's future life together becomes bright and clear after the act of looking in the mirror.' (Snesarev 2003: 69) In former times, the couple remained in the room for the rest of the day, while outside the weddings guests were offered hospitality and entertained by music and dance performances. However, since the 1970s, it has become customary for the bride and the groom to join in with the festivities which, depending on the financial resources of the hosts, often take place in a restaurant. For this, the bride changes again from the traditional wedding dress back to the white, European style, wedding gown she wore in the morning during the registration procedure.

In Khorezm, the second day of a wedding feast is usually reserved for the ceremony *galin go'rar* ('seeing the bride'): in the morning, relatives, friends and neighbours of the groom pay a further visit to the wedding house. They come bearing gifts and are served an opulent meal and entertained by a professional woman dancer and musicians, much the same as the day before. After the meal, the bride, covered by the *ko'shana* and accompanied by her *yenga*, enters the room where the female guests gather. The guests approach her one after another and present their gifts to her while

lifting her veil and kissing her on the cheeks. The nature of the presents depends on each visitor's relationship to the family. Close kinship requires the donation of valuable gifts such as gold jewellery, suits of clothes, household utensils, and the like. Neighbours and less close acquaintances usually offer headscarves and might also give some money to the bride's mother-in-law.[92] As in the case of other life-cycle ceremonials, relatives and guests also help pay for the dancer and the musicians. Men always give money to the dancer while women usually present her with headscarves; in both cases, the amount of the money and size and value of the scarf given depends on the donor's relationship to the family.

Plate 5. The ritual of *galin go'rar*.

Paying the musicians and the dancer takes the form of a ritual, which is typically performed at all joyous, life-cycle rituals. Towards the end of the wedding party, male guests queue up in front of the performing female dancer, according to their kinship proximity to the host family. Each man holds out some money as payment, but the dancer teasingly refuses, indicating with gestures that she wants more. When she is satisfied and accepts the money, the man moves on and the next one repeats the performance. The

[92] Most of the many headscarves donated on the occasion of a wedding form the property of the bride's mother-in-law who in turn will give them away as gift at *to'y*s.

idea is that artists should be paid by the guests. Only if their total contribution does not meet the artists' expectations will the host step in to top up the fee. The ritualised performance allows the guests to demonstrate their generosity in public and, thus, to enhance their prestige.

Plate 6. Women presenting the dancer with scarves during a wedding in Urganch.

On the third day, the groom together with some of his friends visits his wife's family where he is presented to her relatives and other guests invited 'to see the son-in-law' (*guyov go'rar*), as the occasion is called. In the course of the following days, the new parents-in-law, accompanied by members of their respective families, pay reciprocal visits – called *kudo donnish*[93] – to each other.

Although the reciprocal exchange of gifts is a crucial element of all ritualised visits between the parties involved in a marriage arrangement, the contributions follow an asymmetrical pattern. This applies to the quantity of

[93] Literally: to get to know the parents of one's daughter or son. *Kuda* is the term by which the parents of a married couple address each other.

gifts given by the man's side to the bride and her family as well as to the total contributions to the expenses of the wedding itself. Thus, as a rule, the marriage expenses of the man's side are about three times that of the bride's side, although well-to-do families might endeavour to counterbalance this asymmetry by organising particularly generous feasts on the occasion of the announcement of the engagement of their daughter (*potya to'y*) or a henna feast, or by providing their daughter with a rich dowry.

Plate 7. Guests of a wedding with traditional presents (*dasturxon*).

For people with a low or even an average income, the marriage of a son imposes a particularly heavy financial burden on the family. An example of this is the wedding of Muzaffar. At the time of his marriage, Muzaffar was in his early 20s. He had just finished his studies at the provincial university and did not have a job. His family was dependent on the earnings of his widowed mother, a school teacher, and of his younger brother who, at that time, was working as a salesman in a supermarket; the total income of the family was about 80 thousand *so'm* monthly. Contrary to the usual practice, Muzaffar's wedding lasted only one day; this was made possible by celebrating the rituals of *galin salom* and *galin go'rar* on one instead of two subse-

quent days, in order to reduce the costs. However, although this change meant that the groom's side only had to offer hospitality once to a great number of guests, the expenses for the wedding still exceeded one and a half million *so'm*, almost double the family's yearly income. About one-third of these costs – which included the bride price, items of clothing for the bride and her relatives as well as the expenses for the hospitality offered to 400 wedding guests – was contributed by both the paternal and the maternal relatives of the groom. The balance was covered by incurring debts and, in order to be able to pay them off, Muzaffar's brother quit his badly paid job in Urganch and left for Russia where he found work as a construction worker. What money remained was then used to finance the next major life-cycle event, the cradle *to'y* one year later. Once again, in order to cover the expenses of it, another family member had to go to Russia to do seasonal migrant labour: this time it was the mother who left. Thus, for families of limited resources, the financing of rituals leads to an open-ended and almost never-ending cycle of debt.

### *5.2.4 The funeral*

While most of the life-cycle celebrations described above have certain religious connotations, funerary and mortuary rituals display the closest connection to religion and are accorded the greatest importance. None of the measures taken by the Soviet regime to curtail religious practices appears to have affected people in their self-consciousness as Muslims as much as the temporary ban on Islamic funerals (*janoza*) and on visits to the cemeteries. Much in the same way as Privratsky notes in reference to the Kazakhs: 'Not to receive a proper burial is more unthinkable than lapses of devotion or ritual purity during this life' (Privratsky 2001: 96). Correspondingly, attending the funeral of a relative or a close acquaintance is considered a religious duty that nobody would fail to perform without serious reasons. Participation in the funerary prayer is believed to bring about divine merit (*savob*) for the living as well as for the deceased: the more people perform the funerary prayer, the more the sins of the dead will be forgiven by God. Some of my interlocutors even stressed that the only *namoz* a Muslim must – no matter what the circumstances – carry out is the *janoza namozi* or the funerary prayer. I was repeatedly told that in the 1980s – the period of the severest restrictions on religious practice – party members, in order to get around official rules, had the *janoza nomozi* for their own deceased parents conducted secretly at home, while the funeral itself was held without any religious overtones.

According to Soviet statistics, aside from circumcision, *janoza* was the most widely observed Islamic ritual in the Muslim territories of the

Soviet Union (Ro'i 2000: 514-524). Since concern for the afterlife is a thoroughly religious issue, I argue that in their insistence on proper Islamic burial, the commitment of Soviet Muslims to Islam went beyond being a matter of tradition or of being simply a marker of collective identity. Through the observance of Islamic funerary rites, the people confirmed their association with the Islamic 'great tradition' and bore witness to their claim to be part of the *umma*, the worldwide community of believers.

The rites that must be observed at a funeral are minutely prescribed by the religious law; these include how to prepare the body for burial, when and how burial has to take place, and which verses of the Qur'an are to be recited. With only one notable exception that will be discussed below, Khorezmian funerals follow standard Muslim practice. In order to bury the dead within one day of the death, the preparations for the funeral start as soon as possible after a person has drawn his last breath.[94] Immediately after death, relatives and neighbours are informed; an imam or mullah is sent for to supervise the preparations for the burial and recite Qur'anic prayers for the male members of the mourning congregation. The women of the family gather around the dead in a separate room of the house, and display their grief through loud sobbing and lamenting. Each woman's lamentations differ according to the age of the deceased and her relationship with the deceased: the closer the kinship bond between the bereaved woman and the dead person, the more the former is expected to lament. Similarly, the death of a young person is more widely lamented than that of an old person.

In Islam, death is considered polluting. Thus, the body of a dead person has to be ritually purified before burial can take place. The mode of the ritual ablution of the corpse is minutely detailed by the Shari'a; for a male corpse, it has to be carried out by men and for a female, by women. While in some places, the washing of the body is done by an experienced member of the community, in most parts of the province people resort to a professional body-washer (*o'li yuvg'uchi*). After the washing is done, the body is wrapped in a white shroud and is taken outside the house in an open wooden coffin (*tobut*), followed by the male members of the mourning congregation. While the men take their place in front of the coffin, the imam asks who – in case the deceased left behind any debts – is going to pay them off.[95] After one of

[94] Sometimes the time between death and the funeral is extended to two days, in order to allow relatives coming from a distant place to attend it. Such minor concessions to the law are usual in many Muslim societies. For example, see Bellér-Hann's description of funerary customs among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang (Bellér-Hann 2006: 284-288).

[95] According to Snesarev, in the past the ritual of the *davra* ('transformation') was also performed in Khorezm: 'The mulla would "transmit" the sins of the deceased to some individual who voluntarily agreed to this and meanwhile repeat the formula ('Do you take it? I take it.') as many times as the deceased had years, minus twelve for men and nine for a

those present (usually a son or a brother) agrees to do this, the *janoza namozi* is performed and the coffin is taken to the cemetery. Following the universal Islamic tradition, only men participate in the funeral prayer and attend the interment, even if the deceased is a woman. The female mourners remain in the house where the death occurred and continue to wail and lament. As a rule, they are accompanied by a *xalpa* who recites particular religious texts in order to comfort them.

The rituals observed during the funeral appear to follow standard Islamic practice. They include a final communal prayer and the imam's instruction to the dead as to how to answer the questions of the death angels who, according to the teachings of Islam, will interrogate the dead after the mourners have left the cemetery. If the deceased person gives the right answer concerning God and His apostle Mohammed, he or she will be left alone until the Day of Judgment while those having no satisfactory answer at hand, will be beaten severely. The only significant deviation from the religious rules relates to the burial itself. In Khorezm, contrary to the Islamic practice of inhumation, the body is not laid in a grave but, rather, is deposited above the earth in vaults of various forms and materials such as clay, brick and, less frequently, wood.[96] While the vaults are usually built directly on the ground, in some places such as in the district of Xazorasp, the tomb structures are precisely separated from the ground by an isolating fundament made of timbers or bricks.

When asked why they inter the bodies above ground, people unanimously referred to the high water table as explanation. As the guardian of a cemetery in Xazorasp said: 'The ground-water level is one and a half meters here. If we buried our dead in the ground, they would be half in water. Out of respect for the dead, we bury them above the earth, as did also our forefathers.' However, the ground water level does not always correspond with the practice of above-ground interment. There are places, like Khiva, where burial above the earth dominates in spite of the fact that the water table is rather low there. On the other hand, in Qaraqalpaqistan, where the ground water is as high as in most parts of the province of Khorezm, the dead are

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woman - the period during which an individual was regarded as a minor (Snesarev 2003: 100).' Nowadays, however, the *davra* appears to no longer be observed; several people I asked could not even remember its existence. For a detailed account of the *davra* among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, where it is referred to as *isqat*, see Bellér-Hann 2006: 288-291. Abashin mentions the continued practice of the *davra*, 'a ritual by which the sins of the dead are forgiven and collectively taken on by the living', among Uzbeks in Tajikistan (Abashin 2006: 277).

[96] For a detailed description of the various vault types in Khorezm, see Snesarev 2003: 114-115.

buried in the earth.[97] Snesarev points out that the practice of above-ground burial is characteristic of areas where the inhabitants are most closely associated with the ancient Iranian speaking population, formerly called Sarts. Based on this congruence, Snesarev interprets the practice as a remnant of pre-Islamic religious ideas, particularly the Zoroastrian notion of the sacral impurity of the dead (Snesarev 2003: 112, 115-116). And yet, notwithstanding its obviously pre-Islamic origin, the practice is unanimously accepted; not even the 'Wahhabis' have tried to challenge it on the grounds of being un-Islamic.

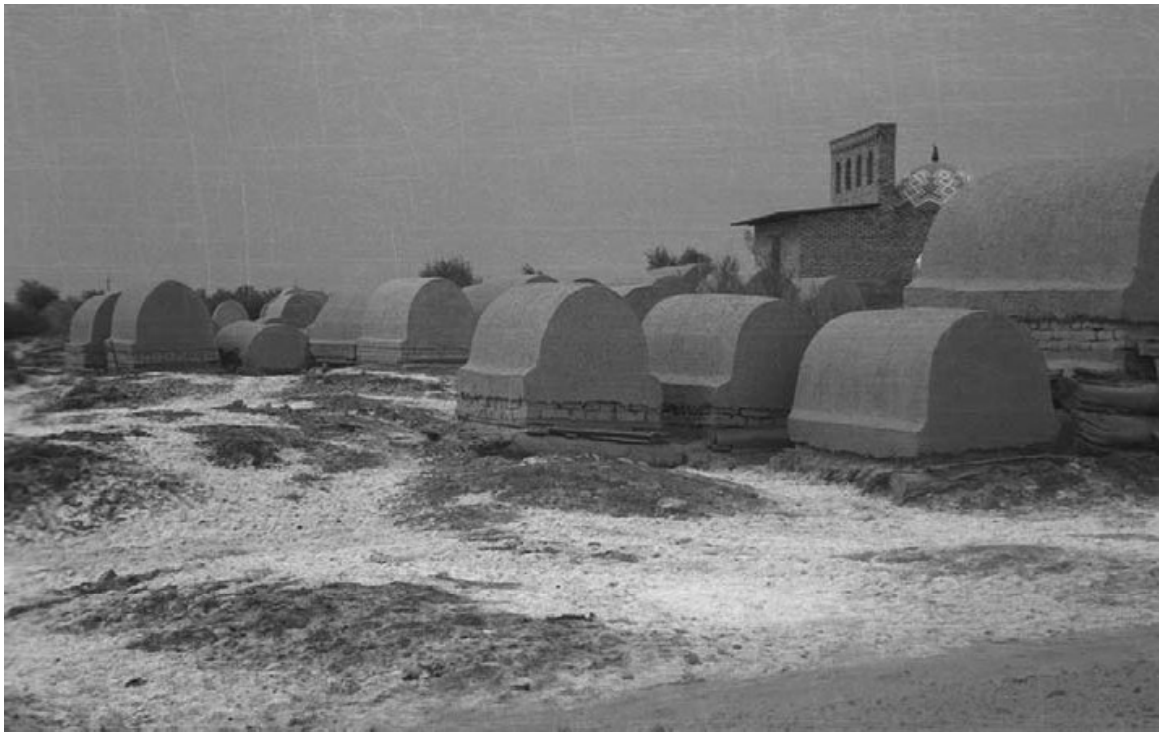

Plate 8. Graves with isolating timbers (Xazorasp district).

As a transitional period between two stages of existence, Islam considers death to be polluting. Thus, according to the religious law, direct physical contact with a corpse requires the performance of the major purification ritual (*ghusl*). Everywhere in the Muslim world, those who participate in the ritual washing of the dead have to perform the *ghusl* before they can be reintegrated in society. In Khorezm, however, professional body-washers bear the stigma of enduring impurity. In pre-Soviet times, they formed a separate social group: they lived in a separate neighbourhood of the towns, followed the rule of group endogamy and also had separate burial places in the cemeteries. As Snesarev notes, 'No occupation (…) called forth so

[97] This is personal information that comes from the historian Makset Karlibaev of the Qaraqalpaq branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences in Nukus.

distinctive an attitude toward it on the part of others as that of the body-washers. In the past, this attitude placed the body-washers on the very lowest step of the social ladder and made them outcasts of a sort' (Snesarev 2003: 123).

Plate 9. Various grave types at the cemetery in Ellikkala (Qaraqalpaqistan).

It appears that 70 years of Soviet influence did not radically alter this situation. Nowadays, although the body-washers are no longer organised in guilds, it still tends to be an inherited occupation in Khiva and Urganch, where there are neighbourhood areas that are predominantly inhabited by them. Moreover, all those with whom I discussed this issue said that they would not give either their daughters or their sons into marriage with a body-washer. Some of my interlocutors even stressed that they would not eat from the same plate as someone who is professionally engaged in washing the dead, explaining that one can never be sure whether the person has performed the ritual washing (*tahorat*) correctly. An acquaintance of mine, an academician in his late 50s, suspected that the widespread unwillingness to socialise with professional body-washers is reinforced by the custom of giving them the deceased's clothing as part of their pay: 'Since they wear the clothes of the dead, people somehow fear them, as they fear also the dead.'

That the body of the deceased is considered to be not only polluted but also a source of danger is discussed in the next chapter.

## 5. 3 Mourning and memorial celebrations

Khorezmians observe a wide range of memorial celebrations (*maraka*) which extend over a year and often even beyond. For three days after the funeral, passages from the Qur'an are recited in the house where a person has died. On the third day, a memorial meal called *uchi* ('the third') is held, followed by *yeddisi* ('the seventh'), seven days after death. On the fourth Thursday, a further memorial meal called *qirqi* ('the fortieth') is offered to the mourning congregation. The first 40 days are the most intensive period of mourning; during this time, Qur'anic recitations are held in the house of the deceased every Thursday evening and relatives refrain from participating in *to'y*s and any other entertaining events.[98] The importance of the first 40 days derives from the belief that the corpse decomposes during this period of time; until this happens, the spirit (*rux*) of the dead pays daily visits to his former home.[99] In order that he can quench his thirst, a cup of water is usually placed on a windowsill. Often, a *maraka* is held on the 52nd day (*ellikki guni*), particularly in the towns.[100] A further memorial feast called *yili* is celebrated when nine or 11 months have passed since the death.[101] On the occasion of the first Islamic feasts – the Feast of Ramadan (*ro'za hayiti*) and the Feast of Sacrifice (*qurbon hayiti*) – following a death, guests are once more invited to share a meal (*hayit oshi*) in memory of the deceased. Moreover, in the first summer season after the death, the mourning family offers a particular dish (*yoz oshi*) to guests.

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[98] The 40-day period shows close resemblances to the 40-day period of avoidance (*chilla*) after birth. For a discussion of parallels of birth and commemoration rituals in a Muslim context, see el-Aswad 1987: 224.

[99] Beliefs and practices related to death refer equally to men and women. For the sake of clarity, however, when referring to the spirit of the dead in the following, I use only the pronoun *he*.

[100] My interlocutors could not give information regarding the significance of the 52nd day other than that it is tradition. In rural Turkey, however, where this day is celebrated with a communal meal as well, it is said that on this day, the bone of the nose falls painfully down. The pleasure about the meal distributed in his memory pleases the dead and lets him forget the pain (Örnek 1977: 220). It can be assumed that the custom of celebrating the 52nd day in Khorezm has the same root, although the belief that originally induced the custom might have fallen into oblivion.

[101] In the case of a person who passed away before the age of 60, the *yili* is celebrated after nine months. For older people, the *yili* is held 11 months after death. See also Kleinmichel 2000: 89.

The mourning period concludes 12 months after death with a memorial feast named *yil do'ldi* ('the year is fulfilled'). Some families even insist on organising annual, memorial celebrations called *o'lgan gunu* ('the day of death') or *yera tushgan guni* ('the day of burial') for many years to come. Such an *o'lgan gunu* was organising by our neighbours in Urganch on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the death of the father of the household head. Tradition also demands that no wedding or circumcision feast can be held in the close kinship group of a deceased person during the one-year mourning period. Nowadays, people no longer wear particular items of clothing that symbolise mourning, but some of my elderly informants recalled how, in their youth, women wore white clothes when mourning the death of a close relative.

On the day of a particular *maraka* – the term refers merely to the memorial feasts held on the third, seventh, and 40th days following death – the entrance gate of the house stays open, signalling that those who want to pay a visit of condolence may enter without knocking. Following the rule of gender segregation, men and women are assigned different rooms of the house; when the crowd overflows, the men also gather in the courtyard. The guests are seated on the floor around a long tablecloth covered with plenty of food: flat bread, salads, fruit, nuts, slices of various sausages and cold meats, and so on. The main dish consists of a soup, made of the meat of the sheep slaughtered for the occasion. The kin of the deceased share the costs of the necessary quantity of sheep, the number of which varies according to the financial means of the kinship group and the number of people expected to come.

A mullah joins the male mourners and recites passages from the Qur'an, while a *xalpa* recites comforting texts for the women gathered in another room of the house and preaches to them about the Islamic virtue of patience (*sabr*).[102] The women of the family in mourning stay in the room for the duration of the ceremony, renewing their lamentations every time a new visitor enters. At the *maraka*s, hospitality for the visitors is provided by the neighbours, who also help prepare the memorial meal; thus, on the occasion of a death, the role between host and guest is reversed. Moreover, everyone making a visit of condolence to a house in mourning contributes some money to help pay for the compensation to the mullah and the *xalpa* for their services.

The slaughtering of sheep, especially during the first of the series of memorial feasts, has a particular relevance. According to canonical Islamic teaching, on the Day of Judgment, all men and women have to cross a thorny

[102] For a discussion of the texts recited on the occasion of a particular *maraka*, see Kleinmichel 2000: 94-100.

bridge as thin as one-seventh of a strand of hair, over a deep abyss from the bottom of which the flames of the hell leap up. Those destined by God to enter paradise will cross the bridge safely, while all others fall off it into hell. Local belief holds that the deceased will pass this bridge on the back of the sheep sacrificed for his soul by his relatives during the *maraka*. Because of this, particular attention is given to the sheep's head, and the honour of eating it is reserved for the mullah. My interlocutors emphasized that all edible parts of the sheep's head must be consumed; otherwise the sheep will be resurrected without its head and, consequently, will not be able to carry the dead safely over the bridge but, rather, will fall down with him directly into hell.

To the best of my knowledge, this belief has no equivalent anywhere else in the Muslim world. It is obviously of pre-Islamic origin and is actually referred to as superstition (*irim*) by the people themselves. Nonetheless, it emphatically conveys the concept that the institution of commemoration is based on, namely that responsibility for the afterlife fate of the deceased is collective rather than individual. In other words, the worldly actions of the kin have a direct impact on the afterlife of the deceased.

The mortuary rites and commemorative feasts emphasize the duty of the survivors to the dead and underscore the connection between the living and the dead.[103] They are based on the notion that the spirit of the dead does not desert the world of the living but retains its relationships in the world beyond. The *maraka*s serve to let the dead know that they have not been left on their own and that their relatives care for them. In the words of a mullah, the aim of the *maraka* is 'to please the spirits of the dead' (*o'liklarni ruxlari shod bo'lsin*). Moreover, recitations from the Qur'an are thought of as spiritual food for the deceased and as a means of attaining God's grace for him: every time the Qur'an is recited for a deceased person, one more of his sins will be pardoned by God. As one of my interlocutors has put it: 'We read the Qur'an for the dead, in order to soften the weight of their bad deeds.' On the other hand, organising memorial feasts and recitations of the Qur'an for the relatives of the deceased also benefits the living: these acts are considered as meritorious deeds (*savob*) and will be reckoned as such on the Day of Judgment (*qiyomat guni, qiyomat qoyim*). Thus, given the religiously motivated collective concern for the spirit of one's forefathers, death rituals effectively strengthen the solidarity and unity of kinship groups. As my field assistant Sarvar stressed:

> The death of a relative is taken very seriously. It can happen that some of your relatives cannot provide you financial help in the case

[103] For similar notions elsewhere in the Muslim world, see Abu-Zahra 1991; Bellér-Hann 2006: 356-361.

> of a marriage or a circumcision because of their own poor situation. But you can be sure that everybody will contribute to the costs if you organise a *maraka*. Why? Because we believe that otherwise we would saddle sin on us.

Moreover, like all other life-cycle celebrations, death rituals provide an 'arena for competing for social prestige, and where membership of the community, status, and material power are displayed, tested, challenged, asserted or denied' (Abu-Zahra 1991: 31). As mentioned earlier, the lavish hospitality displayed during the *maraka*s became the target of severe criticism from both Karimov's regime and the official religious establishment. According to tradition, on the day of a particular *maraka*, people can pay visits of condolence to the mourning family from early morning till late in the evening, and hospitality must be offered whenever they arrive. Nowadays, however, in accordance with a presidential decree, the *mahalla* committees are trying to impose restrictions on the scale of the *maraka*s. Thus, for example, a mourning family is required to limit the duration of each memorial meal to two hours at midday and to reduce the extent of the hospitality, which the authorities argues is wasteful because of the social etiquette that demands that visitors try only a bit of the dishes offered, which consequently results in huge amounts of food being thrown away.

An acquaintance told me about a *maraka* he had recently attended, where a local politician was trying to agitate the mourners about this issue. He reacted negatively to this interference by saying: 'They want to destroy our traditions like the communists before them. But their efforts will remain as unsuccessful as were those of the Soviets. Our people stick to the traditions.' Others, however, were more supportive of the official message, such as the elderly school teacher Otavoy-*aka* from Khiva, who stressed that turning a *maraka* into a lavish gathering (*ziyofat*), in his view, contradicted the very nature of the event. 'It is absolutely sufficient', Otavoy-*aka* insisted, 'when soup and bread are offered to the visitors who do not eat much anyhow. It is a sin to throw away all the food next day.' To give more weight to his words, Otavoy-*aka* recalled a television report about a rich man in Tashkent, who celebrated an extravagant memorial feast for his deceased father whom he neglected to care for when he was still alive.

While the official propaganda targets the scale of the *maraka*s, religious dignitaries disapprove of the institution itself, stressing that, according to Islam, the mourning period ends on the third day after death. In their view, mourning ceremonies held after this time contradict the law and should be abandoned. For example, Davronjon, who was the imam at the Ulli Pir sanctuary when I was doing my research, explained that he only accepts invitations to memorial meals on the third day following death. He was also

highly critical of the practice of women's lamentation, as were all other religious personages I spoke to. Women's wailing during funerary and mortuary rites is a widespread practice in Central Asia and, actually, throughout the Islamic world (see, for example Abu-Zahra 1991: 27). However, modern Islamic teaching disapproves of it on the grounds that it is an unacceptable protest against the will of God.

Nevertheless, given the considerable social and religious importance attached by the locals to death rituals, criticism of the *maraka*s is unlikely to substantially alter traditional modes of mourning and commemoration. Even if many people theoretically share the view of the critics, they continue to conform to the same conventions of hospitality. The only part of the official decree that is obeyed – at least in the towns – is the restriction on the length of time for the celebrations; since a few years ago, mourning families open the gate of their houses on the day of a particular *maraka* for only two hours at midday. To quote a university graduate in his late 20s, from Urganch:

> Actually, there is some truth in what Karimov says about the *maraka*s. To hold all these feasts is a great financial challenge for most of us. But we would be ashamed not to do our utmost to offer the visitors hospitality. People would think that we are not properly concerned with the fate of our dead and rather consider our purse.

Memorial feasts are communal, public occasions to remember the deceased. However, as I will show below, they are by no means the only instances when the spirits of the forefathers occupy people's imagination.

## 5.4 Remembering the dead in everyday life

According to local concepts, until the Day of Judgment when all the dead will rise, the spirits of the dead maintain a relationship with the world of the living.[104] Death does not sever the ties of mutual obligation that bind members of a kin group together during their lifetime. On the contrary, the living and the dead depend on each other for their well being. The spirits need to be honoured, remembered and, particularly during the first 40 days after death, nourished. If the spirits feel that their relatives remember and include them in the rituals of daily life, they are pleased and ask God to protect their families. One of my interlocutors, a former *kolkhoz* worker in her early 50s, expressed it this way: 'We must not forget our deceased forefathers. Their spirits are taking care of us.' The intensity of the relationship between the

[104] The concept of two different spiritual substances, the soul (*jon*) on the one hand and the spirit (*rux*) on the other, which is described for many other parts of Central Asia (for example, see Bellér-Hann 2006: 358), is not well developed in Khorezm, as has already been noted by Snesarev 2003: 86.

spirit of a dead person and his kinship group becomes weaker the longer ago the death occurred, but it never completely breaks off.

Visiting the graves of relatives is one of the most important ways for the living to reassure the dead that they are not forgotten. People say: 'The dead are lying in their graves, waiting to be visited.' Particular importance is given to visiting the graves on Islamic holidays, when cemeteries are swamped with crowds of visitors. After a short, silent prayer at the graveside, the visitors ask one of the countless mullahs present to recite a further prayer for the sake of the spirit of the dead, a service which they honour with a small amount of money. Both prayer and donation are considered to be meritorious acts (*savob*) that please the dead. Visiting the graves on Islamic holidays, a practice widely observed in Muslim societies and also encouraged by the *hadith*, is another way of reinforcing the notion that both the living and the dead share membership in the *umma*, the worldwide community of believers. Thus, it can be argued that remembering the dead is instrumental in supporting both the integrity of the family and the religious community.

In addition, people maintain their relationship with the dead outside the framework of religious holidays and the fixed events of *maraka*s. Thus, it is usual to visit the graves of close relatives at times of critical life situations. For example, in order to receive the blessing for his planned marriage, my field assistant and his bride paid a visit to the grave of his father, who had died five years earlier. Moreover, on the day of his wedding, a video film made on the occasion of an earlier *to'y* was shown for almost two hours, with the whole family gathered around the television. He explained that they watched the film because it showed his father while he was alive. 'We are celebrating my wedding while my father is lying in his grave, lonely and sad. With the film, he is somehow present among us. This, and the very fact that we are thinking of him makes him happy.'

According to the generally held belief, spirits who feel neglected by their relatives appear to them in dreams to remind them of their duty to honour, remember and nourish the deceased. Thus, a person who sees a dead relative in a dream visits the grave and the women of the family prepare *bo'g'irsoq* (fried cake), and distribute it in the neighbourhood. This custom is based on the notion that the spirits are fond of the smell of hot oil. The same belief also is the root of the Thursday ritual of 'emitting the smell' (*is chiqormoq*) which I first witnessed as the guest of a *shix* family in Ko'shko'pir. I was told that every Thursday the women of my host family prepare *polav* (the dish consisting of beef, carrots, and rice) for the evening meal; before adding the meat, they make the oil extremely hot, which results

in the entire courtyard being filled with smoke. The household head explained:

> Between Thursday and Friday noon, the spirits of the dead visit the places where they used to live while alive. To welcome them we cook on this day our best dish and take care that the oil produces as much smoke as possible. The smell of hot oil signals from a distance to the spirits that they are awaited. If the relatives of a dead person fail to produce smell on the occasion of these weekly visits, the spirits would push along to more remote relatives and finally to the house of the mullah. All neglected spirits go to the mullah who is expected to emit smell for all those who have no relatives to remember them.

After the Thursday meal, a blessing (*potya*) in Uzbek is intoned by the household head including formulas such as: 'We dedicate the merit of all what we have eaten and drunk to the spirits of the forefathers (*yegan ichganni savobini oto buvalarni ruxina bag'sh atdik*).' Sometimes, people also introduce the names of their deceased relatives into the prayer, at the end of which all present say amen (*omin*). As Otavoy-*aka*, the retired teacher from Khiva explained: 'When we finish eating and say *omin*, the spirits feel as if they also have eaten with us.' Otavoy-*aka* also recalled that in his youth, on Thursday afternoons, the air in the town was filled with the smell of hot oil: the gates and doors to the street were opened everywhere in order to let the smell spread outside and invite the spirits to enter.[105] Although the custom of cooking *polav* on Thursday still persists, in many families no particular attention is given anymore to the production of much smoke by extreme heating of the oil. Much in the same way as described by Bellér-Hann for the Uyghurs, death rituals also underwent a certain 'routinisation' in Khorezm (Bellér-Hann 2006: 359). For example, Amina, a schoolteacher in her mid-40s, claimed that it is sufficient to remember the dead while cooking and to dedicate the meal to them.

The procedure of 'emitting the smell' (*is chiqormoq*) is also carried out on the eve of important Islamic holidays. These are occasions when, as on Thursdays, the spirits are believed to visit their former homes once again. In other circumstances, *is chiqormoq* is employed when a misfortune has been successfully overcome. According to my older interlocutors, preparing and distributing *bo'g'irsoq* after recovery from an illness, for example, was a way of expressing gratitude to the spirits of one's ancestors for their protection. However, many members of the younger generation are no longer aware of the connection between the practice and the notion that the spirits

[105] Snesarev mentions the same for the old part of Honqa in the first half of the 20th century (Snesarev 2003: 134).

of the dead have to be pleased by the smell of hot oil. When the son of Muhtaram was hit by a car but not seriously injured, the next day she baked *bo'g'irsoq* and distributed it in the neighbourhood. For her, this was a sign of her gratitude to God but had nothing to do with 'feeding' the spirits, a notion that she firmly rejects. Thus, while some younger people continue to practice traditional domestic rituals out of habit and without attaching further religious significance to them, others, like Muhtaram, give such practices a more 'proper' Islamic meaning, which allows them to confirm social expectations without violating their religious convictions.

Although concern for the dead is central to the religious life of the people, it would be misleading to speak in this context of 'ancestor cult'. In most cases, it is not the unknown ancestors of a particular group of people towards whom concern and reverence are directed. Rather, it is the deceased relatives (both on the father's and the mother's side) who were personally known to the living, who are particularly remembered and honoured. However, in the case of large descent groups such as the *shix*s, the legendary founder of the group is usually included in the blessings after the Thursday meal and on every other occasion when the help of the spirits is particularly needed. For example, in addition to dead relatives (his parents and parents-in-law, a daughter, a brother, and a brother also in-law), my host also included the legendary ancestor of the *shix*s, Ismamut-*ota* in his Thursday blessings. Domestic rituals such as the 'emitting of the smell' are, as Privratsky says, best described as 'kinship rites' which create a spiritual communion between the living and the dead over generations and in which 'the dead are experienced - or thought of - as meeting with the living' (Privratsky 2001: 139).

Soviet ethnographers generally regarded rituals related to the spirits of the dead as being remnants of the pre-Islamic culture. As for Khorezm, Snesarev describes them as 'vestiges of early forms of religion', deriving mainly from Zoroastrianism. However, this approach obscures the fact that not only the practices discussed above but also the beliefs that underlie them are widespread throughout the Islamic world. The notion, for example, that 'the dead one circles around his house for a month and around his grave for a year' is universal among Muslims and is also supported in the *hadith* (Smith 1980: 227). Preparing special food as a sacrifice for the spirits of the dead, who are believed to visit their former homes on Thursdays, is practiced in places as far apart as Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan and others (Westermarck 1926: 534-536; Bellér-Hann 2001). As for their particular manifestation, the rituals may be informed by local traditions; in their content, however, they are embedded in an Islamic 'little tradition' which is almost as universal as the canonical teachings and practices of the 'great

tradition' itself. Nonetheless, what is striking is the great similarity in form that most of these rituals exhibit throughout a territory as vast as Central Asia. As ethnographic accounts testify, the Thursday ritual of 'feeding the spirits' is carried out by the Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Bellér-Hann 2006: 361-364) and the inhabitants of the Kazakh town Turkistan (Privratsky 2001: 128-133) in an almost identical way as by the Uzbeks of Khorezm. They all centre on 'emitting the aroma' of hot oil. This might point to a common pre-Islamic origin of the cult of the dead in the region which, however, has been incorporated into a common Muslim sense of meaning.

# *Chapter 6*
# Dealing with the supernatural

In many cases, magical practices carried out during life-cycle rituals are a display of reverence for tradition by those who do not attach any deeper religious meaning to them. Nonetheless, the belief that in everyday life humans are constantly exposed to the effects of various kinds of supernatural agents is quite real and widespread, and so too are the practices that are used to repel them. In this chapter, I discuss ideas and images which are connected with the evil eye and spirits which are thought of as the main supernatural agents behind illness and misfortune. Soviet ethnography on Khorezm relegated these practices and the underlying beliefs almost exclusively to the field of 'local remnants of pre-Islamic religious traditions'. However, the ideas and images discussed here are for the most part informed by Islam and many of the associated practices are to be found throughout the Muslim world, even if they are often disapproved of by the *ulama*. As always, it is important 'not to overestimate the impact of localism at the expense of the universal force of Islam' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 358).

## 6.1 The evil eye

Belief in the evil eye refers to the injurious effects of an envious glance which can harm, and in the extreme kill, both humans and animals, as well as damage lifeless objects. This belief is particularly pronounced in the Near-Eastern and Mediterranean regions and is equally present in all the great religions represented there: Islam, Judaism and Christianity.[106] As Brian Spooner argues: 'The spread of these religions may possibly be responsible for much of the uniformity of practices and attitudes concerning it' (Spooner 1970: 312). In Western ethnographic literature, belief in the evil eye in Islamic societies is usually treated as a phenomenon of popular religiosity, in spite of its being acknowledged by the Qur'an and the Prophetic

[106] For a discussion of the various scientific theories about the belief in the evil eye, see Hauschild 1982.

tradition.[107] According to tradition (*hadith*), Mohammed repeatedly warned his adherents of the harmful effects of the evil eye, stressing that 'the majority of human beings die as victims of the evil eye' which 'empties the houses and fills the graves' (Marçais 1986: 786; see also Krawietz 2002: 344, 346).

Khorezmians are no less preoccupied with the evil eye than their co-religionists in other parts of the Islamic world.[108] Snesarev has already noted that in Khorezm,

> The notion of the evil eye (…) was not only present among all peoples of the past but is particularly persistent. It has outlived many forms of religion and remains to this day, sometimes even in a milieu that is highly indifferent to religion. Often people who are absolutely not religious believe in the evil eye out of habit, even though unconsciously (Snesarev 2003: 30).

In this respect, not much has changed since the author's observations in the 1950s. Moreover, belief in the evil eye is not contingent on educational or professional background, on age or gender, or even on the degree of personal religiosity. For most people, the reality of the evil eye is confirmed by their everyday experiences and is supported by tradition rather than by Islam. This was aptly put by Rahima, a 54-year-old, female bookkeeper from Urganch when she said that belief in the evil eye is 'a thing characteristic for us Uzbeks' (*bizani O'zbeklara singip qalgan narsa bu*).

Like in other Turkic languages, in Khorezm the evil eye is referred to as *yomon go'z* ('bad eye'), while in compounds it is simply called *go'z* ('eye') or *nazar* ('glance'). The term *kinna*, the usual designation for the evil eye in other parts of Uzbekistan, is not common here.[109] People refer to a person whom they suspect of possessing the evil eye as *go'zzi qotti* ('he/she has a strong eye') and the attack itself is described as *go'z deydi* ('an eye has touched'). Asked how the evil eye works, Rahima said:

> When a person who has a strong eye looks at you and says 'Oh, you look so pretty today,' you will become ill or some other calamity will happen to you. Or, for example, if somebody is building a house and such a person looks at it, the walls of the house would collapse or a construction worker would fall from the scaffold. Plants and

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[107] Ibrahim attributes this and similar notions to Western ethnographers' often deficient knowledge of Islamic orthodoxy (Ibrahim 1989: 29).

[108] For accounts of belief in the evil eye and underlying practices among Muslims, see Westermarck 1926: 413-478; 1933: 24-58. Concerning the Middle East, see Schoeck 1970 and Sheikh-Dilthey 1999. For examples from Turkey, see Örnek 1977: 167-170.

[109] Although Snesarev gives *kinna* as the word used for the evil eye in Khorezm (Snesarev 2003: 32), I came across the term only twice. In both cases it was used by women of Tashkent origin. One of them explicitly mentioned that 'in Khorezm, they do not know *kinna*'.

> animals can die and the whole harvest can be destroyed. God save us from the evil eye (*yomon go'zdan hudo soqlosin*)!

In principle anyone can set off the mechanism of the evil eye simply by looking at someone or something with envy, which is why people are reluctant to openly express admiration. If they do make a compliment, they then spit three times at the object of praise in order to avert possible harm befalling it.[110] Certain individuals are believed to possess the evil eye by nature. Their gaze is considered particularly terrifying, since it inevitably causes damage, irrespective of the intentions of the beholder. Whereas among other peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East women are more likely to be afflicted (Spooner 1970: 315; Bellér-Hann 2006: 377), in Khorezm this capacity is ascribed to men and women alike.

The most common remedies used to protect against the evil eye are fumigation and amulets (*tumor*, *go'z minjiq*).[111] For fumigation dried *isvant* is used, an herb that grows in the surrounding steppes and is believed to possess a particularly strong protective power. Actually, *isvant* is a cure-all that is used in any situation when supernatural agents of any kind are suspected to be at work. Thus, for example, whenever I fell ill during my stay in Khorezm, my friends hurried along to fumigate me with *isvant*, stressing that it would be equally effective against the evil eye, magic and bad spirits. As if to justify their actions, they said: 'And even if your case is for the doctors (*do'xtirliq*), it will be of no harm.' Most families possess the utensil necessary for burning the herb: a small tin container in the form of a high edged pan. Although *isvant* is sold at every bazaar, people prefer to buy it at pilgrimage sites, since the miraculous power of the holy place is believed to increase its effect.[112]

During life-cycle events, it is believed that people are especially exposed to the harmful effects of supernatural interventions. Drawing on Khorezmian material from the 1940s, Firshtein reports that in order to protect a woman from harm once her labour had begun, she was set above a spade filled with glowing coal in which *isvant* and salt were spread. The newborn child had to be held above the fumes for about five minutes (Firshtein 1978: 190).[113] Nowadays, since women no longer give birth at home,

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[110] Avoiding compliments is also a well-known 'grazer prophylaxis' in both, Christian and Muslim societies, as is the habit of spitting if a compliment is nonetheless made. For Italy, see Galt 1982; Hauschild 1982; for the Arabian Peninsula see Sheikh-Dilthey 1990: 143.

[111] Fumigation is also cited as one of the counter-measures used by Arab Muslims (Spooner 1970: 317-318). For the Uyghurs, see Bellér-Hann 2006: 378-79.

[112] Also, whenever the opportunity arises, people gather *isvant* themselves. Every time I joined a university class on an excursion to a pilgrimage site, our bus always stopped at particular places in the steppe in order to let students and professors gather the plant.

[113] For an account of birth and early childhood rituals in Khorezm, see Xajieva 1996.

the fumigation takes place when the mother and child go home from the maternity clinic. As in many other Muslim societies, in order to limit the chance of being stricken by an envious glance, mother and child are not allowed to leave the house during the *chilla*, the 40-day period of 'special sacral vulnerability' (Snesarev 2003: 71) following birth.[114]

Marriage ceremonies are similarly accompanied by protective measures against evil influences. In order to minimize the danger of the bride and bridegroom becoming the victims of the evil eye or magic, only a few close relatives are allowed to be present at the Islamic marriage ritual (*nikoh*). Immediately after the mullah has finished the prescribed ritual, and also after the husband and wife have lain down on the wedding bed, the whole room must be fumigated. Moreover, the young couple is required to stay in *chilla*, although only a few, if any, appear to stay in 'quarantine' for the entire 40 days. When I visited my field assistant Sarvar two days after his marriage, uncharacteristically he did not accompany me to the bus station when I left. Visibly uncomfortable with the situation, he explained that he could not leave the house for at least three days, since he was in *chilla*. Bowing to the necessities of life, the family had made an obvious concession because Sarvar had to sit an exam on the fourth day after his wedding. As for the bride, she had to stay at home for a whole week, since, as her mother-in-law argued, 'newly married women are more often exposed to envy than men, especially on the side of unmarried girls.'

In a society where children are highly valued as part of a family's social capital, it comes as no surprise that they are seen as needing close scrutiny and protection. Thus, most small children wear an amulet hung on a cord around their neck or pinned into their clothes at shoulder level. Such an amulet consists mostly of a small fabric bag containing materials thought to avert the evil eye: salt, red chilli and dried *isvant*. 'Each component of such a mixture would of itself have the strength of an amulet. A combination of them would increase that power' (Snesarev 2003: 32). Since this kind of charm can be easily produced at home, they are more common than those containing Qur'anic verses, which have to be prepared by a religious specialist. Somewhat bigger charms in the form of a triangle, covered with gold-ticked red velvet and provided with small balls at their upper side are sold at every large shrine. Hanging behind the mirror, they are the most popular protector of cars against the potential gaze of an envious person.

All over Khorezm people fix ram horns or bottles filled with salt and hot chilli above the entrance gate of their homes in order to protect them

[114] The 40 days 'quarantine' (*chilla*) after birth is a widespread measure to protect mother and child from evil influences throughout Central Asia and beyond. For the same practice in Turkey, see Örnek 1977: 145-47.

from damage caused by the evil eye.[115] Snesarev too mentions bread as being a powerful charm against the evil eye in Khorezm (Snesarev 2003: 33). Among my informants, only Feruza, a 40-year-old housewife from Tashkent, listed bread as a way to counteract the evil eye: 'When sitting together with many people I always keep pieces of bread in my hand. Moulding them in small balls, I press them to my breast again and again if I feel touched by the evil eye.' She explained that the evil eye makes itself felt through sudden headaches and breathlessness. Here, the obvious intention is to transfer the power of the evil eye into something else, in this case bread.[116]

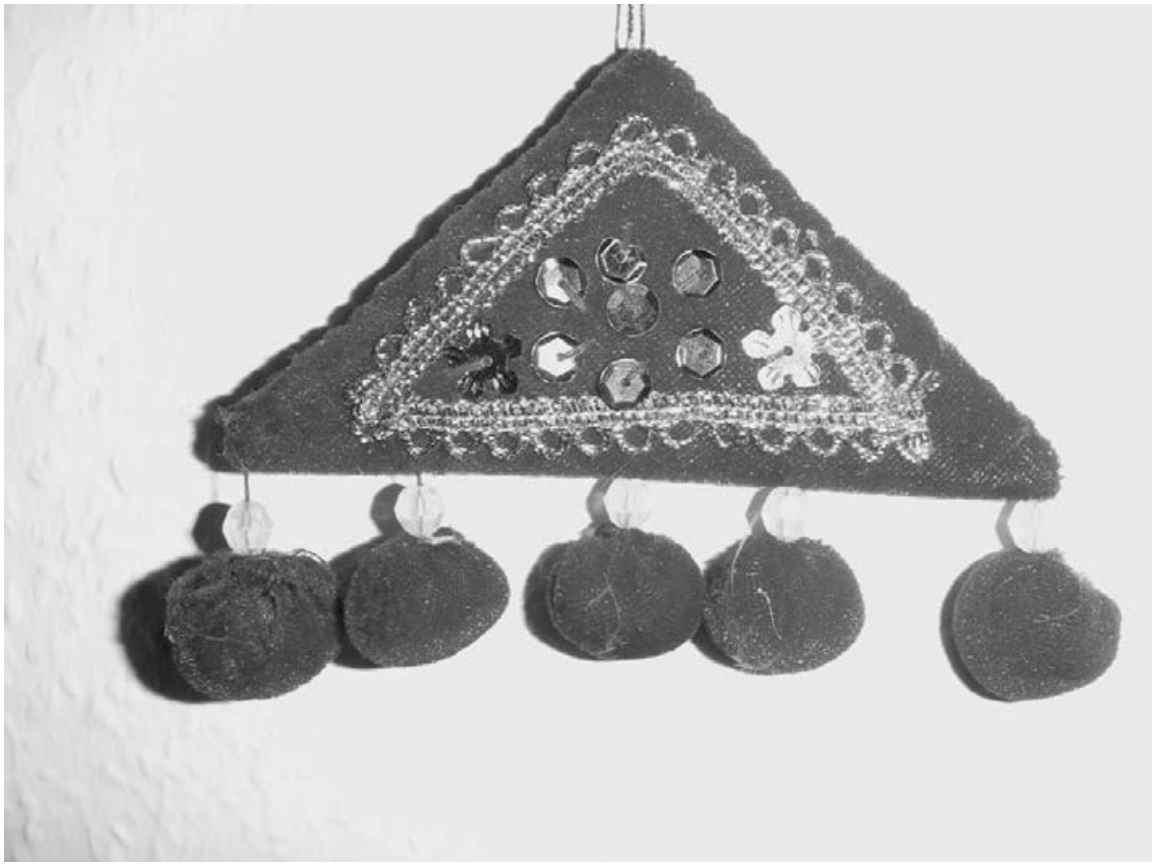

Plate 10. Amulet against the evil eye.

If people suspect someone of having cast the evil eye, they throw the soil touched by the malefactor into burning *isvant* or try to get hold of a piece of

[115] Horns and horn-like objects, such as red chillies, are a frequently used antidote to the evil eye, as also in the Mediterranean region; see Galt 1982: 667; Hauschild 1982: 97-101. In the past in Khorezm the ram was viewed as an amulet because of its horns. People used to keep a ram in their courtyard to protect children from evil influences and men used to touch the head of a ram before important undertakings to assure success (Snesarev 2003: 243).

[116] The practice is also found among Uzbeks in Afghanistan (Shalinsky 1980: 190).

cloth or a hair of the malefactor in order to burn it together with the herb.[117] 'There is a man in our neighbourhood,' Rahima said, 'who has the evil eye. When somebody gets ill after he visited a house, people go to him and take a piece of wood from his door-frame or some earth from the front of the threshold which they then burn at home.'

When people are uncertain about the source of an attack of the evil eye, they may attempt to divine who the culprit is in order to involve him in the cure. Being suspected of being the source of an evil eye attack is not necessarily regarded as a stigma. 'Divining the identity of the gazer generally has the purpose of gaining his or her cooperation rather than being a preliminary to punishment or retaliation' (Galt 1982: 672). However, since diviners only give a vague description of the suspect without mentioning any names, ultimately identification is left to the victim. I witnessed such a case at my village field site, where a small boy in the neighbourhood had fallen ill with light fever and stomach cramps. The next day his grandmother consulted a diviner who diagnosed that the boy had been struck by the evil eye. Both his mother and grandmother agreed that the diviner's description fit a hawker who used to come to the village twice a week. Two days later, when the suspected hawker was passing through the village again, the grandmother called him to account: 'Last week you cast a glance (*nazar atgan akansiz*) at my grandson.' Then she pressed the man to give her something he was wearing on his body and, although visibly annoyed, he finally agreed to pluck out some hairs from his head, which were then burned in the courtyard. In cases where the identity of the evil doer could not easily be determined, people would at least try to determine the place where the suspected attack had occurred. Olishar, a 30-year-old bank employee in Urganch, told me of such a case:

> One day while sitting with friends in a teahouse, I became aware that a woman standing at the nearby greengrocer's was staring at me. I did not pay further attention to her. However, back at home I felt myself getting sick. My mother suspected at once that I could have been struck by the evil eye and asked whether anything unusual had happened to me that day. Then I remembered the woman and told my mother about her. She asked me to exactly describe the place where the woman was standing. After I identified the place she left for the greengrocer's. There she collected some soil which we burned together with *isvant* at home. After that I felt much better.

[117] Similar remedies are used in many other Muslim societies. For example, in the Middle East, 'a common measure is to obtain a piece of the guilty person's clothes and burn it, either separately, in the fumigation ritual, or with a piece of alum' (Spooner 1970: 317).

With the exception of the specialists, who will be discussed later, only a few people seem to know the magical spells to be recited after an attack of the evil eye. Gulnoza, a 46-year-old schoolteacher, recited such a spell to me:[118] 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is not my arm; it is the arm of Fatima. After the *kinna* entered [the body] it left it [again]. If you entered, go out, blame you if you do not go out, blame me if I can't drive you out. Go out *kinna*, go out!'[119] She explained that, after finishing the spell, one has to blow into a cup filled with ashes while imploring God's help. If such domestic remedies fail to bring about the desired effect, people would turn to healing specialists who are also called on in cases when magic or an encounter with evil spirits are suspected to be the cause of a calamity.

Plate 11. Selling *isvant* at the bazaar.

Only a few of my interlocutors refused customary precautions against the evil eye on religious grounds. For Muhtaram, for example, who had adopted a rather puritanical understanding of Islam, not only fumigation and spells

[118] Gulnoza originates from Tashkent, hence her use of the term *kinna* for the evil eye.

[119] *Bismillahirahmanirahim. Meni kolim emas, biji Fatima kollari. Kinna deyan kiradi, kirgandan keyin chikadi, kirgan bolsan chik, chikmasang sanga lan'at, chikarmasam mangana lan'at, chik kinna chik!* (Quoted in the dialect of Tashkent).

but also amulets fell into the forbidden category of sorcery, even if they did not contain anything other than words from the Qur'an. As she explained, the only proper Islamic measure to protect against evil was the recitation of particular Qur'anic verses.[120] Although booklets containing these verses are now readily available on the market, it is not very likely that this 'proper' Islamic method will supersede customary devices for overcoming the difficulties caused by supernatural influences.

## 6.2 Spirits

In his detailed account of Khorezmian demonology, Snesarev distinguishes five categories of supernatural beings: *jin*, *pari*, *dev, ajdarho*, and *olvosti* (Snesarev 2003: 23) In the present day, notions about *jin*s and *pari*s are by far the most widespread, while the others appear to have largely lost their relevance in people's imaginary about the supernatural.[121]

Ethnographic accounts about beliefs and practices related to the *jin*s in various Muslim societies show a great similarity even where they go beyond notions laid down in the Qur'an and *hadith*.[122] Accordingly, Khorezmian ideas about the *jin*s conform to overall Islamic notions, notwithstanding some local features which might be attributed to religious influences other than Islam. In Islamic cosmology, the *jin*s, which have their roots in pre-Islamic Arab beliefs, hold an intermediate position between mankind and the angels. They are conceived of as intelligent beings who were created out of flameless smoke. They are capable of salvation: if they obey Islam they can enter paradise; if not, they are condemned to hell. Though the *jin*s are mainly thought of as airy beings with transparent bodies, they can take different forms, including human ones. In the Qur'an, the *jin*s are neither totally bad nor totally good, which parallels their relation to humans. Evil *jin*s can harm people by 'touching' and 'possessing' them. Islam admits the possibility of *jin*s falling in love with humans and even marrying them, though the legiti-

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[120] For a complete listing of protective Qur'anic verses, see Krawietz 2002: 350.

[121] Snesarev sees the origin of the 'mystical dragon' *ajdarho* in the Avesta (Snesarev 2003: 26-27). The *dev*, who are perceived as spirit beings of immense size and strength among Turkic and Iranian peoples in Central Asia and in Turkey, are also said to evolve from ancient Iranian deities. For a detailed account of the *dev*, see Basilov 1995: 257-262 and for their image in the Uzbek folklore, see Eshonkul 1999: 3-102. Among Turkic peoples, the *albasti* (*albarsti, alkarısı*) is a demon regarded as particularly dangerous for women in childbirth. For examples from Central Asia and Turkey, see Örnek 1977: 144-146; Boratav 1984: 153-155; Basilov 1995: 265-266; Bajalijewa 2000: 70-76; Bellér-Hann 2006: 374-376.

[122] For ethnographic examples about *jin*s in the Arabic world, see Westermarck 1926: 262-365; 1933: 5-23. For Morocco, see Karabila 1996 and for Egypt Sengers 2003: 35-43.

macy of such marriages from the viewpoint of the Shari'a has been the subject of controversy among religious experts for centuries.[123]

People sometimes describe *jin*s as something of small size like mosquitoes living in swarms. Others stress that they appear in the shape of old men with long beards or resemble Indians with dark skin and tousled black hair. Ruined buildings, dried irrigation channels, cemeteries and, in particular, trees such as the *jiyda* (bot.: elaeagnus), are regarded as favourite places for *jin*s to gather, especially at noon. Snesarev speaks about 'an entire category of trees and plants that people try by all means to avoid, because they are believed to be the dwelling places of evil spirits' (Snesarev 2003: 151). That is why many people are reluctant to visit such places at midday. Once I asked my hosts' 17-year-old daughter to accompany me to a holy grave in the village cemetery. Obviously embarrassed, she asked me to wait one hour, since cemeteries should not be visited between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. because of the countless *jin*s gathering there during this period of time.

Unintended encounters with a *jin* are usually manifested in sudden health disturbances, such as cramps, epileptic and paralytic fits and the like. If a *jin* enters a person and takes abode in him or her for a longer time, I was told, the consequence is usually more serious. Such a person may become *jilli*[124] (possessed by a *jin*), a term applied to people suffering from some kind of mental disorder. Moreover, as some of my interlocutors explained, *jin*s sometimes demand sexual intercourse with humans, a notion mentioned also by Snesarev: 'Taking on human form, they entice a passerby, feast him, dance around him, and then disappear, leaving him sick and half dead from fear' (Snesarev 2003: 25).

Many of the features ascribed to the *jin*s also refer to the second category of spirits mentioned above, the *pari*s. They play an important role as helper spirits in exorcism rituals carried out by a particular type of healer, who will be discussed later. Different to the *jin*s, the *pari*s are sanctioned by neither the Qur'an nor the *hadith*. Their name derives from the Avestan *pairikās*, the malevolent female spirits of ancient Zoroastrian mythology (De Bruijn 1995: 271). In the course of the Islamisation of the Persians, the *pari*s appear to have shed their malevolent character and have hence mainly been perceived as 'benevolent spirits appearing in splendid and alluring beauty to

[123] For medieval juristic discussions on the issue, see Badeen and Krawietz 2002. Contemporary Egyptian notions about *jin*s marrying humans are discussed by Sengers 2003: 147; 271-273.

[124] *Jinli* ('with *jin*') in literate Uzbek. As Basilov (1995: 296) notes, in earlier times the Turks of Central Asia used to designate spirit beings as *jil*, a term which according to him has survived up to the present time only in the language of the Uyghur of Xinjiang. The Khorezmian *jilli* (lit.: 'with *jil*') may well derive from the same root.

human beings' not unlike the fairies of European folklore (De Bruijn 1995: 271). However, in Khorezmian demonology, and in that of Turkic peoples in general, the 'concept of this spirit is marked by duality: *pari* may harm people and have a benevolent attitude toward them. (…) When it is desired to emphasize the evil principle in them, the term *jin-pari* is used, thus associating the *pari*s with clearly harmful spirits' (Snesarev 2003: 25).[125] As the 54-year-old healer Oygul put it: 'Among the *pari*s some are good and some are bad.' They are usually perceived as anthropomorphic, appearing as beautiful young men and women to humans, but they may also assume the shape of animals, mainly snakes or birds. Some *pari*s are known by name, at least to the healers who rely on their help in their curing practices. Such names sometimes refer to the external characteristic of a particular *pari*, such as *Ilon* ('snake') *pari* while others have Islamic or Turkic names.

Like the *jin*s, the *pari*s can enter into intimate relationships with humans. As Snesarev notes: 'If there is a beautiful woman in the village, a *pari* falls in love with her and does not permit her husband to have access to her. (…) A woman having a relationship with a *pari* becomes cool toward her husband' (Snesarev 2003: 37). Such images are still common and can serve to explain deviations from the social norm. In the case of girls whose age for marriage has passed (*yoshi o'tgan*), people often suspect that they are prevented from marriage with a human by a *pari* who is in love with them.[126] The *pari*s appear to be altogether stronger and better organised than the *jin*s. The mightiest among them are said to command whole armies (*lashkar*) consisting of subordinate spirits.

It would be misleading, however, to construct a clear-cut boundary between the two types of spirit beings. Telling stories about human encounters with spirits, people often use the terms *jin* and *pari* interchangeably and features attributed by some to the *jin*s are said by others to also be characteristic of the *pari*s. Snesarev has already noted that in Khorezm 'the different images in demonology often merge or replace each other in both their external characteristics and their functions' (Snesarev. 2003: 21). Thus, both the *jin*s and the *pari*s exhibit preferences for the same places, particularly damp sites and cemeteries. Both are attracted by urine and blood and, thus, are especially fond of places where the dead are washed or animals slaugh-

[125] Bajalijewa describes the *pari*s among the Kyrgyz as a sub-category of the *jin*s (Bajalijewa 2002: 98). For a detailed account of the significance of the figure of the *pari* in the traditional healing system of Central Asia, see Basilov 1995: 288-289. For the figure of the *pari* in Turkish folklore, see Boratav 1984: 75-77; 1995: 271. The notion that *jin*s, like *pari*s, are responsible for spirit possession which causes psychological disturbances is described by Strasser in reference to the Black Sea shore of Turkey (Strasser 1995).

[126] As a rule, girls are given in marriage sometime between the ages of 18 and 22.

tered.[127] I sometimes heard accounts of people becoming ill after having passed such a site. In one case, a young woman suffering from sleeplessness and anxiety turned to a healer for help. According to his diagnosis, she was 'found' (*topingon*)[128] by a spirit when she urinated at a place where some time before a cow had been slaughtered. Another time the diagnosis went like this: 'You unintentionally crossed a place where the urine of a dead flowed [while the crop was washed].'

In a state of fear, especially of the dead, humans appear to be particularly vulnerable of being 'touched' by a *jin* or a *pari*.[129] Illness resulting from the 'touch' of the spirits is often attributed to a person's horror of the dead (*o'lidan tiskinish*), a diagnosis which seems almost exclusively applied to women who are generally considered to be more anxious than men. Thus, in order to chase the spirits away from them, women who take part in the washing of a dead person or gather around the body during the mourning ritual are sprinkled with water after the corpse has been carried away. Like fire, water is considered to be a powerful remedy against spirits and, therefore, it is applied in a variety of healing rituals.

## 6.3 Magic

In reports of personal misfortune, magic carried out to the disadvantage of others played no less a role than malevolent spirits and the evil eye. People also regard magic as a possible cause of spirit possession since '[t]rough an individual having magic carried out to the disadvantage of another person, *jin* can enter the body of the victim' (Sengers 2003: 147). Although people's preoccupation with magic varies, only a few would deny its reality, especially since belief in magic is well established in canonical Islamic teaching. According to the Qur'an (2: 102), the occult knowledge of magic was transmitted to mankind by Solomon who, in turn, was introduced to it by the devil (*shayton*) and two angels named Harut and Marut.[130]

On the whole, Islam distinguishes between permissible and illegitimate variants of magic, depending on the goal and the methods applied. Approved magic (Arabic: *ruqya*) refers to practices aimed at warding off malevolent supernatural forces such as spirits, magic or the evil eye and at the eradication of the damage caused by them. This includes the recitation of

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[127] For the existence of the very same notions among North-African Muslims, see Westermarck 1926: 277.

[128] From *topmoq*, 'to find'. Literally: 'being made to be found (by something bad)'.

[129] For the same notion in other parts of the Islamic world, see Westermarck 1926: 273 and Karabila 1996: 121.

[130] For a discussion of magic in Islam, see for example, Bürgel 1991: 210-219; De Jong 1991: 495; Sengers 2003: 42-46; Fahd 2005.

particular Qur'anic verses and the utterance of magical formulae, as well as concluding by spitting or blowing in order to augment the power of the spoken words.[131] What makes these legitimate Islamic practices is the fact that the Prophet himself applied them in appropriate situations. Magical practices carried out by unlawful means – that is, when polytheism (Arabic: *shirk*) is involved – belong in the category of illicit magic/sorcery (Arabic: *sihr*), which is also comprised of any kind of spirit engagement. As Doumato notes: '[w]itchcraft remains a crime against religion because God alone must be addressed when seeking a favor from the supernatural, and the use of magic implies a usurpation of powers that should belong only to Him' (Doumato 2000: 164). In the course of time, the attitude of Islamic scholars towards particular forms of magic has evolved and, therefore, cannot be deemed to be fixed even in the present day. For example, many medieval jurists were of the opinion that the conjuring of spirits is permissible when it is performed 'with perfect piety and the complete absence of unlawfulness (…) and in surrender to God' (Fahd 2005: 5584). And yet, while many contemporary *ulama* regard the use of amulets consisting of Qur'anic verses as tolerable, others – particularly those in the tradition of the Hanbali school of law – severely condemn it as a contradiction of the injunction to put one's trust in God (*tawakkul*) alone.

In the local terminology, magic is described as *dovo*. There is no particular term for magician/sorcerer in Khorezm and I have never heard of specialists being exclusively active in this capacity. Rather, for requests to carry out *dovo*, people call on the very same ones from whom they sought help in the case of illness attributed to magic, the evil eye and the intervention of spirits. This widely observed 'proximity of healing and harming' underlines the notion that 'knowledge of the correct medicine entails, by definition, the knowledge of its incorrect application' (Lambek 1993: 237). The ambivalent role of individuals dabbling with the supernatural also becomes evident in one of my interlocutor's statement about the *duoxon*:

> The *duoxon* – usually an old man or woman – is capable of imploring God's help for the human. He/she does it mostly by writing a *duo* ('prayer') on a piece of paper which the sick sews on the underskirt and wears it until everything becomes good. Or the *duo* is put for a while into water which is then drunk by the sick. These are good things. But using the very same methods, the *duoxon* can also cause harm to others. Whether he uses his power (*guch*) for good or bad depends on the request of the people who call him in for help.

[131] For the healing power of saliva spat out after reciting Qur'anic prayers, see Doumato 2000: 130-146.

Dealing with similar beliefs and practices among Muslims in East Africa, Michael Lambek asks why God should fulfil the evil aspirations of the worshippers. He concludes that such 'beliefs serve to support the conception of a just and moral God and to promote public discourse of moral values, all the while admitting the injustice, misfortune, and uncertainty characteristic of experience' (Lambek 1993: 121). In Khorezm, however, people tend to ascribe the success of harmful magic to the *jin*s or the Devil (*shayton*), on whose help the practitioner is believed to rely. I was told that sometimes, when the *duoxon* (or any other religious specialist) is curing the sick, he/she calls upon God, and while practising harmful magic, he/she engages spirits. However, such concepts are not fixed and many people acknowledge that spirit engagement can be used for positive purposes as well. Thus, the misuse of knowledge occurs not only by means of the *duo*. Healers who have helping spirits at their disposal are also principally suspected of sending them after people, on request, in order to harm them.

People also distinguish between good and bad magic. Bad magic, referred to as *sovuqlik* ('coldness'), are magical practices that aim to harm. Good magic is described as *issiqlik* ('heat'). It refers to any kind of magical practice that intends to influence positively social relations or behaviour. *Issiqlik* implies love magic and magic aimed at the improvement of the relationship between spouses in general. The ambivalent nature of magic is evident in the term *issiq-sovuq* ('hot-cold') which is used synonymously to *dovo*.[132] People tend to view *issiqlik* as justifiable from the viewpoint of both morality and Islam, as the following statement of Ijobat, a 45-year-old housewife from Urganch illustrates:

> Since it does not harm anybody, there is nothing wrong about *issiqlik*. For example, it comes to the knowledge of a woman that her husband has a relationship with another woman. In this case she would request a healer (*folbin*) or a mullah to carry out *issiqlik* on her behalf in order that her husband only has eyes for her. Or a young man loves a girl but she does not pay attention to him. Through *issiqlik* he can cause her to fall in love with him. But *sovuqlik* is bad because it aims to harm. People carry it out mostly in order to separate husband and wife. Or because they want somebody to become ill, to be unsuccessful at work and to have disharmony at home (*kasal bo'lsin dab, ishi yurishmasin dab, uyida urush bo'lsin dab*). *Sovuqlik* is a great sin in our religion and whoever is engaged in it goes to hell. Some people, however, do not care about this.

[132] Contrary to *dovo*, the term *issiq-sovuq* is used throughout of Uzbekistan.

Not everybody would agree with Ijobat in her categorical statement that 'there is nothing wrong about *issiqlik*'. As one of my interlocutors stressed, *issiqlik* can also be bad, if, for example, it seduces a married person into adultery. Gerda Sengers argues in a similar way in respect of Egyptian notions of magic: 'What one person practices and calls 'good' magic is often seen by the other person (the victim) as 'bad' magic' (Sengers 2003: 46).

The means by which magic is carried out in Khorezm resembles what is known of in other parts of Central Asia (see, for example Privratsky 2001: 205-6; Bajalijeva 2002: 26-43; Bellér-Hann 2006: 379). Thus, the target person can be given a meal prepared with water in which written spells have been dissolved. Or the victim might be offered something to eat or drink (tea, sugar, eggs and the like) upon which a spell has been cast. Another means of transmitting evil intentions is to take earth from a cemetery, to have a spell cast over it by a specialist and, then, to place it somewhere that the victim would likely step on it. Sympathetic magic, 'by which an action on a representational object is believed to produce a corresponding effect on the object represented' (Doumato 2000: 161) is equally widespread and the fear of it results in various rituals which are especially connected to traditional wedding ceremonies. For example, the highlight of every Khorezmian wedding, the ritual of untying, is based on the notion that malevolent guests could tie a knot on the clothing of the bride and groom or to stealthily close a lock in their presence, in order to prevent sexual intercourse between them. Thus 'everything tied on the clothing of bride and groom - the ends of the girl's forehand band, the groom's belt, etc.' (Snesarev 2003: 66) has to be untied right before the couple lies down for the first time on the wedding bed. Another widely employed magic device is to encircle the bed of the newly married couple with a thread, in order to keep away evil influences.

The reality of magic through knotting is officially acknowledged by Islam, since already the Qur'an warns 'from the evil of women who blow in knots' (Qur'an 113: 5). The quotation implies a gendered dimension of magic which is also inherent in the Khorezmian notions about magic in general. Thus, women are more likely than men to be suspected of being the driving force behind *issiq-sovuq*. Magic, on the whole, is a delicate subject and nobody would readily, if ever, admit to practising it in any form. At the same time, many are quick to suspect their fellows of doing *dovo* against them, especially in the case of precarious social relationships. The following cases serve to illustrate the kinds of situations which people tend to ascribe to the effects of *dovo* having been carried out to their disadvantage by others.

*Case 1*

Some eight years ago Zuleyha, a 46-year-old school-teacher and mother of four daughters in Khiva, has been left by her husband for

another woman. Although the man claimed to divorce her because she had failed to give birth to a son, Zuleyha is convinced that her former husband had become the victim of magic (*uni dovo attila*). 'His new wife has made *issiqlik* to cause him to fall in love with her', she said. When her misgivings were confirmed by a diviner, Zuleyha visited her rival and confronted her with the magic accusation; however, the other woman denied it. Since then, Zuleyha tends to ascribe every unpleasant event that befalls her family to the continuing efforts of her former husband's wife to harm them. Three years ago, for example, Zuleyha wed her eldest daughter Sarvinoz to a close relative. The marriage turned out to be unhappy for the young woman who suffers because of her husband's crude manners and infidelity. Zuleyha associates her daughter's unhappiness with a disgusting discovery they made on the eve of the girl's wedding. According to what Zuleyha told me, they found the bloody head of a freshly slaughtered cow in their garden: 'Nobody other than his new wife could have done it. She has bewitched the head of the animal in order to poison the marriage. The *dovo* worked because we were careless enough to touch it while we carried it to the rubbish.' Some time ago, Zuleyha's former husband started to pay her occasional visits, which she takes as evidence that the love magic is losing its initial force and that her husband will eventually return to her.

*Case 2*

Amina, a 35-year-old school teacher in Urganch, explained: 'When I was still a young girl, we had a woman dancer in our neighbourhood. One day she visited our house and brought with her an apple which she divided in three pieces and gave me and my sisters to eat. We recognized far too late that she had made *issiqlik* in order to make us like her. Actually, we began to feel sympathy for her. At the same time, she also carried out *issiqlik* on our father, but we do not know how, exactly. As a result, my father fell in love with her and she became his lover (*o'ynash*). For a year or so, my father continued to live with us but he was no longer the same. He often hit our mother and drank a lot. Finally, he left us in order to live with this woman. The *dovo* made by her, however, was so strong, that instead of turning away from the woman, we children visited her in their new house. It is hard to admit this, but we still liked her. Some ten years later, when I was married, our father returned home. He explained that a colleague of his felt pity for our mother and carried out *issiq-sovuq* with the intention of reversing his feelings for that woman. This *dovo* proved to be stronger than the one made by his

> *o'ynash* and, because of it, our father became increasingly cold towards her and began to long for his family.'
>
> *Case 3*
>
> Sarvar, a 21-year-old student of German language, told me about his school friend Qahramon who at that time was working in a supermarket owned by his father. For Years, Qahramon was in love with a schoolmate. They planned to marry after finishing school and, meanwhile, kept the relationship a secret from their families. Then, last summer, Qahramon's father announced his plan to give his son in marriage to the daughter of a well-to-do businessman. Initially, Qahramon told his friends and his sweetheart that he was not going to obey, but some weeks later he acceded and at the end of the summer the wedding was held. According to what he told his friends, Qahramon had suddenly fallen in love with the girl his father wanted for him when he saw her at a wedding party. Qahramon ascribed this to *issiqlik* which he said has been carried out for him on his father's request. Sarvar found this explanation fully convincing: 'Otherwise he would not have betrayed his old love. The poor girl nearly went mad when she learned about the wedding from others.'

As these cases illustrate, magic accusations operate mainly in the field of social relations. Blaming magic for a personal calamity or deeds which could otherwise be negatively interpreted by society appears here, however unconsciously implemented, as a means of transferring social and moral responsibility to a rival enemy. The following observations concern witchcraft and spirit possessions in general:

> The victim of affliction who attributes his difficulties to witchcraft is employing a direct strategy which assigns responsibility for his troubles to a rival enemy. On the other hand, the victim who interprets his affliction in terms of possession by malevolent spirits utilizes an oblique strategy in which immediate responsibility is pinned, not on his fellow-men, but upon mysterious forces outside society' (Lewis 1970: 293).

In Khorezm, however, suspicion of *dovo* does not lead to public accusations and people do not usually attempt to identify, much less pursue, a culprit. Zuleyha's case is the only one known to me where a victim endeavoured to call to account a suspected evildoer, even though it was in the form of a private talk. Instead of public confrontation, people prefer to take revenge by personally employing a specialist to cast a spell that hinder their rival or just to seek the help of a healer capable of undoing magic (*dovo ochish*).

## 6.4 Divination

Similar to the situation in the western Kyrgyz city of Osh that Pelkmans (2006) describes, in the aftermath of independence diviners also became publicly visible actors in Khorezm. Positioning themselves at known meeting places in the towns and never missing out holy sites, they offer their services for a few *so'm*.[133] Especially on days when a particular saint attracts large numbers of visitors, clairvoyants sit closely packed along the pathways in the vicinity of holy gravesites. Whenever I visited the small shrine of Mushkul Kushad in Urganch on a Tuesday, I counted at least ten clairvoyants competing for the favour of the visitors. The same situation could be observed every Wednesday at the pilgrimage site of Ulli Pir in Shovot, to the great annoyance of the imam whose efforts to drive the diviners out of the area remained futile. On their way to the saintly graves, at least a quarter of the visitors stopped at one of the diviners in order to ask about the whereabouts of lost or stolen property, or to enquire about the prospects of a planned business enterprise, a marriage, or the outcome of an approaching university exam. Diviners are also consulted in order to detect the source of an illness or other misfortune, as well as for the interpretation of dreams.

My interlocutors agreed that although diviners were also consulted in the Soviet era, albeit in secret, the demand for their services had grown considerably since independence. This development is paralleled by a marked increase in the number of diviners, the great majority of whom started to practice in the decade following the decline of the Soviet power. However, the extent of the increased popularity of divination cannot be judged by its public visibility alone, since most diviners receive their clients at home, some of whom come on a regular basis. I was told that numerous entrepreneurs of the new and still highly fragile market economy used to consult diviners before going to a foreign business trip or starting a new enterprise. The present burgeoning of divinatory phenomena can be understood as a means of coping with a situation where the increased 'uncertainty of life calls for methods of existential reassurance and control that rational and technical means can not offer' (Lindquist 2006: 2). On the other hand, divination offers an alternative means of improving, however modestly, the life conditions of those who found themselves on the side of the 'losers' in the post-socialist transformation.

In Khorezm, like elsewhere in Central Asia, divination and healing are closely interconnected and are often carried out by the same person. Diviners

[133] In 2006, two hundred *so'm* was the usual amount required for a divination at public places. By comparison, at the same time the price of a *non* (flat bread) was 100 *so'm*.

are described as *folbin*[134], a term which refers to male and female practitioners alike and which, moreover, designates a particular type of healer, though often not necessarily engaged in divination. The methods by which soothsaying is carried out vary according to the personal abilities or preferences of the *folbin*s. One favoured method is *kitob qorosh* which literally means 'looking at a book'. Specialists who use a book for divination are referred to as *kitob qoridog'on*, that is, the one who 'looks into a book'; in the case of male *folbin*s, this is usually the Qur'an. Women resort to small handwritten notebooks whose power is attributed to their perceived miraculous origin. The diviners claim that their text was dictated to them in serial dream sequences by supernatural agents such as Islamic saints and ancestral spirits. Divination can also be done with playing cards, small stones, a mirror, or with prayer beads. Another method used by diviners is to put pieces of cotton into a bowl of water and thence to predict the future, the source of an illness and the like, from their position. Divinatory diagnosis of illness is usually done by taking the pulse. As one *folbin* explained: 'The pulse tells you everything. If it beats in reverse I know at once that the patient has been touched by evil spirits. Children struck by the evil eye have enlarged pupils and their forehead is cold like ice.' Some diviners do not use any material aid but are said to recognise the problem of their clients simply by looking at them. I was told that some even receive their clients with their face covered by a scarf, as in the following story related to me by Maqsud, a young medical doctor in Urganch:

> While Manzura, the wife of my eldest brother was pregnant with her fourth child, she became ill. She had high temperature and epileptic convulsions. We gave her antibiotics in the hospital but her condition did not improve. Finally, my brother and I brought her to Oysha-*ona*, a famous *folbin* living in a nearby village. Although her face was covered when we entered the room, she knew exactly who we were and what sort of a problem we had. After speaking some *duo*, Oysha-*ona* revealed that Manzura had become the victim of magic (*dovo*) and recommended that she circle the tomb of a famous *eshon* on seven consecutive days. My father took her daily by car to the tomb and after the week passed she had recovered.

As this example illustrates, divination does not imply questions and explanations on the part of the clients. Rather, it is the diviners' task to identify their clients' need and, the more successful they are, the greater their reputation. Diviners are expected not to be familiar with the client's personal and social

[134] The term *folbin* combines the Arabic *fal* ('fate', 'omen') and the Persian *bin*, the root of the verb *didan* 'to see' (Basilov 1995: 55). Diviners in Khorezm are also referred to as *fol ochodog'on* or *fol ochuvchi*, both meaning a person who 'opens the fate'.

situation. This is why people prefer to visit diviners outside their neighbourhood and will even travel a considerable distance for consultations. In order to ensure privacy, the client usually visits the diviner alone, only occasionally accompanied by a friend or a relative. Consultations take place inside the house while other clients, and often also those who accompany the clients, wait outside. In the case of diviners practicing at public places, other clients are expected to stay at a proper distance while divination is being carried out for somebody. The privacy of the divinatory sessions allows for discussion of delicate issues between the diviner and the client and because of this, I had only a few opportunities to witness such sessions, two of which are described below. Both sessions took place in the house of Maryam-*ona*, a *folbin* in her early 70s, in a village near Shovot.

*Case 1*

I was just conducting an interview with Maryam-*ona* when a woman and her roughly 20-year-old daughter entered the room. According to what the mother said, they came from a small township some 30 kilometres away and this was their first visit to Maryam-*ona*, who had been recommended to them by an acquaintance. After these introductory remarks, the mother asked Maryam-*ona* to 'look in the book' for her daughter. The diviner asked for no more than the name and age of the daughter and how long she had been married (which was two years). Then she randomly opened her booklet of handwritten texts and only a second later 'saw' that the marriage of the young woman was suffering because of tension between the spouses due to the wife being cold to her husband and because she was unable to become pregnant. 'This is because she is possessed by a spirit', Maryam-*ona* said and she gave the mother a prayer (*duo*) written by hand in Arabic letters which she fished out of a wooden box that was under her bed. She advised the women to burn it with *isvant* at home. In addition, she told the mother to have a mullah read the Sura Yasin to the daughter on 40 consecutive days. 'If it does not help, you have to come again in two months. Then we will slaughter a hen over her head,' she said. The women left without commenting on the diagnosis. However, the unusually high gift of 1000 *so'm* given by the mother indicated that she was satisfied with the result.

*Case 2*

Gulnoza lives in Urganch where she runs a private notary bureau which provides her family a good, though modest, standard of living. Every time Gulnoza faces a decision, whether private or professional, she consults Maryam-*ona*. At this time she was worried about the wedding of her son, which was scheduled to take place four

> months later, in mid September. Unfortunately, two weeks previously Gulnoza's father had fallen ill. If the old man died before the wedding, it would have to be postponed until the following autumn because of the one-year mourning period. Since Gulnoza spent most of her time at her workplace and, thus, was already very much in need of a *galin* (daughter in law) to run the household, this was a particularly bad prospect. I sensed that she was seriously inclined to bring forward the wedding preparations in order to avoid the risk of having to postpone it. Nonetheless, before taking any step in this direction, she decided to consult Maryam-*ona*, who, after looking in her notebook, declared that it would be good to 'open the tablecloth' for the wedding as soon as possible. On the way back, Gulnoza told me that she would tell the bride's mother about the outcome of the divination and persuade her to agree to hold the wedding at the beginning of July.

In the first case, the diagnosis of spirit possession relieved the young woman of responsibility for her childlessness, which public opinion always blames on the woman, as well as of the tension between her and her husband, hinted at by Maryam-*ona*. According to the testimony of other cases reported to me, spirit possession revealed in divination seems to give women a 'means of coping with the stress and difficulties of matrimony' (Lewis 1970: 303-4).[135] As the case of Gulnoza illustrates, divination can also be sought in order to confirm or to justify a decision an individual has already made up his or her mind to take. If a client dislikes the diagnosis or in any way the content of a particular divination, he or she may become critical of the specialist in question and turn to another one. In the main, however, a client's argument for or against a particular diviner generally conforms to the reputation of the practitioner that has already been established by public opinion. People prefer to travel an hour or two to a popular diviner rather than resort to the services offered by one residing closer, arguing that the latter, whose qualities admittedly they have never tested, lacks real power.

Many people believe that diviners who possess real divinatory powers have received their vocation through some supernatural beings, such as Islamic saints, ancestor spirits, or *jin*s, with the help of which they are capable of seeing what is hidden to ordinary humans. The diviners, such as Nuriya, a woman in her late 30s who serves pilgrims three days a week at the Ulli Pir sanctuary, usually refer to Islamic saints as their helpers. Like many other *folbin*s, Nuriya also provides her clients with amulets and occasionally practices healing by laying her hands on the aching parts of the body

[135] For similar notions, see Strasser's research on fertility and impurity in a Turkish village (Strasser 1995: 197-236).

of a visitor. Referring to Abdulkadir Gilani, the saint venerated at the site, Nuriya explained: 'Years ago I spent the night at this place. In dream I encountered this person (*bu kishi bilan muloqotda bo'ladigan bo'ldim*). It is he who helps me to heal and to open the future (*fol ochmoq*).'

Plate 12. The healer and diviner Maryam-*ona*.

In the hierarchy of diviners, those like Nuriya, who offer their services at public places, have a rather bad reputation. My field assistant, who often accompanied me without any objection to diviners practicing at home, was shocked on one occasion when he saw me squatting down to a woman waiting for customers in the vicinity of the bazaar in Urganch. 'You can not learn anything from these people; they are Roma (*lo'li*) and great swindlers,' he said. The argument that one can not trust divination carried out by people on the street or at holy sites was also put forward by others, on the grounds that they are *lo'li* or Tajik, which seemed to be enough reason to mistrust them. Many Khorezmians actually use both ethnic terms interchangeably, probably because most Roma in the region come from Bukhara, a town with a predominantly Tajik population. In regard to the ethnic connotation of

divination, Privratsky made similar observations in Kazakhstan: 'When divination is thought of pejoratively, Kazaks may dismiss it as a specialty of the Tajiks, but this is facile' (Privratsky 2001: 213). Although some of the diviners practicing in public in Khorezm actually came from Bukhara, most of those I spoke to were natives, among them many old women trying to improve their poor economic conditions by this kind of activity.

In spite of the increased popularity of divination, acquiring information on the subject turned out to be as difficult a task as coming in contact with diviners others than those working at bazaars and shrines. At the beginning, people displayed a defensive attitude when confronted with my request to establish contact with *folbin*s, claiming that they would not rely on the latter's services. With time, however, my acquaintances were increasingly ready to talk to me about their experiences with soothsayers. When I later reported my initial difficulty to a friend, she laughed, saying that 'everybody goes to *folbin*s but nobody admits it.' This admittedly exaggerated statement underscores the generally ambivalent attitude towards diviners also inherent in the popular saying: 'Do not credit divination but do not live without it' (*Folo ishonmo, folsiz ham yurma*).[136] The statement of Zahid, a 30-year-old taxi driver in Khiva, is typical of most people's way of thinking on the issue. Shortly before we met, Zahid consulted a *folbin* because of a lost ring, claiming that this was the first time he had done this. Although the diviner actually told him where he would find the ring, Zahid remained sceptical:

> If the client is a woman, the diviner would say that she has problems with her husband. To young girls and men he/she would say something about an approaching wedding or the like. Well, they look at people and know what to say, they are good psychologists. However, some diviners can indeed see the truth. It is possible that divine powers enter a human (*ilohiy guchlar girishi mumkum*) and enable them to see hidden things. But this is a rather rare case and the majority of diviners are swindlers.

Although portraying diviners and all other religious specialists as swindlers and charlatans was an integral part of Soviet anti-religious propaganda, their dubious reputation might predate materialist influences. Referring to the pre-socialist era in Xinjiang, Bellér-Hann for example, notes that among the Muslim population '[d]iviners' services were often used, but clients' attitude towards their efficacy was ambiguous' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 394). On the other hand, people may refuse diviners on religious grounds, like my friend Muhtaram. Much in the same way as the imams I discussed the issue with, Muhtaram argued that according to the teaching of Islam, knowledge of the

[136] A nearly identical saying is quoted for the Kazakhs by Privratsky 2001: 215.

future is restricted to God alone and can not be achieved by humans other than with the unlawful help of the devil. Thus, Muhtaram did her best to talk me out of dealing with *folbin*s at all. 'What these people do is not Islam! They work together with the *jin*s and everybody who goes to them commits sins! You should better keep your fingers off them.' Gulbahor, a housewife in her early 40s and a devoted Muslim, explained the Islamic understanding of divination to me as follows:

> In Islam, *folbinchilik* [that is the activity of the *folbin*s] is a sin. *Folbin*s predict the future. This, however, is only allowed for the prophets and the saints. *Folbin*s who pretend to be supported by the saints, tell lies because in reality they appeal to Satan and the *jin*. The latter are often around when the angels, who write down the deeds of the humans, discuss among themselves. They then tell the *folbin*s what they have learned from the angels. That is why the *folbin*s' predictions sometimes turn out to be correct which again enhances the belief of the people in their abilities. However, what they are doing is sin. True Muslims would never cooperate with Satan or the *jin*s.

Supported by numerous *hadith*, this orthodox view of soothsaying is spread through a vast amount of printed material on Islam, published or at least approved by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Gulbahor's statement can be easily read in the (quasi-official) Islamic journal *Hidoyat* in an article entitled: '*Folbinlar doim aldashgan*' or the '*Folbin*s always betray' (Rahim 2000).[137] Like all people with some formal or informal religious education, imams evidently condemn divination as a capital sin. However, members of the official religious establishment refrain from expressing too harshly in public their views on religious practices which, in private, they might severely condemn as un-Islamic, obviously in order not to arouse the suspicion of being fundamentalists. Thus, imams working at shrines like Mushkul Kushad or Ulli Pir willingly provide the visitors, many of whom have consulted a diviner prior to entering the inner circle of the shrine, with blessing prayers (*potya*), without endeavouring to impose their own notions of proper Islamic behaviour on them.

Nevertheless, people are becoming increasingly aware of Islamic condemnation of soothsaying which, along with other traditional expressions of religiosity, has been the target of open and sometimes aggressive criticism by the new Islamic enthusiasts in the years following independence. However, I met only a few people who, like Muhtaram and Gulbahor, were so categorical in their principle refusal of divination on religious grounds. Many of my interlocutors, who occasionally or regularly relied on the ser-

[137] The text of the article is also redistributed on an Uzbek website which promotes the basic dogmatic and practical aspects of the religion (www.ziyo-uz.land.ru).

vices of diviners, continued to see real divinatory power as a gift from God. For them, relying on divination remained a thoroughly Muslim way to overcome the uncertainties of everyday life. The awareness, however, that others might view the matter differently, resulted in the above mentioned wariness about openly admitting to consulting diviners.

The degree of commitment to formal religious rules, however, can not be taken as a safe indicator of an individual's real recourse to divination, or for that matter his or her engagement in other practices condemned by the representatives of a more puritanical understanding of the religion, as being un-Islamic. For example, Ibodat is a thoroughly pious woman who performs the *namoz* prayers five times a day, refrains from alcohol, and fasts through the whole month of Ramadan. But when facing a serious problem she does not hesitate to consult diviners as well as healers who employ the aid of spirits. Also the elderly woman who first introduced me to a diviner was respected in the neighbourhood because of her religious way of life: since the time she went on pilgrimage to Mecca some years ago, she regularly performs the *namoz* prayers. Others I met observed none of the five pillars of Islam and did not object to consuming alcohol. But they argued that the consultation of diviners is a capital sin for a Muslim which they would never commit. Thus, the attitude of people towards divination and diviners in Khorezm supports the notion put forward by Roy F. Ellen in respect of what he calls 'practical Islam' in South Asia, according to which 'the various modes of Muslim practice and belief (…) are not clearly separable' and 'individuals may adhere to different modes at different phases in their life, or even at the same time' (Ellen 1983: 63).

# *Chapter 7*
# Saints, shrines and pilgrimage

The veneration of saints and the connected practice of shrine pilgrimage has often been identified as the most important element of religious life in Central Asia, past and present (Poliakov 1992; Tyson 1997; Privratsky 2001; Snesarev 2003; Dawut 2007; Louw 2007). As McChesney notes:

> Shrines, the imputed final resting places of saintly figures or relics, play a major role in imagining the landscape. Whereas in other cultures a cathedral, a temple, an idol, or the site of a vision or reincarnation might give the landscape religious meaning, in Central Asia it is almost invariably a tomb. (…) The importance of the tomb shrine lies in its being a threshold or doorway to the spiritual world and to what lies beyond human experience (McChesney 1996: 15).

But who is considered to be a saint in Islam? The Arabic term generally translated as 'saint' is *wali* (pl. *awliya*), which in everyday usage means 'friend', 'benefactor' or 'protector'. In a religious context, the term refers to a particular kind of friend of God – living or dead – whose close relationship with the divinity enables him (less often: her) to serve as an intermediary in people's relation to God and to communicate His grace to the ordinary faithful.[138] The concept of sainthood is particularly elaborated in Sufism or Islamic mysticism. According to Sufi teachings, there are always saints living on earth; they form a single hierarchy headed by the *qutb* ('pillar', 'axis') and are believed to sustain the universe (Schimmel 1979: 221-224). The figures that best illustrate the saint as a venerated holy person are Sufi masters, though not all those to whom Muslims ascribe saintly qualities have a Sufi background. Contemporaries and descendants of the Prophet, local rulers, religious worriers, and even every ordinary human being can be viewed as a saint in Islam which, contrary to Roman Catholicism, has no formal canonisation process. The clearest proof of being a saint is the ability to perform miracles, which is considered as evidence of a person being

[138] For a classical study of saint veneration in Islam see Goldziher 2004 (first published in 1888).

endowed with divine grace (*baraka*). Among the miracles attributed to Muslim saints are the ability to be in different places at the same time, to transform oneself and others, to know the future, to cure the sick, and the like. As saints are believed to hold *baraka* even after death, people continue to venerate them at their place of burial or at places otherwise associated with them.

Recent research provides clear evidence that Sufis played a crucial role in the Islamisation of Central Asia, particularly in the nomadic zones of the region (DeWeese 1994). To a much higher degree then the learned representatives of 'normative' Islam, Sufis tolerated local religious traditions, which, under their influence and reinterpreted in Islamic terms, were gradually absorbed into the new religion. This refers particularly to ancestor worship, which was transformed into the cult of Islamic (Sufi) saints and linked to their shrines and other holy places connected with them:

> These shrines thus emerged not only as sites where sacred power was localized but as nexus points where Islam and the traditions of pre-Islamic times joined and developed – here local communities dealt with Islam and accepted it as their own. Perhaps most importantly, the holy sites became part and parcel of everyday life, accessible to all members of the community (Tyson 1997: 16).

However, the veneration of saints was by no means restricted to the nomadic part of the population. Sufi brotherhoods, especially the Naqshbandiyya and its sub-groups, continued to be of great importance to religious life in Central Asia, where the mystical and scriptural traditions of Islam were strongly intertwined (Paul 1991; Muminov 1999). Far from being limited to the countryside, where almost every village and hamlet had its own holy site associated with a Muslim saint, shrines were also to be found in great numbers in the cities, often in the immediate neighbourhood of mosques and *madrasa*s. Shrines and mosques were not thought of as exclusive categories, either by ordinary Muslims or by the religiously educated. Although not part of the canonical teachings of Islam, the great part of the *ulama* had '(…) long agreed on the permissibility of seeking the intercession of the Prophet and "other friends of God" in one's dealing with the deity in the form of petitionary prayer, supplication, or the visitation of shrines' (Khalid 2007: 45).

The interrelation between mosque and shrine became seriously disturbed when Central Asia came under Soviet rule. While within the framework of registered mosques the regime granted a limited space for public observance of the canonical rites of Islam, shrine-centred religious activities were denied any legal framework. The same refers to Sufi orders which – regarded by the regime as a kind of anti-Soviet underground organisation –

became prime targets of the anti-religious campaigns. Sufis were in fact portrayed then in the same light as are today's 'Wahhabis' of Central Asia: 'as inherently extremist and militant' (Louw 2007: 47). In the Soviet regime's discourse, shrines were characterised as 'the epitome of fetishism and a main centre of evil practices, the "seat of every kind of superstition"' (Ro'i 2000: 369). What's more, in order to undermine the authority of local religious figures, the Soviets took pains to demonstrate that the veneration of saints was actually un-Islamic.[139] Ironically, this view echoed that of early 20th century Islamic reformists and fundamentalists who argued against the veneration of saints and their shrines as incompatible with the genuine Islamic tradition.[140] This notion also pervades the writings of Soviet ethnographers, most of whom considered saint worship to be a leftover of shamanism or other religious systems, the features of which had been incorporated into Islam through Sufism (Sukhareva 1960; Basilov 1987). As Snesarev has put it, saint worship 'may well be the richest aspect of religious practices in terms of the retention of pre-Islamic vestiges recognised as part of the official tradition' (Snesarev 2003: 205). In keeping with this view, the official Soviet *ulama* were mobilised to testify that visiting shrines and related practices had been introduced into Islam later and were, therefore, illegitimate (Ro'i 2000: 378; Babadzhanov 2001: 116). However, 'in view of the fact that a relatively small percentage of people actually attended the registered mosques, it is difficult to see how a fatwa could be widely circulated or, for that matter, enforced' (Subtelny 1989: 597).

During the Soviet era, some of the shrines were destroyed by order of the authorities, while others were closed down or simply left to decay. Bent on proving that tombs associated with saints did not provide any evidence in support of claims of holiness, the Soviets also allowed shrines to be excavated. In Shohimardon for example, the shrine ascribed to the fourth Islamic Caliph Ali was destroyed in 1947, an official commission determining that the 'alleged saintly tomb' consisted of nothing but stones (Saksonov 1984: 10). Such measures were reinforced in the 1980s, during the last anti-Islamic campaign in Uzbekistan, when shrines that had survived earlier campaigns were destroyed or simply cleansed of 'pagan' attributes, such as holy banners, votive gifts, oil lamps (which were lit for the fulfilment of wishes), and the like (Babadzhanov 2001: 114). In other cases, such as in Samarqand,

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[139] For anti-religious literature (in Uzbek language) explicitly dealing with Muslim holy sites see, for example, Rahmonov and Yusupov 1963; Saksonov 1984; Ibrahimov 1985.

[140] The anti-saint discourse in Islam has been first outlined by the 8th century Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. His teachings, regarded extreme by many of his contemporaries, were reinforced by early 20th century reformist movements, represented in Central Asia by the Jadids (Knysh 1997; Khalid 1998, 2003).

Soviet archaeologists opened tombs that were venerated by the people and, not surprisingly, found no scientific proof of sacredness (Hanks 2001: 230). Yet notwithstanding all the effort they made to unmask saint veneration as a superstitious relict of the past, the practice of visiting shrines never completely ceased, although it appears to be limited to a rather small part of the population.[141]

While the Soviet regime strongly discouraged the use of shrines for religious purposes, nonetheless it rescued some of the architecturally important monuments from complete destruction by turning them into tourist sites and anti-religious museums. As McChesney notes: 'Whether these expenditures were rationalized on the grounds of promoting tourism or preserving the material culture of a particular nationality or people, the fact remains that important shrines were preserved and protected' (McChesney 1996: 73).

## 7.1 The rehabilitation of saint worship

In the course of the decline of the Soviet Union, the practice of shrine visitation re-emerged as an important element of Islamic piety in Central Asia. All over the region, the number of people making visits to sacred sites grew dramatically (Muminov 1996; Tyson 1997; Schubel 1999). Moreover, there was a significant change in the composition of the visitors. While prior to independence, visitors were mainly women and elderly men of lower educational level and social status, shrine pilgrimage (*ziyorat*) now draws on men and women of all age groups and educational and social levels (Abramson and Karimov 2007: 320). While *ziyorat* activities – including ritual slaughtering of animals and communal meals at the shrines – were severely disapproved of by the previous regime, they now have the approval of the governments of the newly independent states interested in the rehabilitation of the region's Sufi tradition (Zarcone 1995). For local politicians, visiting shrines and hosting sacrificial meals at them has become a prestigious act through which they seek popularity. This is particularly the case in Uzbekistan where the Karimov regime has co-opted holy sites associated with medieval Sufi saints as 'a centerpiece of its nation-building agenda' (Schubel 1999: 74).

> In an ironic contrast to the way it was pictured in Soviet research and propaganda, aspects of the Sufi tradition are now pictured as expressions of a kind of Islam which has developed in harmony with local conditions and with the Uzbek national character, a kind of Islam which is a bearer of the nation's humanist tradition and which,

[141] For a more detailed account about the policy of the Soviets towards shrines and related religious activities, see Louw (2007: 52-55).

> moreover, is compatible with a modern, secular state as a home grown counterweight to political Islam (Louw 2007: 48).

After independence, major shrines were handed over to the care of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan which, thereby, was incorporated into the structures of the new 'official' – that is, government supported – Islam. In a number of cases, the shrines of famous Islamic mystics have been renovated at the state's expense, and the government celebrates the anniversaries of famous Sufis almost with state pomp. In 1993, the 675th birthday of Bahauddin Naqshband, the founder of the Naqshbandiyya order, was observed with great ceremony at his mausoleum in Bukhara in the presence of president Karimov, the chief mufti of Tashkent, and leading Sufi figures from home and abroad. While presumably the religious figures were motivated to support the rehabilitation of the saint because of religious sentiments, the president's interest was clearly 'cultural and integrated in the quest for the building of a new national Uzbek identity' (Zarcone 1995: 72). In 2003, the president also attended the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the death of Abdulkhaliq Ghijduvani in Bukhara, reminding the nation in his speech of its 'life-long duty to remember its great *bobo*s [honorary title of Sufi sheikhs] and their eternal heritage.'[142] Nor did president Karimov miss the opportunity – at the opening ceremony of the Islamic University in Tashkent, established by presidential decree in 1999 – to pay a visit to the saintly mausoleum inside the university complex, thus signalling the regime's approval of shrine visitation as part of proper Islamic behaviour. Uzbek media promptly spread the news about the notice the president left in the guest book of the University, which stated: 'Visiting such holy places is the duty of everybody.'[143]

At the same time, shrine-based religious practices became the target of open criticism from Islamic purists, including those labelled by the regime as 'Wahhabis'. According to Babadzhanov, debates over the compatibility of saint veneration with Islam even led to a schism among the country's *ulama*, some of them maintaining that the institution of *ziyorat* is *bidat* (unlawful innovation) and that local Islam should be purged of it (Babadzhanov 2001). Others, especially the members of the state-approved religious leadership, display in good Hanafi tradition a benevolent attitude towards the institution of *ziyorat*, even though they might disapprove of some of its concomitants as superstitions. Later in this chapter, I will come back to the question of how these contradictory messages are reflected at major shrines in Khorezm.

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[142] Press notice, available on line at: www.uza.uz/uzbek/news. (Accessed July 2005).

[143] Press notice on the website of the Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Germany. Available on line at: www.uzbekistan.de. (Accessed August 2003).

## 7. 2 Local saints and shrines

According to the definition developed by Wim van Binsbergen:

> A shrine is an observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localized and usually immobile. It is a material focus of religious activities, and perceived and respected as such by the participants. The observable features of a shrine are defined within the participants' local religious system, which entails a limited selection of material objects (man-made or not) that possibly qualify a shrine. (…) Religious activities include not only what believers positively do (…) but also what they refrain from doing out of religious considerations (…). The shrine will only cease to be a shrine, will lose its sacred nature altogether, when it has entirely ceased to instigate any such positive or negative religious activities in the participants (van Binsbergen 1981: 101).

The shrines in Khorezm, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, are always associated with saints; they are perceived as the final resting place of a saint or as a place where he or she passed through or rested at some time in his or her life. The erection of a shrine at a given site is often explained by the standard legend, prevalent in all parts of Central Asia and far beyond, that a saint had appeared in a dream to a person (often a khan or another high ranking person of history) and demanded that a shrine be built for him (Snesarev 2003: 210). This can certainly also happen in the present. The shrine of Gachirmas Buva for example, which I will discuss later, was erected in the early 1990s based on a dream encounter with the saint.

In Khorezm, places connected with the saints are usually called *ziyoratgoh* ('place of visit'), while the term *mazar*, the general designation of tomb shrines throughout Central Asia, is altogether uncommon. Outwardly, the shrines take many different forms. A few shrines in the region consist of great mausoleums which, because of their architectural relevance, were protected monuments in the Soviet era and were declared to be part of the nation's 'golden heritage' (*oltin meros*) after independence. They include the shrine of Sheikh Muxtor Vali in Ostona (near Yangiariq), which was erected in the 14$^{th}$ century, and the splendid, richly equipped mausoleum of the 18$^{th}$ century poet and wrestler Pakhlavan Mahmud in Khiva. Qaraqalpaqistan lays claim to the gravesite of Uwais al-Qarani, the famous Yemeni saint known by the people simply as Sultan Buva ('Grandfather Sultan'). The mausoleum of Uwais, the legendary contemporary of Muhammad who is believed to have communicated with the Prophet by telepathy, was built by the Khan of Khiva in 1837, after the one built in 1805-1806 was destroyed by an earthquake. Uwais al-Qarani's shrine is the only one in the larger region of Khorezm that enjoys a degree of supra-regional eminence and is

definitely the one to which Khorezmians ascribe the greatest miraculous power as well as the utmost religious importance. For many people, it ranks in importance to Mecca; seven visits to this shrine, I was told, supplemented the *haj*.[144] The shrine is located in the middle of the Qyzylqum desert and is surrounded by a huge cemetery. Particularly pious people from all over Khorezm aspire to be buried there, in the hope that they will be in proximity to the saint and supported by him on the Day of Judgement. Similar to other frequently visited holy places, the shrine complex includes adjacent buildings where sacrificial animals can be slaughtered and covered areas where people can gather to prepare and eat food together.

Plate 13. The mausoleum of Sultan (Uwais) Buva with surrounding cemetery.

However, most shrines in the province consist of rather simple buildings made from clay or brick and, more often than not, have a domed roof. There is always a tomb structure in one of the rooms, covered with a cloth brought *ex voto* by visitors. All holy sites are designated by poles with pieces of cloth (*alam*) tied to them at the top. Natural objects in the vicinity of a shrine, such as a free standing tree, a water spring or cliffs are also treated with reverence by the people; in one way or another, they are associated with the saint of the shrine and, as such, are thought to be endowed with the same kind of 'conta-

[144] That in popular perception, the pilgrimage to Mecca always served as 'the yardstick for measuring the merit gained through shrine-visiting' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 350) is reported from many other parts of Central Asia as well.

gious blessedness' (Louw 2007: 50) as the shrine itself. Sometimes, a shrine consists of nothing more than a tree that is regarded as holy.

In Uzbekistan, as among other Turkic peoples, a single saint is called *avliyo* which is the plural form of the Arabic *wali*. In Khorezm, the term *avliyo* (in dialect: *o'lya*) has more than one meaning. Thus, when speaking about an *avliyo*, Khorezmians usually refer to cemeteries, which are usually sited around the (symbolic) grave of a holy man, after whom it is named. Furthermore, the term is used to denote a shrine as well as the saint to whom it is devoted. Similar to what Tyson describes for the Turkmen, virtually all cemeteries in Khorezm have an *avliyo* who is thought 'to be the first buried and around whom all others have to be buried' (Tyson 1997: 18).[145]

All saints are referred to by respectful kinship terms such as *ota*[146] ('father', 'grandfather') or *buva*[147] ('grandfather'), or *pir* ('spiritual guide', 'Sufi leader') is added to their names. This usage, together with designating cemeteries by the same term that denotes saints and their shrines, highlights the close interconnectedness between the cult of the forefathers, referred to as *otabuvala*[148], and the worship of saints. As Snesarev suggests: 'Kinship terms migrated through ancestor worship into the sphere of reverence for saints and became firmly rooted' (Snesarev 2003: 216).

A few of Khorezm's holy sites are associated with widely known figures of early Islamic history. For example, two shrines in Khiva are associated, respectively, with the fourth Islamic Caliph Ali – referred to by the people as Shohimardon[149]– and the fourth Shi'i Imam Zaynal Abidin. A shrine in the district of Shovot is devoted to two medieval Sufi masters of worldwide renown: Abdulkadir Gilani and Yusuf Hamadani. Although all of these saintly figures are historical personages, they have lost, together with many others venerated in the region, 'their real characteristics to the point of unrecognizability because tradition transformed them into supernatural miracle-workers' (Snesarev 2003: 213). For example, the guardian of the Shohimardon shrine in Khiva, a woman in her early 60s who has served at the site for almost 40 years, answered my question about the saint the site is attributed to as follows:

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[145] The phenomenon of gravesites of local saints being located in the cemeteries of the particular rural communities is also reported for Azerbaijan by Pfluger-Schindlbeck (1998).

[146] The term *ota*, which means 'father' in standard Uzbek, is used in everyday speech in Khorezm for 'grandfather'.

[147] In standard Uzbek: *bobo*.

[148] In standard Uzbek: *otabobolar*.

[149] Shah-i merdan ('Ruler of the valorous') is one of Ali's honorary titles.

The holy Ali, whose other name is Shohimardon, is a mighty *pir*, possessor of miraculous power (*karomat*). He turned countless unbelievers into Muslims. He also converted his 40 wives and all of their children into Muslims. His fame also reached the ruler (*posho*) who one day sent for him and ordered him to kill a 40-headed dragon that dwelt in the mountains and was frightening the people. Our *pir* Shohimardon fought with the dragon 40 days and 40 nights. Finally he killed it and brought its skin to the ruler.

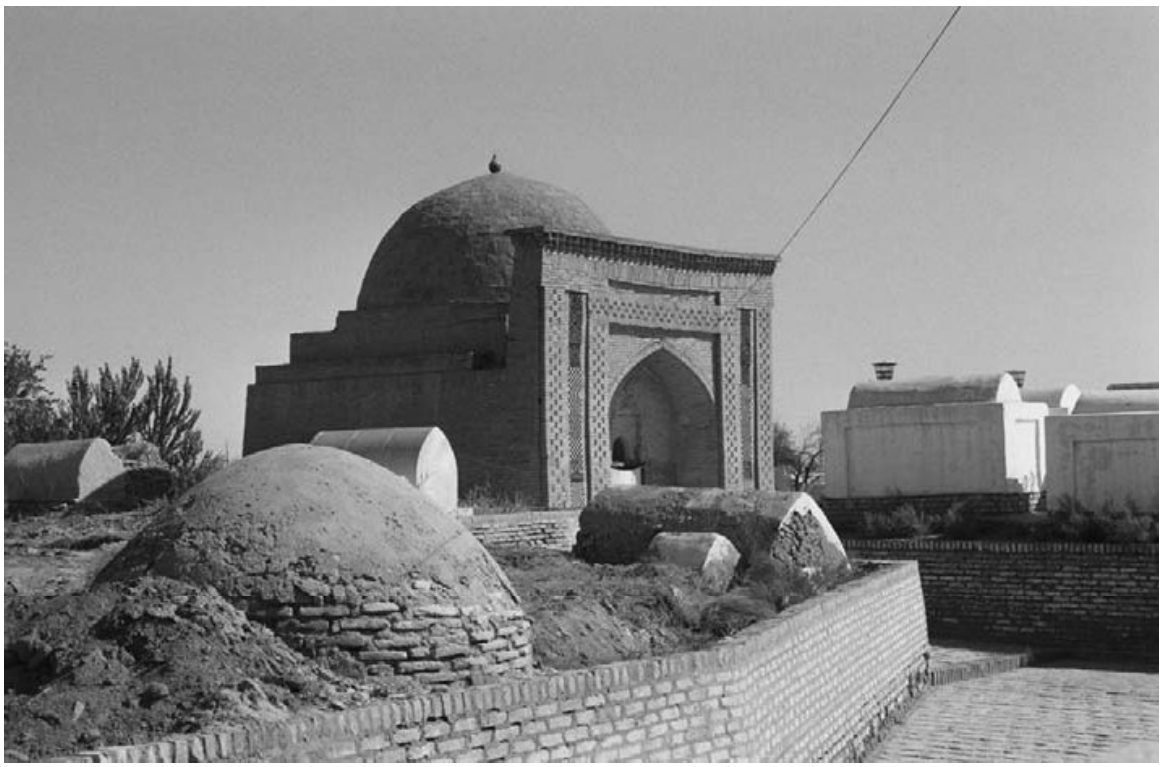

Plate 14. The Shohimardon shrine in Khiva.

Many saints of Khorezm are of rather dubious origin, known by no more than some kind of nickname which often refers to character traits, such as Gachirmas Buva ('the saint who does not forgive'), Misqin Buva ('the miserable saint'), Ochuvchi Buva ('the saint who opens [the fate]'), Tezbergan Buva ('the quickly giving saint'), and the like. In general, people knew little if anything at all about the identity of the saints they venerate, other than that they were good Muslims and spread Islam in the region. Of primary importance to them is the spiritual power attributed to the site itself, the firm belief that miracles have occurred there, and that this miraculous power persists and continues to be effective. Almost 90 percent of the visitors as well as the religious personnel I interviewed at various holy sites in the province could not say anything about the particular saint the shrine was associated with. The situation was somewhat different at the mausoleum of

Sultan Uwais in Qaraqalpaqistan, where visitors were usually more informed about the legendary life of the saint and could provide descriptions of the miracles performed by him.[150] The stories I was told by the people were identical with those described in a recent hagiographical publication (Rahim 1992) sold at the shrine; many people actually admitted to having acquired their knowledge about the saint from this booklet.

The widespread lak of awareness of saintly legends may be due in part to 70 years of Soviet dominance which 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 (Schubel 1999: 74). However, not knowing the identity of saints is not exclusively a post-Soviet phenomenon. Durdyev for example, quotes a Russian account from the 19th century stressing that although the gravesites of holy men were highly revered by the Turkmen of Khorezm, they 'knew nothing about them but their names' (Durdyev 1985: 93). The situation is similar in many other parts of the Muslim world and, thus, writing about women's shrine pilgrimage in Turkey, Emelie Olson notes that:

> Although women knew where to go and what to do when they arrived at the shrines, only rarely did they know much about the histories of the saints or their shrines (…). They came because of the reputation of the saint for granting one's wishes, or, for the more sophisticated, because God's power was said to be expressed here through the vehicle of the saint (Olson 1994: 204).

During the Soviet period, the intensity of shrine visitation appears to have diminished. A number of shrines, described in the literature as still attracting visitors in the 1940s and 1950s seem to have lost their power to arouse religious sentiments in the population and fell into oblivion. Thus, for example, when I asked in the district of Honqa about Sayid Ota, listed in earlier publications among the most popular saints in the region (Rahmonov and Yusupov 1963: 5; Snesarev 2003: 213), people merely shrugged their shoulders indicating that they had never heard of him. However, some holy sites retained at least part of their former popularity, such as the shrine of Sultan Uwais, which Snesarev describes as the centre of highly intensive pilgrimage activities in the early 1950s (Snesarev 1983; see also Ro'i 2000: 373). In later periods, the shrine was repeatedly closed down, such as during the intensified anti-religious campaigns of the Khrushchev era and again in the late the 1970s. However, people continued to visit the site even if they were denied entrance to the innermost sanctuary of the shrine where the imputed tomb of the saint lies.

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[150] For a description of the legend, see Rahim 1992.

The increasing secularisation of the society together with the aggressively anti-religious policy also affected the institution of the *sail*s, annual feasts at saintly shrines. In the 1940s, Snesarev still witnessed *sail*s, 'joined by half Khorezm', at the shrine of Muxtor Vali in Ostona which he described as 'clamorous nocturnal festivals' including ecstatic music and dance performances (Snesarev 1976: 21-22, 81-89). Today, not even old people living in the vicinity of the shrine remember these festivities. To my knowledge, the only *sail* which was continuously held throughout the Soviet era was the yearly pilgrimage feast of the *shix*s (see Chapter 3) at the shrine of Ismamut Ota in Turkmenistan. Every year in August, *shixs* from both sides of the Uzbek-Turkmen border used to set out for Ismamut Ota in order to hold a 3-day *sail* in honour of their saintly ancestor. In this case, pilgrimage was first of all a means of maintaining group identity and solidarity and fulfilling the general obligation to commemorate the dead, since until very recently, the *shix*s used to bury their dead around the shrine. However, due to the political conflicts between the two countries, crossing the border to Turkmenistan has become difficult since 2003. Thus, the *sail* came to an end and the *shix*s living on the Uzbek side had to build a new cemetery of their own.

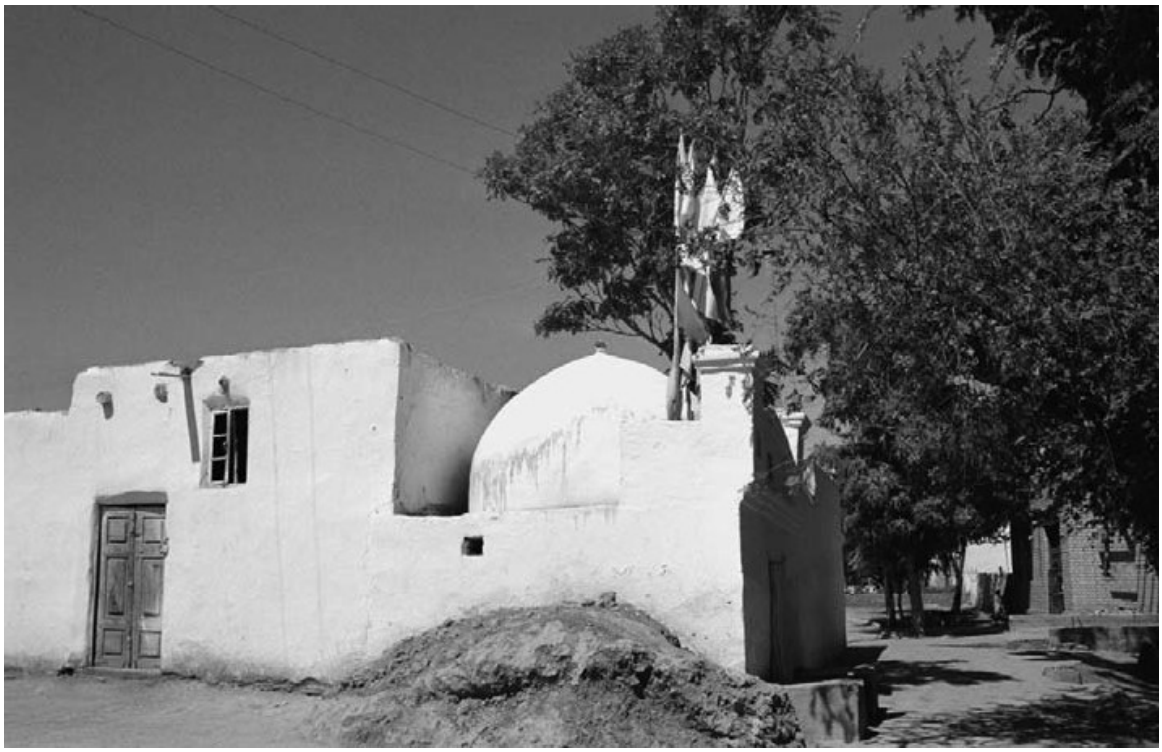

Plate 15. A neighbourhood shrine in the city of Khiva.

Judging from what informants reported to me, during the Soviet era only a small part of the population engaged in *ziyorat* activities, as a consequence

of which most holy sites fell into decay. Shortly after independence, however, when shrine visitations became socially acceptable and started to be advocated even by the state, the situation changed dramatically. There has been a great increase in the number of people visiting shrines, and the tendency is still growing. Many of the decayed buildings have been renovated, mainly with local people taking the initiative and paying the costs. Before turning to the discussion of particular holy sites, let me outline the main motivating factors behind shrine visitations and the practices that accompany them.

## 7.3 *Ziyorat* – motivations and aspirations

As in Muslim societies in general, visits to shrines in Khorezm are called *ziyorat* (Arabic: *ziyāra*), which in an everyday context also designates visits to friends, neighbours and other acquaintances. If used in the religious sense, the term generally translates as pilgrimage, understood as a sacred journey, 'undertaken by a person in the quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal' (Morinis 1992: 4). Although Khorezmians occasionally go on *ziyorat* to distant shrines located in other parts of the country or even abroad, mainly Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, *ziyorat*s more often have 'the nature of a visit to a close and dearly-loved relative, involving a short passage through familiar surroundings' (van Binsbergen 1985: 232). Pilgrimages have a firm place in all major religions of the world and, whatever the variations, they display certain similarities, particularly in respect of the pilgrims' motivations and aspirations. Based on the different purposes, Morinis has developed a 'typology of sacred journeys', consisting of six principal types: (1) devotional; (2) instrumental; (3) normative (4) obligatory; (5) wandering; (6) initiatory (Morinis 1992: 10). While obligatory pilgrimage in Islam is limited to the *haj*, visits to shrines in Khorezm (and elsewhere in the Muslim world) are mainly of devotional, instrumental, and initiatory type, although the aspirations are not always clearly separable.

'Devotional pilgrimages have as their goal encounter with, and honoring of, the shrine's deity, personage or symbol' as well as 'the accumulation of merit that can be applied in this or future life' (Morinis 1992: 10). Indeed, many people I spoke to at shrines explained that they had undertaken the *ziyorat* in the hope of receiving divine merit (*savob*) in the afterlife, since visiting saintly graves is seen as an act of great piety. My field assistant, who on countless occasions accompanied me on my visits to holy sites, told me one day in all seriousness that though he found these visits increasingly boring, nonetheless they were a great advantage for him: 'Thanks to you, at the end of my days, the list of my meritorious acts will be quite long.' Some of my interlocutors even considered *ziyorat* to be a duty for Muslims akin to

paying visits to the graves of one's deceased relatives and ancestors. The legend that Sultan Uwais was the most beloved friend of Prophet Muhammad was supported by the young mullah working at the Sultan's shrine. He recalled a *hadith* in which the Prophet advised his followers to visit the graves of his friends every Friday, stressing that *ziyorat* reminds one of the world beyond. About a quarter of the visitors I asked about the reason for their visit to the Sultan Buva sanctuary, which is surrounded by a large cemetery, explained that they came 'to please the souls of the dead' (*o'tganlarni ruhini shod atish*) or 'to commemorate the deceased' (*o'tganlarni yad atish*). A former *kolkhoz* manager, age 70, explained more precisely: 'It is an obligation (*shart*) to commemorate the dead, to remember the ancestors but it is not an obligation to come here because of the holiness of the place (*muqaddas joy dab galib shart emas*). But it brings *savob*.' The aforementioned connection between veneration of the dead and veneration of the saints becomes clearer in the light of such attitudes.

However, most people perform *ziyorat* with a particular purpose in mind. In keeping with Morinis, such visits can be called 'instrumental': they are 'undertaken to accomplish finite, worldly goals' (Morinis 1992: 11). In such cases, people mostly seek a cure for an illness, the reversal of a disaster, or for help in dealing with personal problems and crises, including family affairs, unemployment, examinations, and the like. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, the belief also prevails in Khorezm that a visit to a saintly tomb is the most effective cure of infertility in women.

In principle, though all saints are ascribed miraculous power, they are not held to be equals: the belief that some are mightier than others determines their respective popularity and, thus, the number of people seeking their help. Moreover, some saints are considered to be specialists in dealing with particular kinds of problems. Ulli Pir, to whom I will return below, as well as Sultan Buva and a saint named Jalil Buva, enshrined in the Uwais-mountains of the Qyzylqum desert in Qaraqalpaqistan, are known for their particular ability to cure the mentally ill. People who suffer from some kind of eye disease particularly visit the small shrine of Go'zli Ota, in the vicinity of the University of Urganch. People turn to Mushkul Kushod ('one who solves difficulties') – a female saint whose simple shrine at the edge of one of the city's communal cemeteries was erected by a pious woman in 1992 – primarily to help find solutions to personal problems. Every Tuesday, the day considered the most convenient to visit her shrine, the small sanctuary witnesses a stream of visitors, in particular many young women and often also couples. Once I met the mother of my assistant there; she had come to ask the saint to help her son pass his university examination the following day. I also often encountered university acquaintances – docents and stu-

dents alike – at the shrine. People also visit shrines to fulfil a vow that they made at the time of an earlier visit to the saint, after their request had been granted. The vow usually refers to an animal sacrifice which can be a cock or a sheep, depending on the importance of the issue in question and the economic ability of the person making the vow.

Sleeping at the shrines, a common practice among Muslims is also observed in Khorezm. At major holy places, such Sultan Buva and Ulli Pir, one always finds people spending a night or more there, in order

> to subject themselves to the force of the place more intensely and order to dream, considering dreaming a state where the *ruh* (spirit) is able to leave the body and move around freely, meeting an communicating with other spirits, and where a human being with clean heart may receive messages from God and his *avliyo* (Louw 2007: 58).

According to a widely held belief, the spirit of the saint associated with the shrine will reveal itself to the visitors in a dream and give them advice or a sign as how to lead their life. As will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter about religious healing, it is customary for healers to stay at a particular shrine overnight, in order to receive the consecration of their profession by the saint – the one who initially called upon them to become a healer – in a dream. Similarly, every year healers spend a couple of days at the shrine of 'their' saint with the aim of renewing their healing power through dream inspiration. This kind of *ziyorat* fits into Morinis' category of 'initiatory pilgrimage' which 'have as their purpose the transformation of the status of participants. Important here is the 'journey' that a seeker undertakes to work a transformation of self' (Morinis 1992: 11).

Often *ziyorat*s are made without any religious intention whatsoever, but rather simply for tourism or cultural experience. Sometimes, I encountered visitors at the shrine of Pakhlavan Mahmud in Khiva who came 'to learn something about architecture and history'. Moreover, people often gather at shrines like Sultan Buva or Ulli Pir for group outings because there are facilities for preparing food and enough space for them to eat together. This was the case with a group of elderly men, all of them formerly *kolkhoz* leaders, whom I met at the Ulli Pir sanctuary. They explained that they had been meeting every year to spend the whole day eating and talking. 'It is a marvellous place for an outing,' one of them said. 'It is quiet and peaceful. And at the same time, to come here brings us *savob*.' Since independence, it has become customary for university classes to make an outing to one of the holy sites in nearby Qaraqalpaqistan. However, even if these visits are undertaken for secular considerations, for the people partaking in them they still represent an act of devotion. All the students and docents I went on class

outings with to saintly shrines participated in the devotional acts typically performed at holy sites, as did the *kolkhoz* leaders mentioned above.

My friend Muhtaram told me that although as a child she had sometimes undertaken a *ziyorat* with her mother, since she had acquired knowledge of Islam she would never do this again. 'Going on *ziyorat* is idolatry (*shirk*),' she said. 'A saint cannot do anything for you. It is God alone whom one is allowed to ask for help in a calamity.' Once I accompanied Nilufar, an English language teacher from the university, on her visit to Sultan Buva in Qaraqalpaqistan. She did not want to tell me the nature of the problem she was seeking God's intervention with by making a *ziyorat* to the region's mightiest saint. Remembering Muhtaram's words, I asked if it was not sufficient simply to ask God for help. She answered: 'No, God is far too distant. You need an intermediary, an *avliyo*, who is near God and who can use his influence with God on your behalf.' While Muhtaram's view echoes the notion characteristic of Muslim fundamentalists, Nilufar's opinion generally corresponds to the mainstream Islamic view, which holds that saints help obtain the grace of God for the suppliant. This is also the approach endorsed by the state-approved religious establishment in Uzbekistan. Thus, the country's leading, officially acknowledged *ulama* support *ziyorat* on the condition that people directly address God in their prayers and not the saint. As the chief imam at the Yusuf Hamadani shrine stressed in an interview with me:

> *Ziyorat* is a great deed (*ulug' ish*), a kind of worship (*ibodat*). God, who has given the saints the ability to cure the sick, is especially near to humans at their shrines. At a holy place like this, the grace of God works in the most direct way through the saints' miracles. But praying to the saints and asking them for help, as the people do, is *shirk*, which is the most severe sin in Islam. Muslims must address God directly.

To some extent, shrine visitations in Islam are modelled on the epitome of all Muslim pilgrimages, the *haj*, the various rituals of which – such as the circumambulations and the touching of the walls of the Ka'ba, the kissing of the Black Stone, drinking the water of the sacred Zamzam-well in addition to animal sacrifice – resemble practices of local *ziyorat*s. The following description of practices typically carried out during *ziyorats* in Khorezm can be encountered in more or less similar form in all Muslim societies.[151] While similar rituals, when carried out at the Ka'ba, are part of the uncontested core of 'high' Islam, they are severely rejected as idolatry by the *ulama* when observed in respect of saints.

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[151] For detailed descriptions of *ziyorat* practices in various Muslim societies, see Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich 1969 and for Afghanistan Einzmann 1977 and Penkala-Gawęcka 1992.

## 7.4 *Ziyorat* – practices observed

Visitors approach a shrine in a respectful manner, with slow steps and making bows towards the entrance. Inside, in front of the tomb, they address the saint in the form of a silent prayer (*duo*). If they came with a particular request in mind, they include it in their prayer. Many also kiss and touch the tomb (or the portal to it) as well as the doorframe and the walls of the shrine with their hands and wipe their faces afterwards. Done with the aim of transferring the blessing power (*baraka*) from the saint to themselves, the same gestures are also performed at trees, rocks or any other object in the vicinity that are regarded as holy. Many visitors circle several times round the shrine (anticlockwise), kissing and touching its outer walls. They are careful not to turn their back to the tomb when leaving but depart backwards with bows. If there is a spring or well nearby, visitors drink from the water and often take water from it home so those at home can share in the saint's *baraka*. Those who come in the hope of a cure for illness might also take earth from under the tomb (or from somewhere else in its vicinity) to rub their face or an aching part of the body with it. These are manifestations of 'the belief in a direct influence of the saint's power radiating from the surroundings of the tombs or place where the saint had dwelled' (Penkala-Gawęcka 1992: 41). The same notion also informs the practice – particularly in the case of an illness – of spending the night near the grave. Especially in the case of rheumatism, it is held that digging oneself into the sand near to the tomb of a mighty saint promotes healing.

Sometimes, people attribute a meaning to the saint's power that appears more 'modern' to them, such as the contractor I met at the Sultan Buva shrine in summer 2004. The 42-year-old man told me that some 12 years earlier he had become ill but no doctor could help him. Although at the time he did not believe in such things, he followed the advice of a friend and came to Sultan Buva. Contrary to his misgivings, he became healthy and since that time he has continued to visit the place twice a year and spend three to four nights there, in order to renew the healing effect and avoid a relapse. 'This place possesses bio-energy (*biotok*),' he said. 'What helps the people to recover at the shrine is this *biotok* which is an attribute of the holy man resting here.' Furthermore, he insisted that the high content of *biotok* at the site has been scientifically proved with some sort of instruments. (As I will discuss in Chapter 8, similar 'modernising' explanations are also applied in reference to religious healing specialists.)

In many parts of the Muslim world, it is a popular practice to tie small pieces of cloth (*alam*) to the branches of trees and bushes or to flagpoles in

the vicinity of saintly tombs.[152] The practice is usually interpreted as a formal sign of a vow, the strips signifying 'one's prayer and wish to the saint' (Tyson 1997: 27). Snesarev, on the other hand, interprets it as 'an act establishing magical contact between the pilgrims and the object of worship' (Snesarev 2003: 206). Visitors also light small oil lamps that are placed in wall niches near the tomb or, more simply, they burn a piece of cotton that they carry with them, in order to support their wishes. As mentioned earlier, during the Soviet era major shrines were repeatedly cleansed by the authorities of what were considered 'pagan elements', such as lamps, candles, and votive strips. These objects are also criticised by the representatives of today's 'official' Islam, as well as the kissing and touching of objects connected with the saint. At many major shrines in Uzbekistan, signboards warn visitors against practices at the graves based on the belief that the spirit of the saint may respond to their requests as being 'un-Islamic'. Whether or not these warnings have had a profound affect on people's beliefs, it appears that they have influenced visitors' behaviour, such that it has become somewhat more 'rational' in outlook. In Khorezm, strings and clothes are only, if at all, found tied to trees or other objects in the vicinity of less frequented shrines or, as in the case of the Sultan Buva site, at an adjacent small shrine which is ascribed to the saint's servant and is located some 200 metres away from the main mausoleum.

People undertaking a *ziyorat* usually bring some bread or fried cake (*bo'g'irsoq*) with them and hand it over to the shrine's guardian (*shix*), who sits next to the tomb. The *shix* recites a prayer (*duo*) on behalf of the visitors to reiterate their requests and help direct them to God and, in return, visitors leave money or, in the case of a particularly urgent request, a cock or a hen with the *shix*. Such offerings are called *sadaqa*, the same term that is used for an animal sacrifice offered to the saint in fulfilment of a vow. As Michael Lambek notes in respect of offerings among Muslims in Mayotte, the *sadaqa* is 'supposed to enhance the process of communication, to clear the channels. The better disposed your intermediary is to you, the greater the chance his entreaties will have in reaching their destination' (Lambek 1993: 108).

While the term *sadaqa* designates all kind of offerings, both cash and in kind, the more common term used in reference to the offering of a meal at shrines is *hudo yo'li* ('the path of God'). A *hudo yo'li* is usually given in the fulfilment of a previous vow for the case of the successful outcome of a request pronounced at the shrine such as the recovery from an illness, the safe return of a son from military service, or a university graduation. If a request has been made in the name of a particular saint, the petitioner brings

[152] Tyson called attention to the connection of the term *alam*, used in the same sense also among the Turkmen he studied, with the Arabic word for 'banner' (Tyson 1997: 27).

the animal (usually a sheep) promised as offering to his shrine where it is slaughtered and prepared for a meal. The standard requisites of greater shrines include a cooking area equipped with hearth, cooking caldrons, and all necessary utensils. A part of the sacrificial meal is consumed in the company of relatives and friends, invited by the donor. The remaining part (typically about one third of the meal) is distributed among the visitors to the shrine, while the skin of the slaughtered animal remains with the shrine as an additional *sadaqa*.

Plate 16. Preparing sacrificial food at the shrine of Jalil Buva, Qaraqalpaqistan.

People often give *sadaqa* without even entering a shrine. Every time I crossed the provincial boarder to Qaraqalpaqistan on a bus taking pilgrims to Sultan Buva, one of the solders at the check-point gave some money to the driver, asking him to give it on behalf of him to a *shix* or a mullah at the shrine. Similarly, drivers passing a big shrine often stop in order to put money in the donation boxes set out along the way by the shrine's administration. As a rule, such offerings are not connected with a request; rather, they are thought of as 'a means to accumulate merit, which on an individual's personal balance sheet would appear on the credit side or as paying off one's accumulated moral debts' (Bellér-Hann 2006: 351).

The growth in the popularity of *ziyorat* has corresponded with a significant influx of money through donations, particularly in the case of major shrines, which provides considerable financial resources for both the administration and the personnel of the holy sites. The following example about the Ulli Pir sanctuary discusses how, aside from ideological differences about

the 'correct' conduct of *ziyorat*, disputes over the disposal of the lucrative sources of income influence the running of affaires at a shrine.

## 7.5 Contested meanings, contested resources – the case of Ulli Pir

The holy site referred to in popular usage simply as Ulli ('great') Pir, is located some 25 kilometres from Urganch, on both sides of the main road to Shovot.[153] Situated in a small cemetery, Soviet sources describe the shrine as the imputed gravesite of the famous Islamic mystic, Yusuf Hamadani; this is now also the official name of the shrine. However, when asked about the identity of Ulli Pir, local people usually suggest that he is one and the same as another great medieval Sufi, Abdulkadir Gilani, better known to the people by his honorific title G'ausul A'zam ('Great Help'), though most visitors to the shrine are not aware of his Sufi background. What matters for them is the miraculous power ascribed to the saint, who is usually described as the 'Beloved of God' (*hudoning ma'shuqasi*) and the one who has brought seven dead people back to life. In the words of an aged mullah from a village in the vicinity of the shrine: 'God loves him so much that he fulfils all of his wishes.' According to popular belief, before visiting Gilani's shrine supplicants should pay respect to the graves of his two servants in a small cemetery on the opposite side of the road. People explain this custom with reference to the last testament of the saint, who apparently promised to fulfil people's wishes on condition that they visit his servants' graves before coming to him.

Ulli Pir has a special reputation for healing ailments ascribed to spirit possession (*jillilik*). Relatives bring their family members suffering from this kind of disorder to the site where they are chained and shut up in a dark shack (*chillahona*), and have to stay for 40 days. Local belief holds that when this period expires the sick person recovers and the chains drop off by themselves.[154] This practice persisted throughout the Soviet era, in spite of the official ban (Snesarev 2003: 39). Even when the authorities closed down the site – during the 1930s, 1970s and early 1980s – people who showed symptoms of *jillilik* were chained to a tree outside the shrine's territory. People told me that apart from this kind of case, the shrine was rarely visited. One elderly inhabitant of the adjacent village of Beshmergan said emphatically: 'There were actually only a few old women coming here.'

[153] Most of the ethnographic material used in this chapter has appeared in Kehl-Bodrogi 2006.

[154] I was told that in 2003, a young man died during his enforced closure at Ulli Pir. The imam working at the site, who confirmed this information, did not allow me to have a look at the *chillahona* arguing that as a European, I could be shocked by the room's outlook and even protest against the prevailing conditions there as a violation of human rights.

There was apparently a slight revitalisation of *ziyorat* activities at the site in the early 1980s, when the dilapidated adobe shrine was replaced by a brick structure built by the collective effort (*hashar*) of some inhabitants of the surrounding villages. As part of the countrywide anti-Islamic campaign mentioned earlier in this book, the local media sharply attacked the revived 'superstitious' activities at the shrine, attributing them to the harmful influence of some 'uneducated' and 'greedy' mullahs. For example, in the newspaper *Xorazm haqiqati*, the head of the local branch of the Republican House of Scientific Atheism did his best to prove that the since Yusuf Hamadani had never been in Khorezm, there is no foundation for venerating him at the shrine:

> In the cemetery (*qabriston*) of Yusuf Hamadani in the district of Shovot one can from time to time meet people of all ages and professions who believe in the holiness of this site. Speaking to them [they explain that] sick people become cured there, barren women become fertile, and the unhappy gain happiness. (…) One wonders about all the gifts (*sovg'a salom*) that these people, cheated by mullahs who take refuge here, bring [to the site]. (…) In fact, nothing that visitors say about the grave of Yusuf Hamadani is true. (…) He has never been to this place, neither is he buried here but in Meri in the Turkmen SSR. In light of this, why is the place regarded as holy (*muqaddas*) at all? (…) Some pious people who have renovated the shrine in order to earn money lie to the visitors and let them believe in the holiness of the site (Ibrahimov 1984: 3).

However, independence brought about a radical change in the authorities' attitude to the site. In January 1994, the governor of the province of Khorezm initiated a campaign to collect donations for the restoration and enlargement of the complex. The campaign focused exclusively on Yusuf Hamadani, while Abdulkadir Gilani, the saint who is the actual object of popular veneration, was not mentioned at all. This time, overtly contradicting its earlier position, *Xorazm haqiqati* vigorously promoted the campaign, week after week publishing the names of donors, and emphasising Yusuf Hamadani's importance for the religious and cultural identity of the Khorezmians. Officially, the question of the empty grave never again came up. To the contrary, I was told that a university teacher lost his post because he questioned on local television the logic of the on-going restorations, pointing out that there is already a shrine to Hamadani in Turkmenistan. The teacher's case, however, was an exception. In the midst of the general upheaval, the issue of tradition took on crucial importance and was repeatedly, publicly invoked by politicians, academics and members of the new religious establishment. Thus, the rector of Urganch University made the case for Yusuf

Hamadani in a newspaper article: 'We owe it to our forefathers and our children to care for the holy places that our people have always venerated' (Sadullaev 1994: 2). In addition, members of the *ulama* also publicly declared *ziyorat* to be legitimate from the viewpoint of religion: 'All over the Republic, the shrine (*ziyoratgoh*) of Yusuf Hamadani is regarded as a holy place. The number of visitors is increasing from month to month. This is good and must remain like this, since such visits are our holy duty vis-à-vis our ancestors' (Sharifboy 1994: 4).

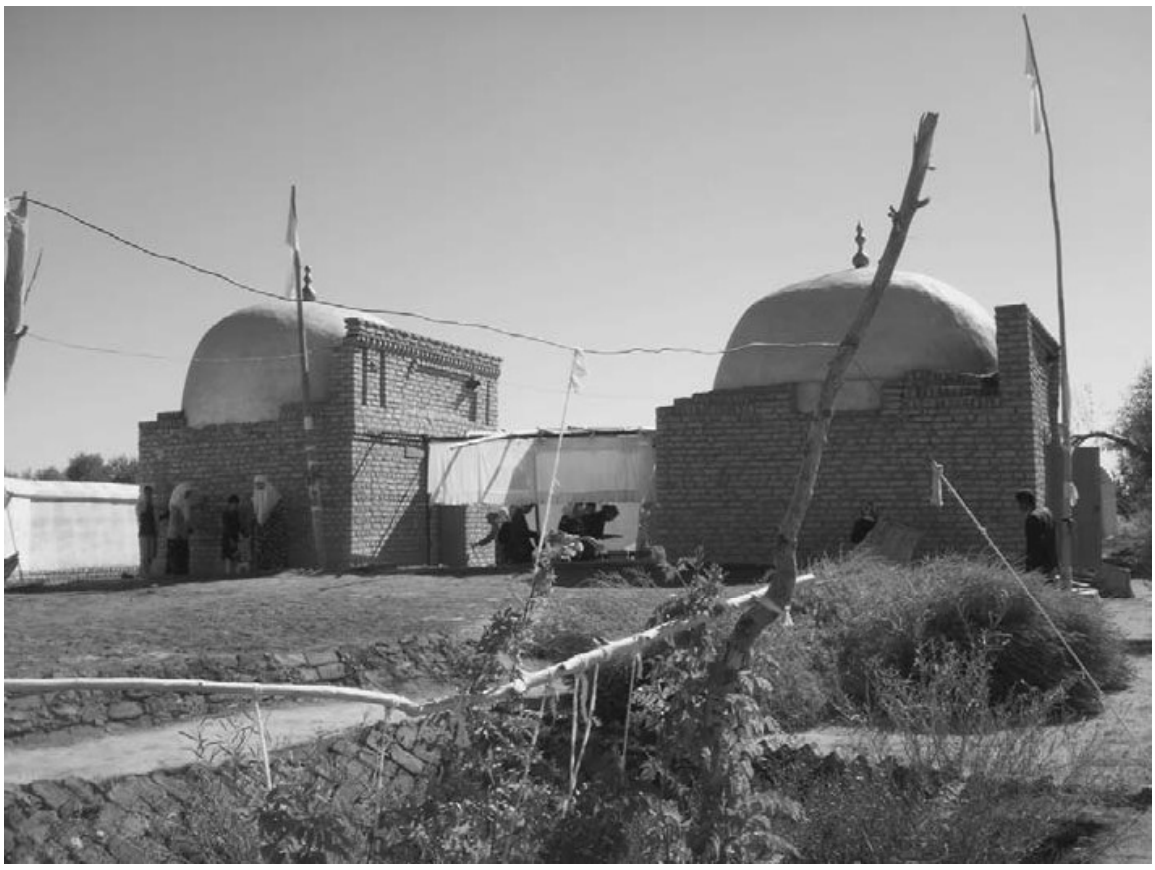

Plate 17. The shrines of the servants of Ulli Pir.

### *7.5.1 The re-opening of the shrine*

Following the restoration of the shrine, the site was reopened as the 'Yusuf Hamadani Pilgrimage Centre' (*Yusuf Hamadoniy Ziyoratgohi*), and was administered by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU). As a result of the reconstruction work, the outward appearance of the sanctuary changed completely. Whereas formerly it consisted of a plain un-domed shrine and some simple buildings where visitors could gather, the site was turned into the largest shrine complex anywhere in the province. The originally plain structure of the shrine was replaced by a large, marble-clad building with four domes rising over it. It now boasts an entrance hall big enough to ac-

commodate 30 to 40 people and separate chambers for three saintly tombs encased with beautifully ornamented tiles. While two of the tombs are attributed to Yusuf Hamadani and Abdulkadir Gilani respectively, the identity of the third saint remains dubiously uncertain. While visitors could not shed any light on the matter, the imam suggested that the third tomb might be that of Sayid Ali Hamadani, whom he said was a brother of Yusuf Hamadani. It seems reasonable to speculate that when the shrine was being rebuilt and enlarged a third grave was incorporated into it, because even numbers are considered unlucky in Islam. Moreover, a mosque large enough to accommodate a thousand people or more has been erected in the immediate vicinity of the shrine, which clearly demonstrates the new regime's acknowledgement of shrines and *ziyorat* activities as integral parts of Islam, no less than mosques and mosque-based religious practices. In addition to the overall structural changes to the shrine, the rooms where visitors can gather, even in the cold season, to consume the sacrificial meals have been renovated and the entire area has been lavishly replanted. Only the *chillahona*, a small mud hut located in a remote corner of the site, has been left untouched.

Furthermore, to provide suitable accommodation for those visitors who hope to be cured of an illness and, therefore, want to spend a longer time at the site, a guesthouse that can accommodate 300 people has been attached to the complex. Additional buildings include a small museum and a World War II memorial. The museum and the guesthouse are administered by the local branch of the state-run Centre for Morals and Enlightenment (*Ma'naviyat va Ma'rifat Markazi*). Its director explained that, theoretically, in addition to administering the museum, the Centre has responsibility for 'spreading the culture of Yusuf Hamadani' to the wider public. In point of fact, I observed that the 'awareness training' seems to be restricted to a small exhibition of framed posters promulgating nationalist messages while the director, a bone-setter of fame throughout the province, concentrates his energy of treating his many clients in his office, all with the approval of the authorities. The museum itself consists of nothing more than a set of posters portraying a number of personalities who once lived in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan and became known in the Islamic world by virtue of their work in the fields of medicine, philosophy and theology. A separate poster unmistakably proclaims the real mission statement of the gallery, explaining that a 'country with a great past is looking forward to an equally great future.' One placard displays the text of the national anthem, while others elaborate on the symbolic character of the state banner and show pictures of the president, new state buildings, factories, laboratories, and the like. Without making any reference to the holy site itself, the exhibition clearly intends to promote state ideology and to strengthen national identity

by making it possible for people to identify with a commonly inhabited meaningful past. By attaching state institutions and secular symbols to it, the state demonstrates its primary aim of defining the holy site as a valuable element of national history.

Plate 18. The new entrance gate to the Ulli Pir shrine complex with the mosque in the background.

Since its re-opening, the shrine complex has been administered by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU). In 2004, 11 employees of the MBU were working at the shrine: an imam and his substitute, four mullahs, a *muazzin* (a person who calls Muslims to prayer), a bookkeeper, a gardener, a cook, and a butcher. The imams, besides being responsible for the shrine and the mosque, carry out religious services for the nearby villages. The mullahs' main duties are reading verses of the Qur'an and providing the visitors with blessings (*potya*) in the way described above. The bookkeeper supervises the expenditure of the considerable amount of money resulting from the donations. According to the imam, part of the money has to be paid over to the MBU, while the rest is kept to pay the employees and for maintenance costs of the shrine, and charitable purposes. An incidental source of income derives from the skins of the sheep brought to the shrine by the pilgrims in the fulfilment of a vow. The butcher is responsible for the correct Islamic

slaughtering of the sacrificial animals and the cook supervises the preparation and distribution of the food prepared.

When starting the donation campaign in 1994, the officials argued that the restoration of the shrine was intended to meet 'the demand of the people'. However, it is apparent that a simple renovation of the site would have been sufficient to gratify the needs of the visitors whose number did not initially show a dramatic increase. Information indicates that pilgrimage to the site only began to increase after the new site was completed; even at the time of my field research, the facilities were under-utilised. Thus, the guesthouse that can accommodate 300 pilgrims, never houses more than 20 guests a week, at any given time. The mosque also appears to be larger than necessary as, according to the imam, the number of those attending Friday prayers only exceeds 200 in the month of Ramadan. These circumstances indicate that the great upsurge of *ziyorat* to Ulli Pir since 2004 is as much the result of the massive publicity campaign as it is of the people's increased interest in religion. As an interlocutor of mine recalled: 'In those years, our politicians blatantly propagated *ziyorat* to Yusuf Hamadani.'

Undoubtedly, the provincial government's positive attitude towards the shrine adheres closely to the official policy of complying with people's spirituality in a way that does not endanger the state. However, this is not the whole story. I maintain that the official drive to turn a minor shrine into a large pilgrimage centre emanates primarily from the desire to create a spatial focus of regional identity which, regarding its symbolic meaning for the nationalist discourse, is able to compete with major shrines in other provinces. In this respect, the official emphasis on Yusuf Hamadani takes on particular significance. Obviously what makes him appear important in the eyes of the provincial government is his reputation as the master of the most celebrated Islamic mystic of Uzbekistan, the Naqshbandi shaykh Abdulkhaliq Ghijduvani. The Naqshbandi shaykh's shrine near Bukhara was restored at the instigation of president Karimov himself, who attended the formal state celebration in 2003 of the 900th anniversary of Ghudjawani's death. Given the importance of the Sufi tradition in general and the Naqshbandiyya in particular to the nationalist ideology, the provincial authorities may have hoped to enhance Khorezm's importance in the national arena by promoting a shrine attributed to Ghijduvani's master.

### *7.5.2 How to perform* ziyorat *and where to put the money?*

Entering the shrine through the main gate, one is immediately struck by a large signboard put up by the shrine's administration. In keeping with the position of the MBU, it proclaims that visiting graves is *sunna*, a practice initiated by the Prophet himself, and it enjoins visitors to come to the site in

a state of ritual purity (*tahoratli*) and to salute the spirits of 'our beloved *pir*s (*aziz pirlar*) who walked on the path of God and who had passed this place.' At the same time, the signboard warns people against certain practices at the graves which are based on the belief that the spirit of the saints responds to requests for assistance and points out that the graves of the saints are not to be the object of worship: 'You may recite the Qur'an for the souls of these beloved ones (*azizlar*), but you must do this without touching the graves and rubbing your face on them. If you have a problem, ask God by saying a prayer for the sake of the loved ones who had passed this place.' The last paragraph enjoins visitors not to 'fling around their donations everywhere' but to put them in the alms boxes (*xayriya-ehsan kutisi*) that are at the shrine for this purpose, ensuring that the donations will be used in a way that pleases God.

This last and rather cryptic injunction makes it clear that the MBU – or, more precisely, its local representative, the imam – lays claim to all donations that people leave at the site, whether in cash or in kind. 'Flinging around donations everywhere' is a circumscription of 'giving donations to unauthorised people', a coded reference by the imams to the shaykhs (*shix*).[155] The *shix*s, the traditional guardians of holy sites, form a kind of unofficial staff at the shrine. There are regularly two or three of them present, but on Wednesdays, when the shrine is flooded with visitors, their number more than triples.[156], The *shix*s, whether men or women, regard themselves as the true guardians of the site having inherited the title and function by virtue of their lineage. During the Soviet period when they were banned from the shrine, they or their parents provided the pilgrims with accommodation and blessings at their homes in the nearby village of Beshmergan. Then, at the end of the 1980s when they had either reached the age of retirement or were otherwise unemployed, the *shix*s returned to the shrine. One of them, the elderly O'ro'zvoy, explained:

> Being a *shix* has a long tradition in our family. My great-grandfather got the permission of the Khan of Khiva to serve here as a *shix*, and he passed down this function to his children and grandchildren. I have been keeping an eye on the graves since the early 1970s, as my father did before me. I came secretly and cleared the area of weeds, as well as I could. Since 1989, I have been sitting at this place every

[155] Not to be confused with the holy group of the *shix*s mentioned in Chapter 3.

[156] Wednesday is the day on which visits of the shrine are considered to be most convenient. It is the day when, according to the widely held belief, Ulli Pir's spirit appears at the site in order to learn who is in need for his assistance. While on the other days of the week the shrine makes a very quite appearance with only a few visitors coming, on Wednesdays the site fills with hundreds of people.

> day serving the visitors. I do this for nothing other than merit (*savob*).

When responsibility for the shrine was handed over to the MBU in 1994, the *shix*s were initially integrated into the new official structure of the site and received a certain share of the donations. However, before long this regulation was abrogated and the *shix*s were phased out in favour of the mullahs who enjoyed the imam's confidence.[157] Rumour has it that the imams allocated the posts of the mullahs on the basis of bribery, 500 US dollars being the usual sum. In 2000, the *shix*s were completely expelled from the shrine enclosure and, henceforth, were only allowed to sit by the side of the road. Even there, they still had to compete with the mullahs who stationed themselves at the most frequented stops in the vicinity of the shrine, vying for yet more of the pilgrims' favour. The *shix*s were required to relinquish all the money given to them by the visitors, putting it into the ubiquitous alms boxes located at places of the mullahs. These boxes are sealed with a paper strip with the warning that they are only to be opened by a representative of the MBU. In order to distinguish the mullahs from the *shix*s, the imam equipped them with small plates. For the visitors, however, it does not actually matter whether the person who recites prayers for them is authorised by the imam or not and, so, they continue to give donations to whoever, in spite of the warnings. The *shix*s feel themselves under constant pressure to give up their earnings, without getting – as the mullahs do – any share of the considerable income of the shrine. Thus, not only have the *shix*s had to accept a reduction in their already meagre earnings but also their traditional authority as the guardians of the shrine has been challenged.

The situation caused considerable tension at the site, which reached its peak shortly before my second visit to Khorezm in summer 2004. Accused of womanising in the vicinity of the holy site, the imam was beaten up by the *shix*s who also destroyed his car. To settle the scandal and restore order, the MBU replaced the imam. The new imam, a man in his mid-30s with a profoundly religious education, blamed the *shix*s for the tension. According to what he told me, the *shix*s simply wanted to get rid of the former imam and so they set a trap for him by hiring some women to seduce him. According to the new imam's version, the *shix*s wanted to take revenge on his predecessor because of his efforts to cleanse the shrine of un-Islamic activities, corruption and other criminal activities:

> Before that imam came to the shrine, there were intolerable conditions here. The *shix*s took money from the donation boxes and even stole sacrificial animals. My predecessor thus tried to keep them

[157] Mullahs are not required to have received a religious education. It is completely sufficient when they can recite fragments of the Qur'an.

> away from the visitors in order to protect them, not only from the criminal machinations of the *shix*s but also from being affected by their religious ignorance. The *shix*s behave as if they were the owners of the shrine, but they do nothing other than keep their hands out for donations. They do not have the slightest knowledge of Islam, and they poison the minds of the visitors with all kinds of superstition.

In the short time since he was appointed to the shrine, the new imam has made several appeals to the authorities, including the MBU and the district government, to keep the *shix*s out of the shrine because of what he sees as their harmful influence on the visitors and their allegedly criminal activities. He also protested against the presence of diviners at the shrine and demanded their removal, but the answer he got was 'not to interfere with the activities at the holy site' since it is 'the task of God to punish the sinners.' This response clearly reflects the official policy of leaving non-canonical religious practices untouched, so as not to encourage a more Shari'a oriented religiosity, which even the official religious establishment, represented by the MBU, would be obliged to obey.

There is little chance of the imam imposing his understanding of Islam on the visitors because they hardly ever attend the mosque, let alone listen to his sermons. In spring 2005, the imam himself started sitting in front of the tombs, particularly on Wednesday, to recite long Qur'anic verses before giving blessings (*potya*) to the pilgrims, a task usually performed by minor religious specialists. The imam justified this innovation by saying that 'at least on this occasion, the visitors would have to listen to the holy words of the Qur'an, which otherwise they do not do.' In addition, he hoped to influence directly the pilgrims' behaviour by his own example and, to some extent, he does. When he is present the visitors usually refrain from kissing and touching the fences and the walls of the shrine in order not to incur his censure. For their part, however, the *shix*s as well as some secular-minded outsiders suspected that the imam was just trying to get more direct control over the donations. One critic of the ongoing activities at the shrine claimed: 'For the imams, Ulli Pir is a goldmine for purely personal use.'

As for the imam, his position at the site is highly ambivalent. By virtue of his training in Islamic law and theology, he finds himself in opposition to both the pilgrims and the traditional religious authorities. However, as an employee of the MBU and thus, by extension, of the state, he is obliged to represent a moderate type of Islam which legitimates local traditions. His failure to expel *shix*s and soothsayers from the shrine demonstrates that the authorities expect him to tolerate activities which otherwise he would con-

demn as ‘superstitious’, because they play an important part in the official nationalist discourse invoking the tradition of the Uzbek people.

On the one hand, the tension between the religious personnel at the shrine seems to result from the mutual accusations of the parties involved, all of whom are struggling for scarce economic resources at a time of increasing economic collapse and uncertainty. On the other hand, the rivalry between the imams and the *shix*s echoes ideological differences of the interpretation of Islam and exposes the more general conflict between two kinds of religious authority, one legitimated by descent and the other by learning.


Plate 19. A man putting money into the donation box in front of the Ulli Pir shrine complex.

## 7.6 Shrines as healing sites – the case of a new saint

In Khorezm, as elsewhere in Central Asia, there is a particularly strong connection between shrines and healing. As indicated by earlier examples, people primarily undertake a *ziyorat* in the conviction that the saint associated with the shrine can cure illnesses, especially those ascribed to the effect of the evil eye, magic, or spirit possession. Besides this, it is believed that the consecration to the practice of healer comes in one’s sleep; when an individual agrees to accept the calling of a given saint and become a healer,

he or she goes to the saint's tomb and spends the night there (see Chapter 8). In the past, shrines were also often used as healing sites where spirit exorcisms were undertaken by a specialist.[158] Snesarev witnessed such a séance at a shrine in the district of Honqa in the first half of the 20th century (Snesarev 1976: 86-87). In later times, however, spirit exorcism rituals have largely withdrawn into the domestic sphere, not least because of increased governmental control and suppression. In the following chapter I discuss how the traditional modes of spirit exorcism (referred to as 'shamanism' in the literature) witnessed a slight revitalisation after independence but did not re-enter the public sphere of the shrines. Nowadays, if healers practice at all at shrines, they restrict their activities to the mumbling of a short prayer over the patient and laying their hands on him or her. However, there is a notable exception to this rule: the healer To'xtavoy practices at a newly recovered saintly shrine near the small township Ellikala in Qaraqalpaqistan, some 40 km from Urganch. Thanks to his 'discoverer' To'xtavoy, a holy site devoted to a saint named Gachirmas Buva, developed in the space of a few years into a large cure centre visited by sick people from all over Uzbekistan.

I first heard about To'xtavoy from a young schoolteacher from Honqa, who consults the healer on a regular basis to treat her chronic headaches. The story she told me about the creation of the shrine embodies all the traditional elements of legends that relate to the emergence of shrines and, at the same time, it illustrates people's perception about an individual's endowment with healing power:

> It was at the beginning of the 1990s, in the first years of independence. To'xtavoy used to be a chauffeur at that time. One evening he got stuck with his truck in the sand in front of the cemetery of his home village. Although he had assistance, he couldn't move the truck, not even with a tractor. Finally To'xtavoy went home and lay down. At night he had a dream in which the saint Gachirmas Buva, who was buried in the cemetery in front of which he had had his accident, appeared to him and lamented the condition of his grave. He said: 'While Pakhlavan Mahmut has a beautiful mausoleum in Khiva and is visited by a lot of people, nobody cares for me. My grave is made of clay and is dilapidated. Rain patters on me and in winter I am covered with snow. You must build a domed grave for me.' To'xtavoy promised the saint to do what he desired and in turn, Gachirmas Buva gave healing powers to him. The next day he went to his car and was able to drive it out of the sand without any problem.

[158] For examples from Muslim Xinjiang, see Bellér-Hann 2006: 408.

Later To'xtavoy, a man in his late 50s, gave me a slightly different version of the restoration of the grave and his becoming a healer. He explained that in 1994 the Prophet Ibrahim appeared to him in a dream pointing to the site where Gachirmas Buva had been buried. He began to dig and soon the saint's bones appeared. Impressed by this miracle, he swore to erect a shrine for the saint as soon as he could afford to do so. In his conversation with me, To'xtavoy claimed to be a direct descendent of the saint in the 8th generation and stressed that although he had always known about his healing power, he did not make it public during the 'time of the Russians,' because *traditional healers* used to be harassed by the authorities. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, he had nothing to fear. Soon after the recovery of the grave, he publicly disclosed his healing power. He explained:

> One day I happened to be at the gravesite when some men came along. One of them could only walk with difficulty, since he had a bad foot. I hit him three times on his shoulder and, immediately, he could walk normally again. Shortly after this occurrence, I cured three men who became mad after they pulled a drowned woman out of the river. These events became known and people started coming to me.

For the first two years, To'xtavoy performed his healings outdoors and he earned enough money to fulfill his promise. He put his son, an architect, in charge of the construction of a large domed shrine, richly decorated with marble. In 1998 a large mosque was added to the complex. In view of the constantly increasing number of his patients, he also constructed a large building nearby, where he held his healing séances (*seans*) when I first visited the site in 2004. In addition, to accommodate the sick, three buildings with about 150 beds were built. With its trees, well-tended flowerbeds, shady benches, and large pond, the complex gives the impression of a health resort which, judged by regional standards, can almost be called luxurious. In 2005, at the time of my second visit, a huge free-standing gate had been erected on the sandy road leading to the site, some 200 meters away from the rest of the buildings. One year later, the road had been covered with asphalt and there was also a new, paved parking place for cars and buses at the entrance to the site complex. Since the building where To'xtavoy used to hold his séances was no longer large enough to host all the sick, craftsmen were constructing an even bigger one. All the craftsmen and their helpers were former patients of To'xtavoy and worked there voluntarily, in gratitude for having been successfully healed by him.

Plate 20. The shrine of Gachirmas Buva.

Although the inhabitants of the nearby village remembered the existence of a saintly grave at the abandoned cemetery in their vicinity, until its rediscovery by To'xtavoy it had not enjoyed any particular veneration. Nobody remembers the saint's deeds or has any idea about the origin of his curious name, Gachirmas Buva, 'the saint who does not forgive.' Nonetheless, as he is now believed to work miracles again, on their route to the shrine of Sultan Buva, located some 30 kilometres to the north, pilgrims now stop at Gachirmas Buva as well. Although some people visit the shrine without taking advantage of the healing services provided there, most do partake in the healing rituals that To'xtavoy performs twice a day. After paying their respects to the saint and performing the Islamic purification ritual (*tahorat*) in an adjacent building, the visitors enter the séance hall and take a seat on the floor, waiting for the healer. To'xtavoy enjoins his patients to come *tahoratli* to the séances, and, thereby, consciously underlines his claim that his healing performances are purely Islamic.

At weekends, between 200 and 300 hundred sick people, often accompanied by friends and relatives, take part in the ritual, which consists of two major parts. Sitting on the floor behind a low table in front of his patients, To'xtavoy begins the healing séance with the rhythmical uttering of recitations from the Qur'an, and continues doing this for an hour. While most of the participants listen motionless to the recitations, some people fall asleep or start crying. When the recitation is over, To'xtavoy approaches his patients and begins to treat them one by one. Sometimes he exchanges a few

words with a patient. In most of cases, however, he just lays his right hand on the patient's head while making some indiscernible utterances. Then he runs his hands along both sides of the patient's body as if he were trying to extract something and he finally gives the sick person a strong blow on the back. When the crowd is too large, To'xtavoy is assisted by his wife and one of his sons. This was the case at the time of my first visit, when nearly 300 hundred people were present.

Occasionally, To'xtavoy explains the origin of the illness to the patient, but the ritual usually proceeds without much personal conversation. During the healing rituals I observed, To'xtavoy repeatedly announced that all illnesses are caused by magic and warned participants against engaging in magical practices, stressing that these are considered sinful according to the teachings of Islam. While all other healers I spoke to declared some illnesses beyond their competence, To'xtavoy claimed to have all-embracing powers to cure every kind of ailment, including cancer and drug addiction. Indeed, patients suffering from a wide range of conditions, ranging from cancer to rheumatism, breathlessness, headache, hypothyrosis and the like congregate at the shrine. One man declared that when he was first brought to To'xtavoy he had been unable to move: 'From séance to séance I felt better. Now I can walk again, albeit with a crutch.' All patients I talked to expressed great satisfaction with their treatment at the shrine, as the statement of a retired schoolteacher exemplifies:

> I had been suffering from headaches for more than 20 years. During the time of the Russians, I was sent to a hospital in Moscow, but even there, nobody could really help me. Since I have come here, I feel much better. I could even stop taking medicine.

Maryam visits To'xtavoy twice a year, spending two or three weeks at the shrine each time. Nilufar, a university lecturer and mother of two small children who complains of heart problems and nervousness, visits the site at irregular intervals, spending just a few days there. Women make up roughly 70 percent of the patients at the shrine and, for many of them, staying at a place like this is the only socially acceptable way to escape, for a short time, the sorrow and trouble at home. For most, it is also the only affordable outlet, because the centre asks for no more than 'what comes from a person's heart' in exchange for its services. Some give their donations directly to To'xtavoy immediately at the end of a séance or, if they spend a longer time there, at the end of the cure. In most cases, however, people put money in the numerous boxes they find, as at all other major holy sites, in great number all over the complex. People also throw packets of money into the alcove where the tomb structure is located; every time I visited the shrine, the place in front of the tomb was completely covered with bills.

Since the shrine complex is an entirely privately run 'enterprise', there seems to be no conflict about how the money is used. Members of To'xtavoy's family occupy all the lucrative posts the shrine has to offer: one son performs the task of the mullah in front of the tomb while his wife and daughters supervise the kitchen which provides meals twice a day for those staying at the site. Visitors and patients repeatedly called my attention to the lavishness of the site, which confirms, for them, the healer's sincere use of the donations. One of my interlocutors, a joiner from Khiva, said: 'Unlike the mullahs working at shrines, To'xtavoy doesn't put the money in his pocket. All these buildings you can see, the shrine, the mosque, the hospital, the gate, and everything else, he has had them made from what the patients left here as *sadaqa*.' To'xtavoy even donated a lavish marble mosque for another holy place, the popular shrine of Narinjon Buva, which is located a few kilometres away at the edge of a huge cemetery. By doing this, he further augmented his reputation as a good Muslim.

As indicated by the narrative about how he came to be a healer, some people believe that he was legitimised by the will of a saint. Most people I talked to were convinced that it is the saint who works through To'xtavoy; the very fact that he practices at a saintly shrine, which is thought to possess healing powers *per se*, strengthens this effect. For others, however, To'xtavoy's legitimacy derives from his use of practices regarded as lawful from the viewpoint of Islam. Although the healer presents himself as being a descendent of the saint and, therefore, as being endowed with divine power (*ilohiy guch*), during the performances he appeals neither to the saint nor to any kind of spirits. The fact that the séances consist only of Qur'anic recitations and the laying on of hands also allows individuals – who otherwise tend to view local Islam as incorrect – to participate in them. For these people, the attachment of a mosque to the complex and the precondition of observing the Islamic purification ritual before joining a séance prove the 'proper' Islamic character of both the site and the healing rituals.

The people address To'xtavoy simply as *ota* ('grandfather'), one of the terms also used in reference to saints. Indeed, he is considered by many as an *avliyo* in the possession of miraculous power. Once I wanted to take a photo of the shrine while standing outside the complex in the parking area. A group of men standing around warned me: 'You can not take a picture here. It does not work, because of the *ota*'s miraculous power (*karomat*). You will not see anything; the picture will be just black.' Gulbahor, the pious woman in *hijob* whom I introduced in Chapter 4, categorically called To'xtavoy an *avliyo*. We were speaking about healers curing with the help of spirits. When she condemned this kind of healer as being not 'true' Muslims, I asked her about To'xtavoy. I quote this part of our discussion from my notes:

G.: To'xtavoy is completely different. He is an *avliyo*.
K.: What makes a person an *avliyo*?
G.: An *avliyo* is somebody who asks God to do a favour for the people, for all people.
K.: What about performing miracles? Is it not necessary?
G.: But yes, of course! To'xtavoy-*ota* has performed a lot of miracles. I witnessed some of them with my own eyes. He made terminally ill people healthy. Once a bus brought dozens of cancer patients from Tashkent to him. After only two weeks, they left completely recovered. To'xtavoy-*ota* has got his power from God through Gachirmas Buva who is the intermediary between him and God.

Having established a healing centre around a saintly shrine and legitimising himself by a dream encounter as well as by descent from the saint himself, To'xtavoy clearly relies on a system of meaning which is deeply rooted in local tradition. At the same time, he consciously endows the traditional healing system with an Islamic flair and a more modern outlook. His charismatic personality aside, his great success can be attributed to this combination of traditional context and modern form, which appeals to individuals with diverse needs and orientations. The case of To'xtavoy also shows that in situations of social crisis, the need for miracles and saints may emerge spontaneously and give birth to new saints who meet this demand.

Significantly, To'xtavoy enjoys an excellent reputation not only among those who rely on the services offered by traditional religious healers such as the *tabib*s and *folbin*s with whom I deal in the following chapter; even those who otherwise condemn the activities of this type of healer as un-Islamic tend, like Gulbahor, to acknowledge his capacity and regard it as legitimate from the viewpoint of Islam.

# *Chapter 8*
# Religious Healing

In the view of many Khorezmians, illness (*kasallik*) can be the result of a malfunctioning of biological processes, as well as of some kind of supernatural intervention as described in Chapter 6. According to this notion, 'natural' illnesses belong in the sphere of bio-medicine and are usually referred to as *do'xtirilik* ('the matter of doctors') while, on the other hand, it is believed that ailments caused by supernatural agencies can only be cured by spiritual means. Those who think they may be suffering from an evil eye attack, the curse of someone who is envious, or the effects of an unintended encounter with a malevolent spirit visit a saintly tomb to recover or turn to a recognised healing specialist such as a *tabib* or a *folbin* (see below). Someone who is ill usually uses both approaches, first consulting a religious healer and then visiting a shrine, or vice versa.

I owe my first encounter with religious healing in Khorezm to Qizilit, the reddish-brown mongrel of my village host family. One evening soon after my arrival in the village, as I was entering the courtyard it jumped at me and bit me in the calf. My cry alarmed my host, a docent in humanities at the Urganch State University who was home for the weekend in his village. He chased away the dog and rendered first aid to me by swabbing the sore with vodka. Then, as if not convinced that this treatment was sufficient, he started to run his hand over my leg. He explained that he has divine power (*ilohiy guch*) in his hands, which he discovered some years ago, on the occasion of a visit to his brother's son who had fallen ill: 'I went to his house in order to wish him a speedy recovery. When leaving I laid my hand on his forehead. I did it rather casually, with no particular intention. But the next morning his wife told me that her husband recovered immediately after I left.' Later that evening, when my host's son, a young Tashkent-trained medical doctor arrived, my host told him to check my leg to see if further medical treatment was necessary. (It was not.) However, my host family assured me that Qizilit (the dog) was not normally aggressive and so they speculated on what could have caused his unusual behaviour. Finally, they

agreed that most probably I was the victim of magic (*dovo*) and advised me to wear an amulet (*tumor*) for the duration of my stay in Uzbekistan. 'As a foreigner you attract attention in the village. You have a camera and other expensive equipment which some people may envy you for. Since envious people can cause you harm you should protect yourself,' my host said.

The reaction of the family to my mishap with Qizilit is a good illustration of the persistence of religion-based worldviews and practices, even among highly educated members of the society and in spite of 70 years of atheist education. However, my host's recent discovery of his healing capacity points to the general increase of interest in spiritual healing that has also been observed in other parts of the former of the Soviet Union. Thus, Lindquist notes that 'magic and alternative healing practices have become pervasive and conspicuously public phenomena' in post-Soviet Russia (Lindquist 2000: 247). Moreover, interest in religious methods of dealing with illnesses and other forms of misfortune has been growing during the 1990s in Kazakhstan (Privratsky 2002: 231; Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming). The proliferation of religion-inspired healing is also reported from Kyrgyzstan, where the services of healers and clairvoyants 'are used by the widest variety of people: by businessmen eager to pave the road to success, by students wanting to know if they will pass an exam, and, of course, by people suffering from various ailments and visitations by evil spirits' (Pelkmans 2006: 1).

The aim of this chapter is to explore the current state of religious healing in Khorezm in the context of the overall societal, political and religious transformations going on since independence. When speaking about religious healing, I refer to various practices aimed at the restoration of desired states of bodily, mental, and social conditions, in which 'the skills of the healing practitioner are derived from, or operate in conjunction with, religious knowledge and performance' (Doumato 2000: 36). The increased reliance on the services of healers and the relative absence of impediment to their performance of these activities, sometimes even in public, suggest not only profound changes in the health care system but of the attitude of the new states towards religious methods of healing, many of which have been in use in the region since long before it came under Soviet dominance. Given the political embeddedness of healing, I want to begin by giving an overview of Soviet health policy in Central Asia and the effect on the health care system of the region in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

## 8.1 'Backward' healing versus modern medicine - Soviet health policy

'One of the ways in which modernity has laid claim on people's lives is through biomedicine's expansion around the globe', writes Linda Connor in her introduction to a book on modernity and biomedicine in South and Southeast Asia (Connor 2001: 3). She stresses that, in all societies under investigation, 'biomedicine has been imposed there by governments intent on their own modernist projects of 'development', implying notions of social progress and economic improvement' (Connor 2001: 7). Similarly, the emergence of Turkey as a modern nation state in the first quarter of the 20th century was closely intertwined with the development of biomedicine: 'In the realization of this new society based upon reason, rationality, and science, medicine assumed a vital position' (Dole 2004: 258). Given the globally observable significance of biomedicine for the notion of modernity, it comes as no surprise that the Soviet Union – often held up to be the 'epitome of modernity' (Ray 1997: 545) – put particular emphasis on the implementation of a biomedical health care system. In Central Asia the systematic development of public health care facilities began in the late 1920s and, in the subsequent decades, a close-knit network of clinics, hospitals, and village health centres was established which provided medical services free of charge. As a result, life expectancy in the region rose considerably, epidemic and infectious diseases that existed prior to the Bolshevik conquest diminished and the general health conditions of the population improved (Feshbach 1984: 82-84; Field 2002: 67; Michaels 2003: 69).

Paula Michaels (2003) shows in her historical account of medical policy in Central Asia in the Stalinist era that the modernisation of the health-care system was not free of ideological and political premises. On the basis of rich archive material (pertaining mainly but not exclusively to Kazakhstan), Michaels demonstrates how the Soviets used the implementation of biomedicine as one means of transmitting their ideology from the centre to the periphery. Medical propaganda was accompanied by the condemnation of indigenous healing practices as dangerous relics of a dark past clung to by people out of superstition and ignorance. Medical propaganda did not merely target indigenous healers and healing practices but was also employed as a weapon in the struggle against religion in general. Thus, particular Islamic practices, such as circumcision and fasting in the month of Ramadan, were declared to have a seriously harmful effect on the health of the population. Healers were accused of charlatanry and of acting out of pecuniary greed and, in the reign of Stalin, were severely persecuted. Although the situation

became more relaxed in subsequent decades, biomedicine remained the only officially recognized and tolerated form of health care in the Soviet Union.

While Central Asians did come to recognise the advantages of modern medicine, they did not uniformly adopt the negative valuation of traditional healing as propounded by the state. Official documents provide evidence that 'there were not a few areas in the country where the sick, instead of turning to the state's medical institutions and professionals, approached their mullas to find a cure' (Ro'i 2000: 359). Michaels quotes a survey from 1995 in which 'respondents (…) in Southern Kazakhstan region almost unanimously asserted that shamans and mullahs continued to serve the population, albeit in secret, throughout the Soviet era' (Michaels 2003: 67). In cases when biomedical treatments failed, people also turned to traditional healers in Khorezm, where according to my informants, even medical doctors sometimes advised patients to try it 'in the old way' (*eskicha*).

## 8.2 Post-Soviet developments in the domain of health care

In spite of the vast investment the Soviets made towards the implementation of modern medicine in Central Asia and elsewhere, serious shortcomings in the health care system became increasingly evident from the mid-1960s onwards. Due to the over-centralised command structure, it was difficult to make rapid adjustments to new problems – caused, for example, by increasing environmental pollution – and there was also a permanent shortage of equipment and drug supplies (Feshbach 1984 and Field 1990, 2002). By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the health care system was in need of reform and restructuring. However, for various reasons none of the governments of the newly independent Central Asian states took effective measures to improve the situation. Indeed, medical care in the region has suffered further deterioration and Uzbekistan was no exception. Here too, although the health care delivery system set up by the Soviets remained untouched, the infrastructure and quality of service was deteriorating the same as the quality of medical training.

During my research, I became all too aware of the alarmingly poor condition of the health care system in Khorezm where, due to the ecological crises the overall physical condition of the population is particularly poor in comparison to the rest of Uzbekistan and Central Asia. As a result of decades of wanton use of chemicals on the cotton fields, the groundwater supply is highly contaminated, while water treatment facilities are either totally lacking or inadequate. The effects of the ecological disaster documented for the Aral Sea region, such as 'high infant mortality and morbidity rates, a sharp increase of esophageal cancer (…), outbreaks of viral hepatitis, the contamination of mother's milk' (Glantz, Rubinstein and Zonn 1994: 173)

and the like, have also been documented by local physicians for the southern part of the Khorezm oasis. According to informants from the Medical Faculty of the University of Urganch, young women are most frequently affected by anaemia and hypothyrosis.

The clinics and hospitals of the province are woefully inadequate for dealing with the situation. Technical equipment is either non-existent or hopelessly antiquated and the supply of vaccines and medicines is limited and unreliable. Thus, either the patients themselves or their relatives have to buy the drugs at a pharmacy or from the clinic doctors, who stockpile drugs – mainly smuggled in from Russia or bought on the black market – and sell them at a higher price to the sick. This creates a worrying economic burden for the patients and their families, and this burden is further intensified by the system of venal, informal payments. Like all other state employees, doctors and medical workers are poorly paid and often only receive their low salaries after several months of delay. 'Given this, many physicians and nurses (…) are increasingly reliant on informal payments and in-kind gifts from patients' (Falkingham 2002: 49). Such payments were common in the Soviet era and even more so in the transition period, but the burden they pose now is many times worse because most people's economic situation has so drastically deteriorated since independence. Thus, if a hospital stay goes on longer than anticipated or an operation becomes necessary, the average Khorezmian has to depend on financial assistance from the whole kinship group, much the same as in the case of life-cycle ceremonies.

Though in most of the cases known to me the families did manage to raise the money demanded, there were also exceptions, such as the following case that I accidentally came across. One day I was sharing a taxi with two other passengers. It stopped in front of the central *rayon* hospital in Shovot to let a very distraught young woman get in. When the driver asked her if a close relative had just died, she lost her composure and burst into violent sobs. After recomposing herself, she explained that her brother had suffered a serious work-related accident and urgently needed to be operated on. However, she claimed that the doctors would do nothing until 20 000 *so'm* were not paid: 'Today I brought with me half of the sum, but was told that I should come again when I have the whole money. Our family is poor and I do not know where to get all the money from. Thus the doctors just let my brother lie there and I can't help it.'

Another aspect of the general health care disaster the Khorezmians have faced since independence is the low level of professionalism of medical personnel. After 1991, many Soviet trained physicians – many of them Russians – left the province, leaving behind the younger, less experienced staff. Another factor in this dramatic decline is the poor quality of medical

training; as in other faculties, diplomas at the Medical Institute in Urganch can be bought, with the honours depending on the amount of the bribe offered.[159] There is a pervasive understanding that there is no point going to the doctors, since 'they themselves do not know what to do', which is what a friend of mine told me when his nine-month-old niece died in hospital where she had been sent with the diagnosis of some sort of 'infection'. Given the low level of professionalism in the health institutions of Khorezm, those who can afford it travel to the capital – where the situation is said to be somewhat better than in the province – for medical aid. In one case, a friend of mine used a business trip to Germany to have an eye operation. 'The operation took nearly all of my savings', he said. 'But if it had been done here, I would have risked going blind. You know, we had good doctors here in the Soviet time, but the present ones you can forget.'

The deteriorating quality of medical services often drives people to seek the aid of 'folk doctors', like my friends in Urganch did when their son Jasur was hit by a car. At the clinic where they first took the child, a nurse did nothing more than disinfect his wounds and sent him home. The injured foot became swollen over night and he could not walk on it, so his parents took him back to the clinic to have it X-rayed. However, they could not find a doctor to look after the child, since about 80 percent of the medical staff had been assigned by the provincial administration to do four weeks of cotton harvesting.[160] Finally, after experiencing the same situation at another clinic, my hosts took their son to a bonesetter recommended by a relative. Jasur's father told me that he had never before consulted a traditional healer and he had only done so because of the urgency of the circumstances. When I asked the patients of a different bonesetter why they had gone to a healer rather than to a physician, I heard similar explanations.

There is no doubt that the deterioration of the health care system contributed to the resurgence of religious inspired modes of healing. One healer told me: 'Many people can't pay for the doctors. Then they come to me, since I don't ask for money. I accept what they give to me: sometimes money, sometimes some bread or cakes.' Sara-*opa*, a practicing healer for nearly 30 years, confirmed the recent growth in demand for the healers' services by pointing out that she now has three times as many clients as during the Soviet era. However, the length of Sara-*opa*'s healing career is

[159] This situation is by no means restricted to Khorezm. Low educational level and a ubiquitous bribery system characterise the university landscape in Uzbekistan as a whole.

[160] As was the case in the Soviet era, as well as students and school children, state employees are obliged to help the farmers with the cotton harvest and physicians are no exception. Although clinics and hospitals should provide medical supplies for urgent cases, this does not always function.

exceptional. Of the 22 healers and diviners I worked with, only two had been active prior to independence while all the others took up their trade sometime in the 1990s. According to Mathijs Pelkmans:

> Part of the popularity of healers and clairvoyants then, stemmed from the severe socio-economic crisis and the resulting uncertainties for individuals. Furthermore, their authority was enhanced by the loss of credibility that secular ideologies faced after the collapse of socialism. 'Atheist rationality' had never been completely accepted, but once the Soviet Union fell there were even more indicators that secular ideologies were mistaken (Pelkmans 2006: 21).

In many cases, people who resorted to the services of healers and diviners explained that previously they did not believe in 'such things'. Notwithstanding economic factors, people with serious health problems seldom relied exclusively on traditional healers; rather, they commonly consulted healers and physicians simultaneously, to maximise success. In most cases known to me people turned first to medical doctors and then resorted to healers when the doctors' treatments failed to help. On the other hand, Shohista, a teacher in her mid-20s from Urganch took the opposite approach. Arguing that the only result of going to a doctor would be to place a heavy burden on the family budget, for over a year she sought treatment for her chronic cough from a traditional healer. Finally, she turned to the hospital where her tuberculosis was diagnosed.

Although in Central Asia healers are no longer subjected to suppression or harassment by the state, the official attitude towards them differs in each of the newly independent countries. Thus in Kazakhstan, alongside other forms of 'Kazakh folk medicine', healing with the help of spirits has gained official recognition. Perceived as part of the cultural heritage of the nation, it has a prominent part in the education programme at the Republican Centre of Eastern and Contemporary Medicine in Almaty (Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming). In Uzbekistan, while different to Kazakhstan in that traditional healing practices are not explicitly assigned the role as 'signifier of cultural identity' (Connor 2001: 10), nevertheless the authorities accept the healers' activities and do not interfere with them. For 'folk doctors' – who specialise in setting bones or herbal medicine –it is now possible to get a diploma from public health authorities that officially acknowledge their professional abilities. While on one hand the favourable attitude of the authorities towards local healing practices appears to be one aspect of the overall revaluation of what are perceived as 'national traditions', on the other, this new tolerance can be interpreted as merely practically motivated, since the state is no longer in a position to provide the population with sufficient medical services.

## 8.3 Categories of healers

In Khorezm, religious healers are described by a variety of names such as *tabib* (in local dialect: *to'vib, tab*, *tayb*), *duoxon*, *folbin* or *po'rxon*. However, the concepts behind these labels are not clearly fixed and techniques and methods attributed to each of them often overlap. The term *tabib* (Arabic: 'doctor', 'healer') is used in a very broad sense that 'reveals the diffuse character of the Muslim healer's art' (Privratsky 2001: 193). Thus the term may refer to a specialist who in the case of illness recites some verses from the Qur'an over the patient and, in order to augment the spiritual power of the words, spits or – more often – breathes on him afterwards. These methods, which according to the *hadith* literature, were practiced by Mohammed himself and, therefore, are approved by the orthodox can also be carried out by mullahs, many of whom are ascribed healing powers. Accordingly, healers whose therapeutic practices include prayers and breathing (*dam solish*) are also often referred to as mullah (*mo'llo*), whether or not they provide further religious services to the population. In some parts of Khorezm, specialists who resort to prayers and magical formulae are also called *duoxon*. While some *tabib*s specialise in bone setting (*siniqchilik*) or herbal medicine, others employ magical spells, massage, and the laying on of hands in their curing practices. Yet again, others serve as diviners to whom people turn when they wish to learn the whereabouts of lost or stolen property or to inquire about the prospects of a planned business enterprise or a marriage. Usually, any given healer employs one or more of the methods mentioned, in accordance with his/her personal abilities and preferences.

Only a few healers claimed to be able to treat all kinds of illness; rather, most of them declared that they specialised in the treatment of a limited number of ailments and stressed that they sent patients who came to them with problems that did not fall in their area of responsibility to other healers or to the hospital. Because of the widely held suspicion that anyone possessing healing power might also use it to harm people, most of the healers I spoke to hastened to dispel this thought by pointing out, right at the beginning of our conversation, that they only engaged in therapeutic activities. In the following I briefly introduce some practitioners in order to provide an insight into the various modes of healing employed by the specialists usually classified as *tabib*s.

Abdulla, a healer and farmer in his mid-40s, was introduced to me by my friends in Monoq as the most prestigious *tabib* in the district. The people usually address him as *xo'ja*, a term that indicates his descent from a *xo'ja* family. Abdulla-*xo'ja* was sitting on a mat behind a low table in an otherwise empty room of his large house, when he received my assistant and me. Carefully placed in order on the table in front of him were his healing uten-

sils: the Qur'an, covered with a white towel; a stack of slips of blank paper; and, finally, a pen. Abdulla- *xo'ja* explained that he is a specialist in undoing the effects of knotting, and in the treatment of epilepsy, fever, and illness resulting from the 'fear of the dead' (*o'lidan tiskinmoq*). He emphasised the fundamentally Islamic character of his practices, explaining that he uses only readings from the Qur'an, breathing, and the provision of charms, which consist of short Arabic formulas (*duo*) that he writes on one of the slips of blank paper, when needed. He explained that, depending on the nature of their ailments, patients have to burn the *duo*s with *isvant* at home, hang them on the wall, or wear them for a while on their bodies. However, according to my friends, the healer did not mention that he also receives requests to predict the future and divine the whereabouts of lost property by means of the Qur'an. Hulkar, a retired village teacher in her late-50s, who took me to him, said: 'Up to now, I visited Abdulla-*xo'ja* only three times. On two occasions I asked him to open the fate (*fol ochmoq*) and at another time I took my daughter to him when she was ill.'

Yusup, age 57, whom I first met at the shrine of Ulli Pir where he was caring for a recovering patient, introduced himself to me as a *tabib* and journalist. When healing, Yusup resorts mainly to prayers and breathing but also practices massage and herbal medicine. Since he lacks the ability of divination, he relies on the assistance of a *folbin* to identify the source of ailments. Referring to a recent case, he explained his method of healing as follows: 'Last week I was called to the district hospital to a woman suffering from paralysis in her legs. Since the doctors could not help her, her relatives sent for me. After the *folbin* whom I brought along with me diagnosed that the sick woman had been touched by evil spirits, I approached the patient while symbolically drawing a circle around her bed in order to prevent the *jin*s from hitting other people present. Than I started to recite prayers from the Qur'an and to move my hands over her body. Shortly after I finished the treatment, the woman could move her legs again.'

Reymajon, a former *kolkhoz* worker in her late-40s, mainly heals children suffering from fever, vomiting, and coughs by means of prayers and massage. In the case I witnessed she treated a five-year-old boy with stomachache. First she felt his pulse and diagnosed an evil-eye attack. Then she left the room and came back with a Qur'an which she kissed three times before reading a long passage over the boy. When finished, she kissed the book again, covered it carefully with a cloth and laid it aside. Then she began gently massaging the boy's stomach while murmuring the phrase 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful' in Arabic.

When healing with hands, the healers run their hands several times along both sides of the patient's body as if extracting the evil and then shak-

ing it out at the end. All the healers described how during the cure they feel a strong pain. For example, Yusup said: 'As a result of my efforts, the evil leaves the body of the patient and enters mine. For a while I feel a strong pain in my arms. Finally, the illness disappears through my body.' Maqsuda, a healer from Khiva, said that after taking over the pains of the patient, her legs and arms feel heavy like lead and her whole body aches. Finally, her mouth fills with air and the pain flies out with a hiss.

People believe that the laying on of hands is effective because of *biotok* ('bio-energy') which many present-day healers claim to possess. The term derives from the repertoire of bio-energy healing which was already unofficially flourishing in the Soviet era. Bio-energy or extra-sensory healing (*ekstrasens*) is based on the idea that all creatures are surrounded by a certain kind of field, comparable to magnetic fields (Lindquist 2001: 21). *Ekstrasens* healers, some of whom had already acquired considerable fame in the period of transition, became more prominent after the decline of the communist regime. In the first years of independence, a few of these healers also found their way to Khorezm. One of them, a Russian woman, is reported to have held a public séance in the new stadium of Urganch in front of some three thousand people. As far as I can determine, at present there are no *ekstrasens* healers practicing in Khorezm. However, as a result of being disseminated throughout the region by Russian television and magazines, their methods and vocabulary have been adopted by Muslim religious healers, thus making their repertoire even more syncretistic. In spite of this, when people are asked about the nature of *biotok*, they describe it as 'divine power' awarded to the healers by God. Thus, without drawing on pseudo-scientific explanations about bio-energy and magnetic fields, people translate foreign concepts into ones that have meaning for them.

### *8.3.1 Healing with the help of spirits*

In Khorezm, healers who claim to utilise the help of supernatural beings in their therapeutic practices are usually referred to as *folbin*. Literally, the word means 'diviner' and is a combination of the Arabic *fal* (fate) and the Persian *bin*, the root of the verb *dildan* (to see) (Basilov 1995: 54). In some parts of Khorezm, especially in the north of the oasis, the term *po'rxon* is used instead of *folbin*, with the same meaning. *Po'rxon* derives from the Persian *parixon*, meaning a person who calls up the *pari*, a particular category of spirits (Snesarev 2003: 36). Traditionally, the *folbin*s' practices include both divination and the healing of ailments attributed to the intervention of malevolent spirits. While some deal with both, others specialise either in healing or in divination. *Folbin*s are believed to rule over an army (*lashkar*) of spirits, with the help of which they expel the evil powers from the

body of the victim. Various healing rituals, to be discussed below, are exclusively performed by *folbin*s. However, most present-day *folbin*s also employ methods that are more often associated with the activity of *tabib*s, as described above. In general, those healers who are believed to stay in personal contact with the spirit world are called *folbin*, while all others are normally subsumed under the category of *tabib*.

Some healers, like 56-year-old Malika, represent the perfect combination of an Islamic healer and a traditional *folbin*. As a member of a *xo'ja* family, Malika is equally versed in healing by means of Qur'anic prayers and breathing as well as in the treatment of spirit possession with the drum (*tap*, *darya*) and the whip (*qamchi*), which are characteristic instruments employed in spirit exorcisms throughout Central Asia. Given the relatively lower prestige of *folbinchilik* (that is, the activity of the *folbin*s), a phenomenon which I will discuss in more length below, many healers described by others as *folbin* actually insist on being called *tabib*. People who know the original (Arabic) meaning of *tabib* are critical of the indiscriminate use of the term. For example, Davronjon, a young imam in Urganch, argued that the term should be restricted to those healers who follow the Islamic medical tradition, who are rarely if ever found in present-day Khorezm. 'These people call themselves *tabib*, but they have not even heard the name of Ibn Sina[161], not to speak about being familiar with his works,' he said. An acquaintance of mine, a university graduate, also mocked his countrymen's 'arbitrary use' of the word *tabib*: '*Tabib*, *mo'llo*, *folbin* – each of these words refers to very different professions. But since the Soviets have destroyed our knowledge and traditions, the people now lump all these categories together.' However, the absence of a clear-cut boundary between the different categories of healers is not a recent phenomenon; 19th century ethnographic reports had already noted 'the striking similarity in the roles of mullahs and shamans in folk healing, as both sought the intervention of an outside, intangible power in the patient's recovery' (Michaels 2003: 29). Moreover, Bellér-Hann's conclusion, drawn from material from the 19th and early 20th centuries, retains its validity for contemporary religious healers in Khorezm:

> Specialists who dabbled with the supernatural world represented a large and diverse group who did not fit into the two opposing categories of spirit healer/shaman and Muslim *molla*. They were pragmatic actors who made use of a vast repertoire of methods informed by scriptural traditions and local orthopraxis (Bellér-Hann 2006: 404).

[161] Known in the West as Avicenna, the Bukhara born doctor and philosopher Ibn Sina (980-1037) influenced European medical science for more than a half millennium.

### *8.3.2 The feminisation of* folbinchilik

According to Basilov, spirit healers – 'shamans' in his terminology – among the nomadic peoples of pre-Soviet Central Asia were exclusively men, while among the sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks, this profession was almost exclusively carried out by women (Basilov 1995: 63). However, ethnographic data from Khorezm contradicts this kind of gender division along the nomadic-sedentary divide. Thus, among the Uzbeks of the Khorezm oasis men and women were equally represented among the *folbin*s and *po'rxon*s (Zadykhina 1952: 413; Snesarev 2003: 36). This was also confirmed by my interlocutors, some of whom inherited their profession from their fathers or grandfathers, or mothers or grandmothers respectively. Today, however, the great majority of the *folbin*s are women.

The feminisation of a profession is generally regarded as an indicator of its decline in prestige. In the field of healing, a similar process took place almost everywhere in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Thus, for example, the weakening of the prestige of the shamans among the Khanty in Siberia was paralleled by an upsurge in the number of female healers (Blazer 1987: 1091). As Atkinson notes: 'Where women dominate in the shamanic ranks, it is often the case that shamanic prowess has been edged out or subsumed by political and religious centralization' (Atkinson 1992: 317). Also Bellér-Hann points to the 'domestication and feminization' of spirit healing and other communal practices among the Uyghur in contemporary China as a consequence of the socialist regime's policy (Bellér-Hann 2004: 645). Bahodir Sidikov argues in a similar way, stressing that the female domination of 'modern Uzbek shamanism' was first of all promoted by the religious policy of the Soviet state,

> (…) which severely curbed Islamic practices in the public (male) domain but had little control over expressions of female religiosity in the domestic, private sphere. Economic conditions may have contributed to this feminization of shamanism: Throughout the Soviet as well as post Soviet period, female employment in the public sector has lagged behind male employment (…). For women, therefore, the practice of shamanism has been long regarded as an additional income source (Sidikov 2004: 646).

However, Soviet policy appears to have merely accelerated the dwindling prestige of the *folbin*s. Thus in some places, like among the Turkmen on the middle reaches of the Amu Darya, the displacement of the male *po'rxon*s by females appears to have already taken place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Basilov 1995: 62-63). The abandonment of spirit healing by males at that time could in part be attributed to the growing influence of Islamic reformism which heavily criticised such practices for deviating from the

prophetic tradition (see Sukhareva 1975: 57). Early ethnographic reports on Central Asia confirm that normative Islamic elements in spirit exorcism rituals were considerably more highly valued than the healer's other performances (see Findeisen 1951).

Given the general deterioration of the economy in present-day Uzbekistan, being a healer often provides a way of improving one's financial situation. However, in spite of the end of state suppression and the fact that women are no less affected by unemployment or underpayment than men, the former gender division of religious healing appears to continue. Thus, among the healers known to me, of those who started a healing career in the last decade and a half, there are no men who employ the techniques traditionally associated with the *folbin*'s way of healing.

## 8.4 Healing rituals

### *8.4.1 'To let the spirits dance' - the* o'yin

In Khorezm, as among other Turkic peoples of Central Asia, the most characteristic healing ritual of the *folbi*n is called *o'yin*, meaning play or dance, 'since the healer forces the evil spirits to dance and eventually abandon the patient's body' (Bellér-Hann 2004: 643). In the course of the *o'yin*, the healer invokes his or her helper spirits and patron saints by chanting to the accompaniment of a drum with small metal rings inserted in it. The performance of the *o'yin* is called *o'yin o'ynomoq* ('to play', 'to dance') or as *jar solmoq* ('to perform the *jar*'). The latter term alludes to the frequently mentioned closeness between spirit healing and Sufi practices in Central Asia (Basilov 1987; Bellér-Hann 2006). In Sufi terminology, *dhikr-i jahr* means a loud *dhikr* (e.g. the repetition of God's name), consisting of ritual dances to the accompaniment of chanted songs and music.[162] There is evidence that in the early 20th century the *o'yin*s in Khorezm also included ecstatic performances that served to demonstrate the healer's supernatural power. Among the Uzbek in the Amur delta region, male *folbin*s sometimes stepped barefoot on a glowing spade, licked hot iron, or poured boiling water on their chests without showing any sign of injury (Zadykhina 1952: 413). Snesarev also reports that during healing rituals 'shamans' sometimes stepped 'with bare foot onto the sharp blades of two swords held a meter off the ground by two men. It was allegedly the *pari* of the male or female shaman that raised him over the swords' (Snesarev 2003: 42).

[162] In Central Asia, this type of *dhikr* was especially characteristic of the Yasawiyya. For descriptions of early Yasawi rituals, see Babadzhanov and Ghulamov 2004.

This kind of performance is no longer part of the repertoire of the Khorezmian *folbin*s, and only a few of them even appear capable of performing a traditional *o'yin*. Since the *o'yin* requires the presence of a greater number of people and is accompanied by considerable noise, it was especially difficult to perform it during the Soviet era. Socialist education and the introduction of modern medicine reduced *folbinchilik* and its main element, the *o'yin*, to a kind of 'peripheral cult' (Morris 2006: 29). Nevertheless, in each generation a few children of *folbin*s learned the ritual techniques and invocations and carried out *o'yin*s, albeit in secret. And yet, for many if not most people, the *o'yin* now irretrievably belongs to the past and people – among them the rector of the Faculty of Folklore Studies at the University of Urganch – often told me that 'real' *folbin*s capable of 'playing' no longer exist in the region. In spite of this, in the course of my research I came into close contact with six female healers who perform the *o'yin*. They all claimed that there has been an increased demand for their services since independence, although the scale of them still appears to be limited. For example, Oygul, a *folbin* in her late-40s, regularly performs the *o'yin* every August for a man regarded as mentally ill (*jilli*), at his family's request. Other than this, she 'plays' no more than three or four times a year, mainly for women suffering from miscarriages and illnesses described as the 'fear of the dead'. Other healers gave similar accounts, stressing that they perform only five to seven *o'yin*s a year.

Since the spirits are believed to fear darkness, the *o'yin* typically takes place in the late evening and lasts several hours. According to 73-year-old Sara-*opa*, the oldest *folbin* I got to know, in the past the whole residential community was expected to attend it. Scholars of Central Asia and Siberia have often emphasised the communal character of spirit exorcism rituals (Basilov and Niiazklychev 1975: 127; Murodov 1975: 97; Bellér-Hann 2006: 404-5). Nowadays, however, illness is considered to be a family rather than community matter. Thus, while the performance of an *o'yin* still requires the presence of some people – a minimum of seven – usually only the female in-laws of the patient and a few friends take part in it.

Depending on the severity of the ailment, the *o'yin* can be repeated several times over a period of 40 days. In such a case, the first session lasts for three days, followed by a second session seven days later. Another ritual is held 20 days after the first and a final one called *qirqi* (the fortieth) when the month is over. The patient is not to leave the house before the *qirq chilla* (the 40-day quarantine period) ends. At the end of the *chilla*, and before the final ritual takes place, the patient pays a visit to a saintly tomb, accompanied by his family and the healer. If the patient is regarded as mentally ill, his hands are bound by a chain or cord throughout each ritual session.

The healing ceremony described below was carried out by the elderly Sara-*opa* for our neighbour in Urganch, Shukurjon, whose weak health condition Sara-*opa* ascribed to 'fear of the dead' – malevolent spirits had filled her with fear when she looked upon the corpse of her husband at the time of his death two years earlier. The ceremony started at 10:30 in the evening after an opulent meal shared by the participants: the healer, the patient, the female members of the patient's family and some of her friends, eight people altogether. The ceremony began with divinatory diagnosis, referred to as *suq chiqorish* (removing the envy or the evil eye). This is a typical Khorezmian ritual which is also performed outside the context of the *o'yin*, as a remedy for ailments attributed to the evil eye and any other illness in which supernatural agents are thought to play a role. It is also used to locate the spirits in the body of the patient. In the second part of the ceremony, the healer used animal blood to lure out the spirits; as with *suq chiqorish*, the ritual of smearing animal blood on the body of the sick is often performed outside the context of the *o'yin*. The third part of the ceremony consists of the *jar*, in which the healer calls on her supernatural helpers for assistance. All the rituals of the traditional repertoire of the *folbin*s can be used at various stages of the *o'yin*; the dramaturgy varies considerably with the *jar* being perhaps the only constant in it.

After the evening meal, Sara-*opa* took off her ordinary headscarf and put on a great white one so that it covered her head and shoulders. Then she and Shukurjon left the room to perform the Islamic purification ritual (*tahorat*). Sara-*opa* stressed that being in the state of ritual purity is a precondition for entering into contact with the helping saints and paris. Meanwhile, the other participants sat on mats along the walls. The healer returned and ordered Shukurjon's daughter-in-law to bring the things needed for the first stage of the ceremony, the ritual of *suq chiqorish*: dough, pieces of salt crystal, seven small twigs, cotton, a small cup of tea with honey, a milk pot and a bowl of water. Then Sara-*opa* began fabricating small torches (*shuttuk*); she peeled the bark off the twigs, whittled a point on one end and wrapped them in cotton. She then formed small balls with the dough and stuck the *shuttuk* in them, after dipping them in the tea and honey mixture. When all this was done, Shukurjon was seated on a mat in the middle of the room and covered with a large piece of cloth. Sara-*opa* dissolved the salt crystal in the water and asked two of the women present to hold the bowl of water above the head of the patient. She placed one *shuttuk* in the bowl and lit it. Then she plucked some cotton apart to cover the opening of the milk pot, which she turned over the burning torch into the water. As the cotton began to burn and draw the water up into the pot, there was a loud, sputtering fizzle. This procedure was repeated seven times, each time for a different

part of the patient's body.[163] Every time Sara-*opa* dipped the pot into the water, she loudly uttered '*bismilloh*' and inaudibly mumbled prayers or exorcism formulas. Surrounded by the women who watched her intently, each time she made cryptic statements about the position of the burned cotton in the water saying, for example, that these have 'fallen' (*yiqildi*) in the direction of Mecca, or of God, or that of the ritual prayer (*namoz*). According to what she previously told me, the burned materials reveal the source of illnesses (*kassallik yongan vajlarindan balli baradi*) to those who know how to interpret them.

Plate 21. Sara-*opa* preparing the torches (*shuttuk*).

For the next step Sara-*opa* ordered that a chicken be brought. She held the animal by the feet and let it circle three times around the head of the sick woman, striking her with it in turn on the head, back, chest, legs and feet.

[163] Snesarev gives a similar description of a *suq chiqorish* ritual, stressing that in it water and fire were employed to drive out the evil from the body, which he regards as being reminiscent of the cult of water and fire in Zoroastrianism (Snesarev 2003: 35).

With every blow she called to God and various saints for help. Next she cut the comb of the chicken and pressed the bloody comb to various places on the body of the patient: her neck, back, hips, forehead, ears, chest, arms, stomach, feet, and soles. While doing this, the healer repeatedly called out the formula: 'I have found it. I have found it. From wherever you entered, come out from there' (*Toptim, toptim. Nerdan giryan bo'lsong shor'dan chiq*). Finally, the sheet was taken away and the patient had to stand up and step over the chicken three times before it was taken from the room.

Then Sara-*opa* called for white and red sheets to be hung on the wall on two opposing sides of the room. She had explained to me beforehand that, at this point in the ceremony, she would call upon her spiritual helpers – the *pir*s and the *pari*s – for help and they would take their places, the males on one side and the females on the other. The patient sat down again on the mat and was once more covered with the sheet. The healer then took her drum and started to play and sing in a powerful, clear voice. She began her invocation by greeting the souls of the dead and continued with the Islamic confession of the faith and summoning her spiritual helpers. Aside from numerous Muslim saints, the helpers also included the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), the angel Gabriel, the Twelve Imams of the Shi'a as well as the first four caliphs (*choryor*) of the history of Islam.[164] Among the 15 Muslim saints she called on by name for help were Uwais al-Qarani (Sultan Buva), Ahmad Yasawi, Abdulqadir Gilani and many local saints venerated in the province as well as in adjacent parts of Turkmenistan and Qaraqalpaqistan. While she circled ever faster around the patient, Sara-*opa* carefully avoided turning her back to the sheets on the wall. After a while, she indicated with a nod of her head for the other women to stand up and form a circle around the patient. Placing their hands on each other's shoulders and following the tempo of the drum, they started moving around the patient, bending their bodies towards the centre of the circle. They accompanied their movements with rhythmical calls such as *Allahu rabbim Allahu* ('my God, my Lord, my God') or *Allah pirim Allahim* ('My God, my *pir*, my God'). At the same time, Sara-*opa* circled ever more quickly around the group of women and bent down over them repeatedly, touching their heads with the drum. After about an hour she stopped playing, put the bowl of water to her mouth, went around and spit water on the women as well as into the four corners of the room.

Throughout the ceremony, a variety of means were used to drive the trouble-making spirits from the body of the sick. Striking or beating the body with an animal or an inanimate object is generally interpreted as the transfer of evil powers into something else, which is then got rid of (see Centlivres

[164] Here, Sara-*opa* referred to the central figures of both Shi'i and Sunni Islam without being aware of this distinction.

and Slobin 1971: 160). As for the blood used in the next step, different explanations are available. Sara-*opa* stressed that 'When the spirits smell the blood, they leave the body and start to lick up the blood from it. Thus my spirits can catch them easier.' Oyto'ti, another healer, provided a slightly different explanation saying that 'First my *lashkar* [the army of the helper spirits] pounce on the blood. When they are fed up they let the bad spirits lick up what remains. Thus the illness is licked off and my *lashkar* finally carry the bad spirits away.' Sometimes, a sheep or less often a calf is slaughtered instead of a hen for the ritual. Usually, the animal is slaughtered over the head of the sick person and so considerably more blood flows over the body.[165] Although the healers claim that the spirits advise what kind of animal they must slaughter, in practice it appears to be a matter of negotiation between the healer and the patient and depends on the latter's economic situation.[166]

All healers performing the *o'yin* explained that when the ritual is over they order their *lashkar* to carry away the bad spirits, including *jin*s and *pari*s, that have been exorcised from the body of the sick. The helper spirits are expected to grasp the defeated malevolent ones and take them to Ulli Pir, to be slaughtered. Ulli Pir is said to be the most powerful '*pari*-butcher' (*parilani qassobi*) in the entire region. Another *folbin*, Oyto'ti, explained that at the end of the *o'yin* she even instructs her *lashkar* that, in order to make the transport of the vanquished *pari*s easier, they should tie a noose around their necks.[167] As for the *lashkar*, after they have done their duty, the *folbin*s send them back into the canals or the mountains where they are thought to live.

By expressing the Islamic credo and invoking the names of various Islamic figures, Sara-*opa* definitely endeavoured to give her invocations an Islamic character that is further emphasised by the performance of the ritual purification (*tahorat*). Interestingly, although she frequently mentioned the *pari*s in her explanations and also took care to accommodate them during the ceremony, she made no reference to them in her invocations. The text of other invocations I had the opportunity to record included references to the

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[165] In the case described above, the healer restrained from killing the hen over the patient who explained that it makes her sick to have too much blood on her body.

[166] Given the overall Islamic idea that spirits are fond of blood, it does not come as a surprise that similar rituals are to be found elsewhere in the Muslim world. Karabila reports from Morocco that the slaughtering of an animal over the aching part of the body is common in Moroccan healing rituals. It is held that the spirits would leave their victim in exchange for the blood (Karabila 1996: 128).

[167] Similar motives are also reported from the Turkmen, where the healers sometimes order their *lashkar* to tie the hands and feet of the *jin*s that have harmed the patient with their own hair (Basilov and Niiazklychev 1975: 130).

*pari*s who, however, were mentioned far less frequently than the saints. On the one hand, this points to the overall Islamisation of the whole subject of spirit healing and underscores the notion that the credibility of the spirit healers rests mainly on their use of Islamic symbols. On the other hand, the rather fuzzy role played by the *folbin*s' helper spirits in the exorcism rituals makes the latter appear obscure even in the eye of those participating in them. The obscurity surrounding the *o'yin* as well as most of the rituals described below, may have contributed to their diminishing significance and, thus, will most probably also prevent its further renaissance.

Plate 22. *Folbin* with whip and drum.

### *8.4.2 Beating the spirits*

Healers often employ a whip (*qamchi*) for exorcism, either during the *o'yin* or on separate occasions.[168] It is believed that the trouble-making spirits flee

[168] For the use of the whip in healing rituals in other parts of Central Asia, see Basilov and Niiazklychev 1975: 127 and Basilov 1995: 81-85.

from pain and abandon the body of the person in whom they came to dwell. The ritual I describe in the following was carried out by Malika in her house in a village near Urganch. The patient, a young woman suffering from infertility which Malika ascribed to her having been possessed by a *pari*, was laid on the floor on a mattress and covered with a big white cloth. Malika placed seven coins (*tanga*) on different parts of her body: the forehead, both shoulders, hands and feet. Then she set up twelve small oil lamps around the mattress and lit them.[169] After all this was done, Malika started revolving around the patient and slightly beating her body with a small whip, while intoning the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Barakalla pirlarim* | Bravo my *pir*s |
| *Barakalla pirlarim* | Bravo my *pir*s |
| *Sher – arslonim galingsiz* | Come on my lions |
| *Dav parilar galinglar* | Come on giant *pari*s |
| *Arslon pirlar galinglar* | Come on lion *pir*s |
| *Samiyodin odli parilar* | *Pari*s named Samiyodin |
| *Olisdagi allalar* | Far-away lullabies |
| *(...)* | (…) |
| *Chetda yurgan bo'lmasin* | Nobody should walk outside |
| *Ko'ng'li kalta qolmasin* | No heart should remain angry |
| *Qon o'rtada qolmasin* | No blood should be left behind |
| *Kabristan tarqalmasin* | No cemetery should be divided |
| *O'li yuvulgan yerda qolmasin* | No dead should remain where it was washed |
| *Qon chiqarg'an qon topsin* | Bloodshed should be avenged[170] |
| *Haydab galing haydovchi* | Come on drover and drive |
| *Allohga uchrab galinglar* | Come flying to God |
| *(...)* | (…) |
| *Allohim haq yolga salgaysen* | My God, lead (us) on the right way |
| *Allohim dayan bandangni* | My God, open the fate of all those |
| *Savabini ochgaysan* | Who say 'my God' |
| *(...)* | (…) |
| *Barakalla pirlarim* | Bravo my *pir*s |
| *Muchama mucha* | Limb to limb |
| *Tomira tomir urunglar* | Hit vein to vein |
| *Tosh dapada qolmasin* | No stone should remain on the hill |
| *Go'k yelkada qolmasin* | No heaven should remain on the |

[169] Though Malika did not give any explanation for these actions, they are probably based on the widespread belief that spirits flee from metal as well as from fire.
[170] Literally: The one who shed blood should find blood.

| | |
|---|---|
| | shoulder |
| *Ko'rak ko'zda qolmasin* | No button should remain in the eye |
| *So'zlar tilda qolmasin* | No word should remain unsaid |
| *Tutam qo'lda qolmasin* | No bandage should remain on the arm |
| *Kamar balda qolmasin* | No belt should remain on the hip |
| *Yurak oyoqda qolmasin* | No heart should remain in the foot |
| *Tug'gan odam urmasin* | No man should beat |
| *(...)* | (…) |
| *Jondor bolsa joni bor* | The living has a soul |
| *Barakalla pirlarim* | Bravo my *pir*s |
| *Damir do'nli pirlarim* | My *pir*s with iron garments |
| *Damir do'nli parilar* | My *pari*s with iron garments |
| *O'li yuvuchular* | The washers of the dead |
| *O'likni yuvib beringlar* | Should wash and deliver the dead |
| *Tabutga solsangiz* | Should put it into the coffin |
| *Janozasin okinglar* | His *janoza* should be read |
| *Laillaha ilolloh* | There is no God but God (and) |
| *Muhammad Rasul Alloh* | Mohammad is the Prophet of God[171] |

After continuing the invocation for about 20 minutes, with a sudden movement Malika pulled the cloth off the woman – the coins dispersed all over the room – and cried '*chiq*!'('go out'), thus commanding the spirits to leave the patient's body.

To be sure, the text of the invocation is rather cryptic and obscures, as in most other cases, any attempt at interpretation, even on the part of the healer. Anyhow, healers are generally reluctant to explain the content of their invocations, stressing that they are inspired by what the saints tell them while chanting. The same also applies for the healing rituals, since the healers claim that they are merely carrying out what the saints order them to do. Almost all healers explained that while they are treating a patient, one or more saints – invisible to others - stay beside them and give them exact advice.

### *8.4. 3 The* alas

The *alas*, 'the most popular of all "curative" ceremonies in Central Asia' (Snesarev 2003: 34), aims to expel malicious spirits from the body and transfer them into an inanimate object – here: a torch - which is then thrown

[171] The dots indicate passages I found incomprehensible and were also unsolvable for native speakers I played the records to.

away. The *alas* I observed was conducted by the *folbin* Oygul in G'oybu, a suburb of Urganch. The patient was a young woman from the neighbourhood who complained about headache and giddiness. Oygul felt her pulse and declared that she had been caught by a *jin* when she was urinating at a place where a cow was slaughtered (*mol kasilgan yera siygan, topingan*). After making the diagnosis, Oygul told us to join her in a small annex in the courtyard. She put on a white headscarf, indicating that the ritual she was going to carry out was a religious act. Then she slipped a white cloth over the head of the patient who stood with bowed head in the middle of the room. Next, Oygul took a piece of oily rag and fixed it to the end of a wooden stick. She set the torch on fire and began circling it around the patient's head and body while repeating the phrase *bismilloh*. After some five minutes she threw the burning rag on the floor and told the patient to jump over the fire three times. After extinguishing the fire with water, Oygul laid her hands on the patient's head, pressing it three times from all sides. She accompanied all of her movements by calls of *bismilloh*. Than she hit the patient's back three times with her hand while uttering the words *qo'ch, qo'ch* ('go away'), demanding that the spirit(s) leave the body. Finally, the patient was told to lift her dress and Oygul sprinkled water on her bare belly and back. The ritual concluded with Oygul going around the room and sprinkling water on all of us present.

In Soviet literature, the use of fire in healing and purification rituals in Central Asia is usually ascribed to the influence of Zoroastrianism and is cited as evidence for the existence of fire worship among the Muslim population of the region. Privratsky is rather sceptical of the Soviet notions about the influence of Zoroastrianism on Turko-Mongol 'shamanism', stressing that '[t]he most that can be said is that the sacrality of fire was part of the domestic cult of Inner Asia and that it has had ritual expressions involving the women of the household' (Privratsky 2001: 152). Since Uzbek national historiography celebrates Khorezm as the homeland of the Avesta, the notion of the Zoroastrian origin of the ritual use of fire is well established among the educated segments of the population. Thus, every time fire was employed to keep away or to expel evil spirits my friends reminded me that I was observing a tradition of ancient Zoroastrian origin. As for the healers, such considerations did not play a role in their explanations. Rather, they stressed the Islamic character of the rituals they performed. Although the discussion of the religious-historical origin of curing and other rituals is beyond the scope of this book, it should not be forgotten that the notion that spirits flee from fire is widespread all over the Muslim world. Thus, whatever its origin, the ritual use of fire has been incorporated into a Muslim set of meaning, like most other aspects of the healing rituals described above.

The invocation of Muslim saints and references to the Qur'an in the course of treatment indicate the strong Islamisation of the indigenous healing system in Khorezm. Healers who secretly practiced in 'the old way' during the Soviet era, contributed, however few in number they were, to the preservation of a wide range of rituals and, thus, they can be regarded as 'the agents of tradition' (Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming). It is these experienced healers who nowadays, under much more favourable conditions, transmit their knowledge to others eager to take up the profession. As will be shown below, the way to become a healer largely follows traditional templates that refer, once again, to the persistence of ideas underlying the system of religious healing in spite suppression and secularisation.

## 8.5 How to become a healer – modes of legitimacy

In Khorezm, healing is generally thought of as an occupation that an individual cannot take up voluntarily and the skills of which cannot be acquired by learning alone. Rather, the ability to heal is seen as proof of a person having been endowed with an extraordinary power. But how do healers substantiate their claim to possess such a power and how do they convince others of it? In this section I explore legitimising strategies used by the 22 healers – 6 men and 16 women between the ages of 45 and 95 – whose narratives I collected.

Galina Lindquist describes the legitimacy of healing as its 'meaningfulness (…) within the broader domains of meaning-making, their place with reference to the dominant structures of knowledge and power' (Lindquist 2001: 16). Reworking Max Weber's classic typology, Lindquist distinguishes three types of legitimacy of healing in contemporary Russia: 1) rational-legal legitimacy which draws on the authority of natural sciences, formal education, and diplomas; 2) traditional legitimacy which derives its persuasiveness from the past and thus places healers and their practices 'within a deeper temporal range'; and 3) legitimacy through 'alterity' or otherness which 'is constituted through reference to the foreign and distant origin of the craft, that in many cultures is imbued with power and value', such as Voodoo, Reiki, pagan cults, neo-shamanism and the like (Lindquist 2001: 17).

In Khorezm, legitimacy based on 'alterity' did not play any role and rational-legal legitimacy had only a minor role in the legitimising strategies of healers. Thus, some *tabib*s and *folbin*s occasionally boasted of possessing diplomas issued from the Ministry of Health or from other official organisations. In principle, such diplomas are available for 'folk-healers' and one bonesetter actually showed me one issued in Tashkent. However, since diplomas have to be paid for and thus, once registered, healers are subject to

taxation, most of them do not bother applying for them. Unlike in Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan, in Uzbekistan there is no procedure for spiritual healers to obtain official certificates. Even so, some of my interlocutors claimed to possess 'diplomas', such as one diviner who boasted that her ability to predict the future and identify the whereabouts of lost property had been officially attested to by the local branch of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. When I mentioned this episode to the imam of a mosque in Urganch, he reacted with outrage: 'How does she dare to claim that we would assert such an un-Islamic activity as divination,' he said.

Sapargul, a woman in her early-50s, is the guardian of a small village shrine in Monoq. Since 1992 she had widened her practice to treating women with psychological problems (*ruhiy kasallik*) and children suffering from some kind of tongue and mouth disease, for which she employs saliva, massage, and the laying on of hands. 'We heal the sick with divine power and by order of God,' she said. Some years ago, with donations and support from the local *kolkhoz*, she established a roomy new building in the vicinity of the shrine, where the sick could spend days, months even, if necessary. She described how, one day, health officials from the administration in Shovot checked her 'hospital'. She said they left fully satisfied, because everything was clean and tidy and she even had a medicine cabinet. Sapargul also claimed to have been visited by a medical delegation from UNESCO. The doctors measured and approved her possession of bio-energy (*biotok*) by means of some kind of technical appliance and, finally, they confirmed her diagnostic and healing abilities with a diploma. However, she regretted not being able to show me the document because, for some reason, it had had to be sent to Tashkent.

Sometimes it is the patients themselves who, because of their confidence in the healers, ascribe them the possession of official documents. In so doing, the patients create a more 'rational' aura for the healers, thereby justifying for themselves and their social environment visits to spiritual healers, which might otherwise be viewed as superstition. One day an acquaintance of mine took me to the healer Jumavoy, whom he praised for his ability to cure almost all physical diseases through the laying on of hands. 'Jumavoy-*aka* is a powerful *tabib* with mighty spirit beings supporting him. He even has an official diploma confirming his capability,' my acquaintance explained. However, Jumavoy gave an evasive answer to my question about his diploma and, on leaving, my acquaintance told me that I should not have asked him about it: 'He must have gained the impression that you were sent by the *nalog* [Russ.: tax] department in order to control him. That's why he hesitated to speak about his diploma,' he said.

Unlike in Russia where, according to Lindquist magic healers present documents issued by official medical institutions in order to foster the image of 'efficacy', Pelkmans remarks that in Kok-Jangak (Kyrgyzstan) nobody 'bothered to obtain the official diplomas' which were easily available for money (Pelkmans 2006: 17). The author ascribes the lack of 'rational-bureaucratic legitimacy' of healing in Kok-Jangak to the collapse of medical and educational institutions which 'led to a situation in which healers distanced themselves from official biomedical medicine and certainly did not want to pay money for official diplomas' (Pelkmans 2006: 17). Contrary to this, for healers in Khorezm legal-bureaucratic legitimacy is still invested with a high degree of authority, even though doctors are less trusted than in the Soviet period. What's more, most of the healers I spoke to made a point of sending patients to the hospital if their ailments fell outside their area of expertise. Thus, religious healers do not perceive their field of activity as being in opposition to modern medicine but, rather, as an additional, alternative mode of healing when bio-medical treatments fail to work. As in Sapargul's case, healers sometimes also describe their healing power as *biotok* and, as it is thought to be technically verifiable, claiming to use it is a means of attaining quasi-scientific legitimacy. For example, Karomat, a 37-year-old *tabib* emphasised that her healing ability had been certified, albeit by an unidentified source, as being 85 percent *biotok*, granted to her by God. However, none of the new 'modernising labels' such as diplomas and *biotok* are regarded as sufficient to validate the healers' claim of possession of special healing abilities. Rather, in present-day Khorezm *tabib*s and *folbin*s legitimise themselves by schemes that are well known from numerous pre-Soviet and early Soviet accounts about the religious healing system in Central Asia. The marked similarity of the healers' narratives indicates that they follow particular cultural templates, as illustrated by the stories of Oyto'ti and Malika summarised below.

Oyto'ti told me that in 1983, when she was in her mid-30s, she became ill. She fainted frequently and half of her face became paralysed so that she could not speak. At that time she was working as an employee in the administration in Urganch. Following the advice of her mother, a *folbin*, Oyto'ti became the apprentice of a *xalpa*, from whom she learned the Arabic script and how to recite Uzbek religious texts written in Arabic letters. Later she herself became a *xalpa*, with the result that her health condition improved. However, in 1996 her face paralysis returned, at the same time when her mother had to give up *folbinchilik* due to her advanced age (she was in her 80s). Around that time, Oyto'ti had a dream in which she saw herself performing the *o'yin* and her mother interpreted the dream as a call to Oyto'ti to become a folbin. Thus, she received the drum and the whip from

her mother, who also transmitted her *lashkar*, the troop of helping spirits to her daughter. Oyto'ti explained that as soon as she started healing others, she herself recovered. Then, between 2000 and 2002, having retired, she decided to get in on a business project run by her son and daughter-in-law. Since she made frequent trips to Kazakhstan to sell Uzbek products, she had to give up healing. However, business failed and all the money she invested was lost. At that time both she and her daughter became ill. For Oyto'ti, all these misfortunes made it clear to her that she had to restart with *folbinchilik*. She explained: 'It is not my decision. Being a *folbin* is a must (*shart*) for me. Otherwise I would die and would also endanger my family. After I started to "play" again, my daughter and I recovered.'

Malika was born into a family of *xo'ja*s with a long healing tradition. Her father cured spirit possession with the drum, in spite of the unfavourable conditions during the Soviet period. The village headman banned him from healing but Malika said he could not live without it. When he did not 'play' for a long time, he fell ill and was near to death. At the beginning of the 1980s, her father died. Three years later, Malika – about 35 at the time and working on the local collective farm – became ill. She fainted frequently and had difficulty moving; after two weeks in hospital, the doctors said there was no medical explanation for her condition and sent her home. One of the doctors advised that she try it 'in the old way', and so her sister took her to Ulli Pir where she spent 13 days in a house in the vicinity of the shrine. During this time, her father appeared to her in a dream and showed her how to heal. Malika knew that she had been called to be a healer but for a year and a half she resisted. All the while, her health worsened. She said that finally she had no choice but to start working as a healer and, since then, she has had no further problems with her own health.

Like Oyto'ti and Malika, all the healers I talked to referred in varying degrees to 1) family tradition, 2) initiatory illness, and 3) dream encounter (see Table 1). In the following I discuss in more detail these elements that comprise the base of the legitimacy of the religious healing system in Khorezm.

Table 1. Modes of legitimacy (m: male; f: female)

| | **Healer** | **Family tradition** | **Initiatory illness** | **Dreaming** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Abdulla (m) | 1 | | |
| 2 | Abdulla (m) | | | 1 |
| 3 | Anajon A.(f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | Anajon B. (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 5 | Egembergan (m) | 1 | | 1 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Jumavoy (m) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | Karomat (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 8 | Malika (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 9 | Maryam (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 10 | Nilufar (f) | | 1 | |
| 11 | Nuriya (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 12 | O'ro'zvoy (m) | 1 | | |
| 13 | Oygul A. (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 14 | Oygul B. (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 15 | Oyto'ti (f) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 16 | Oliyajon (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 17 | Reymajon (f) | | | 1 |
| 18 | Sapargul (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 19 | Sara (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 20 | Shukurjon (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 21 | Soliya (f) | | 1 | 1 |
| 22 | To'xtavoy (m) | | | 1 |
| | ***Proportion in %*** | **45** | **72** | **86** |

### *8.5.1 'This thing is in my blood' – the inheritance of healing power*

The notion that healing power can be inherited applies to all types of healers, whether they cure by means of prayers, natural medicine, laying on of hands, or performing spirit exorcism in the way as described earlier. On grounds of their sacred descent, members of religious honour groups like the *xo'ja*s, the *sayid*s, and the *shix*s are particularly credited with the possession of supernatural power. For example, my village host took it for granted that his newly discovered healing capacity was due to his being a *shix*: 'Among my ancestors there were many who possessed such a potency (*guch*).' Egemberган-*xo'ja*, a specialist in herbal medicine has also emphasised that he had received the power to heal from his mother, the descendent of a local *sayid* family. O'ro'zvoy, the bonesetter (*siniqchi*), when asked how he learned his task, answered that the skill of his father, a *siniqchi* whose fame is still remembered in many parts of the province, came down to him after his death. Abdulla-*xo'ja*, who heals and predicts the future by means of the Qur'an similarly stressed that he lacks any formal religious education. His prayers, he said, work through his inherited healing power: 'My grandfather was a very powerful healer. In the time of the great deprivations, he sup-

ported the family by secretly practicing as a *tabib*. It is his power that came down to me.'

*Folbin*s also claimed inherited capacities. Thus, referring to her ancestors who passed down their healing power to her, Oygul said: 'This power has come to me through seven generations' (*Bu guch yetti orko oylanip galyan mango*). Oyto'ti claimed that she inherited the army of spirits (*lashkar*) of her mother, while Malika explained that it was her father, a *folbin* of *xo'ja* descent, who had passed his capacity - which he in turn had inherited from his mother - down to her. Finally, Jumavoy, who heals by the laying on of hands, referred to his paternal grandfather, who was a mullah and who used to heal skin diseases by means of prayers and breathing. As the examples show, healing capacity can be passed on patrilineally as well matrilineally, sometimes missing out a generation.[172]

### *8.5.2 Chosen by the spirits – illness narratives*

As shown in Figure 1, the overwhelming majority of the healers explained that they have been called in a dream to become a healer. At the time of their dream vision, most of them were suffering from some kind of severe illness, most often described as frequent fainting and partial paralysis, and which doctors were unable to cure. My informants explained that as soon as they accepted the call and started healing others, their health condition improved or they recovered completely. In retrospect, the healers interpreted their illness as a means of forcing them to accept the call, and they all stressed that they cannot give up their trade without becoming ill again.

Initiatory illness, referred to both by Oyto'ti and Malika, is a characteristic feature of healing with the aid of spirits all over Central Asia and Siberia (Basilov 1995). Although the profession of the healer is often passed on through inheritance, tradition demands that the individual who is going to inherit the gift has to be chosen by the spirits. Thus, if a descendent of a former healer falls seriously ill, people take it as a proof that from among the many members of the family, this particular individual has been assigned by the spirits to continue the tradition. It belongs to the stereotypes of the 'shamanic illness' that the individual can overcome it only if he/she accepts the call to become a healer. The fact that not only spirit healers but also those *tabib*s and *folbin*s who in their therapeutic practices only resort to the laying on of hands, massage, or who cure by means of breathing and prayer recitation claim to have suffered from an initiatory illness, indicates the blurring of the different categories of religious healing in the region.

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[172] The inheritance of healing ability is well documented for Central Asia (Basilov 1995: 63; Bajalijewa 2002: 93; Bellér-Hann 2006: 395; Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming).

The widespread occurrence of the initiatory illness caused some scholars to conclude that this type of healers basically emerge from the ranks of those who are mentally or otherwise ill. Also Snesarev stresses that in Khorezm 'people associated with the gift of shamanism are, in greater or lesser degree, mentally handicapped or actually insane' (Snesarev 2003: 38).[173] Contrary to this observation, only two times did I come across healers whose initiatory illness was described – either by themselves or by others - as *jillilik*, the Khorezmian term for mental illness or 'madness'. One of them was Anajon-*opa*, whose career as a *folbin* began in the mid-1950s, when she escaped from the psychiatry clinic of Urganch where she had been taken because of *jillilik*. Once out of the clinic, Anajon's relatives took her to the shrine of Ulli Pir where she was laid in chains and locked up for 40 days in the *chillahona* in the expectation that the miraculous power of the saint would free her from the *jin*s who had come to dwell in her. Anajon later reported that while in the *chillahona*, Ulli Pir appeared to her in a dream and promised her recovery, if she accepted the gift of healing. The other case is of 70-year-old Maryam-*opa,* who reported that she got the call in a dream while she was receiving psychiatric treatment in the early 1960s. People who knew her at the time described how, prior to her taking up the profession of a *folbin*, Maryam-*opa* went around in rags like a *jilli*, with her hair uncombed and wild. The fact that mainly elderly informants explained their initiatory illness in terms of *jillilik*, might support Snesarev's notion that in the past, the gift of *folbinchilik* was more strongly associated with mental disturbance than nowadays.

The phenomenon of people who have gone through serious illness subsequently becoming healers is known in different parts of the world and is not missing from Islamic contexts. For example, Gerda Sengers mentions that Qur'anic healers in modern Egypt often assert that they gained insight into the sacred verses of the Qur'an during a personal crisis or illness (Sengers 2003: 138). According to Abdelhalek Karabila, modern Moroccan healers also claim to have been possessed by *jin*s who made them ill. After taking up the call to heal, they recovered. Had they not done so, the healers explained, the spirits would punish them or one of their relatives with illness and even death (Karabila 1996: 98).[174] Although the 'illness-pattern' in the case of healing is not exclusive to Central Asia and Siberia, in that context it does appear to be a particular cultural imperative, as the Khorezmian case

[173] For a critical discussion of the widespread notion that 'shamans' are neuropaths or otherwise mentally and psychologically disturbed individuals, see Basilov 1997.

[174] Sündermann, however, mentions in her study of Syrian religious healers only one case of initiatory illness. Here, a sick man overcame illness after a Sufi-master forced him to heal others.

also illustrates. As Basilov points out, the necessity of the often quoted 'shamanic illness' is suggested to the healers by the traditions of their society, rather than as a consequence of actual madness or neurosis, as the recovery from illness after the acceptance of the call 'is dictated by the traditional behavioural pattern of the shaman, according to which the illness is supposed to pass' once the call is accepted (Basilov 1997: 6).

The precise identity of the dream image that forces an individual to become a healer is often obscured. Sometimes, the healers referred to such an image as *pir* or *bobo*, terms usually designating Islamic saints. In some cases, they spoke of the saints by name, like the herb-doctor Egemberganxo'ja who explained that Ulli Pir came to him in a dream and called upon him to heal. Others reported similar dream encounters with ancestral spirits who endowed them with the capacity to heal. For example, when referring to her healing ability, Soliya said: 'When I was lying ill, my ancestors came to me in a dream and gave me this thing.' Often, the images were simply referred to as 'persons', sometimes described as old grey bearded men clothed in white garments; descriptions which equally evoke images of Islamic holy men as well as ancestor spirits. Speaking about a first dream-like experience, Shukurjon mentioned a spirit that was in the shape of a young man of very large build and whom, in the course of our conversation, she described as a *pari* and addressed with words such as 'my companion' (*yo'ldash*) and 'my supporter' (*orqa*).[175] She explained that the spirit had first appeared to her during a healing ceremony. She became terribly frightened, trembled from top to toe and lost consciousness. As time went by, she got accustomed to the spirit who paid her frequent visits. 'He is around me most of the time and tells me what to do. If I do not obey, he makes me ill,' Shukurjon asserted. In her narrative, Oygul also mentioned a 'supporter' to whom she referred as *arkak yo'ldash* ('male companion'): 'Wherever I go, he is behind me and protects me. I have nothing to fear, I can walk at night alone on the street. However, if I don't follow his orders, he makes me very ill. He is the one who forces me to heal.' Statements like those given by Shukurjon and Oygul fit well with the picture drawn by Snesarev, according to whom the *po'rxon*'s

> possession of a special supernatural power (…) depends upon the fact that (…) the shaman allegedly came into close and sometimes intimate relations with a representative of the spirit world, or, to be more exact, with a *pari*. (…) For an individual called by supernatural

[175] People often speak about a specialist credited with such a power as possessing *orqa*, a term literally meaning 'back' but also used locally in the sense of 'support' as well as 'generation'. Thus, saying that an individual has *orqa* (*orqasi bor*) or is *orqali* (with *orqa*), people – or the healers themselves - indicate that he or she possess supernatural support.

> forces to serve as a shaman, the initial period of such a relationship with a *pari* is always agonizing, especially if he refuses the gift of shamanism for a long time (Snesarev 2003: 36-7).

Indeed, most of the healers suffering from an initiatory illness reported that initially they did not want to take on the heavy task of *folbinchilik*. In a few cases, they were prevented from healing by their social environment, like Oygul who reported that her husband did not allow her to take up the profession until, after many years, he understood that this was the only possibility for her to recover completely. Although some female healers stressed that they have to obey their 'companions', none of them hinted at intimate relationships with their male protector *pari*s. Thus, over the last century the 'sexual factor' which, according to Snesarev was 'present in virtually all Khorezmian information about the beginning of a shaman's career' (Snesarev 2003: 37), appears to have lost its significance as a means of legitimisation.

### *8.5.3 Revelation in a dream*

As Figure 1 shows, dreams by far play the greatest part in individuals becoming healers. Fully 90 percent of the healers explained that at a decisive moment of their life they had a dream which they – or the diviners to whom they turned in order to interpret the dream – understood as a call to take up the profession of either *tabib* or *folbin.* Often the dream was experienced at a holy site, where the future healers spent some time in the hope of recovering from the illness they were suffering from at that time. The dreams contained particular, culturally agreed-upon signs, which ensured that it would be interpreted as a call to become a healer. Thus, the individual who experienced the dream was usually offered one or more healing appurtenances: the drum and/or the whip, the torch used in the *alas* ritual, or they see themselves healing with hands or uttering prayer formulas. Moreover, the healers explained that all the training required for their particular method of healing was revealed to them in dream. Oygul's answer to my question as to how she learned to perform the *o'yin* was typical of many others: 'This knowledge has been given to me in a dream.' Anajon explained that the saint who appeared to her in a dream spit three times into her mouth, thus transmitting knowledge (*ilim*) to her. 'Before that time, I did not know any single prayer,' she said and added that in a subsequent dream, the saint led her hand over a piece of paper until she learned how to write prayers and formulas (to be used for amulets) in Arabic letters.

Asked whether they use a particular method in their treatments, healers often gave answers like 'My *pir* does not allow me to do this.' Especially when they wanted to make clear that they do not engage in divination or

black magic, many healers referred to their *pir*s, who forbid them such practices. Very often, the healers are also forewarned in their dreams of the approaching visit and ailment of a patient, as well as the treatment that they should employ. Only once did I come across an exception to the principle that 'technical knowledge is not sought but revealed' (Reynolds 1992: 32). Egembergan-*xo'ja* explained that he acquired his knowledge about herbs and the modes of their application from books. 'You cannot become a healer unless you receive a call by a *pir*. Knowledge, however, has to be achieved by learning,' he stressed.

Once an individual agrees to accept the call, tradition dictates that he or she receive a blessing (*potya*), the consecration to the practice of *fol-binchilik*. The *potya* also often comes in sleep when the future healer spends a night at the tombs of a saint. In other cases, the healers reported that they were advised in a dream to visit a particular saintly tomb where they would get the *potya* from the guardian of the shrine or by a mullah. However, the *potya* can be bestowed on the aspirant healer by another healer as well. In some cases, where the period between receiving the call and starting to heal has been particularly long, healers have claimed that they were unable to take up the profession earlier because they had not been 'shown' (*ko'rsatilmagan*) in a dream where they should turn to for the *potya*.

Since the earliest times of Islam, dreams have played an important role and they continue to be relevant to the lives of many Muslims, right up to the present-day. As Roy Dilley reminds us, since Mohammed's initial revelation came to him during sleep, the 'theme of inspiration and instruction through dream and dream-like experiences is one that lies at the heart of Islam' (Dilley 1992: 76). Islamic theology distinguishes between true and false dreams, the first being inspired by God and the latter by Satan, malevolent spirits and demons, or by disturbances of the dreamer's mind (Daiber 1995: 645). Although according to the teaching of Islam, Mohammed's prophetic revelations came to an end, 'true' dreams continue to be seen as mediators of divine messages throughout Islamic history. They play an important role in many social and religious contexts, and are particularly relevant as a driving force behind an individual's development as a ritual specialist.[176] Viewing dreams as divine messages, people may endeavour to realise in their waking life what they experienced in sleep. In this context, M. C. Jedrej and Rosalind Shaw speak about dreams as 'authorising discourses', stressing that people often use dreams and dream images 'to construct acceptable accounts, to explain to themselves and others otherwise

[176] Ewing (1990) provides an insightful analysis of initiation dreams in Sufism, based on the example of Pakistani Sufis. Dilley (1992) discusses the issue of inspiration and instruction through dreams in the case of Muslim weavers among the Tukolor in Africa.

extraordinary and unintelligible actions' (Jedrej and Shaw 1992: 8). An important aspect of dreams refers to the aspect of agency. On the one hand, the decision to accept the call and become a healer, often against the will of their families, the *folbin*s in the examples above developed agency. On the other hand, they at the same time subsumed their actions under the agency of a supernatural agent outside themselves. Burkhard Schnepel speaks in this context about the aspect of *passio*: in the perception of the natives, it is the supernatural power that initiated the dream experience that acts, rather than the dreamer (Schnepel 2001: 26).

### *8.5.4 Apprenticeship*

In the indigenous healing systems of Central Asia, the institution of apprenticeship has rarely been recorded. As for Khorezm, Snesarev explicitly points out that contrary to other occupations, apprenticeship among the 'shamans' was unknown (Snesarev 2003: 39). My interlocutors, on the other hand, were of divided opinion on the question of apprenticeship. While a few of them actually stressed that healers do not need any formal instruction, others claimed that healers cannot start working independently without first having done a period of apprenticeship (*shogirdlik*) at the side of an experienced healer who gives the aspirant healer the *potya* when he feels that the latter is competent to start healing others. *Shogirdlik* includes helping with the master's healing rituals, giving some money and other gifts, especially at the time the healer receives the master's blessing. Nonetheless, the healers generally claimed that they did not learn about healing from their master (*usto*) since everything they know was communicated to them in dream. In denying the importance of their masters' instruction, the healers obviously bow to the force of tradition which requires supernatural instances to be the only source of a healer's power.

The precondition for the establishment of a master-apprentice relationship is that the future *usto* and *shogird* have a shared dream in which they are 'shown' to each other. Thus the herb-doctor Egembergan-*xo'ja* explained that he accepts an apprentice (*shogird*) only on the condition that he has been shown to him in dream by his patron saint Ulli Pir. The very same saint must also appear to the aspirant *shogird* and show him Egembergan-*xo'ja*. When I asked Oliyojon how she became acquainted with her master Anajon, who lives in a small village some 40 kilometres away from Oliyojon's home town Khiva, she answered:

> I saw in dream my *pir* and a woman clothed in a white garment. I went to a *folbin* in order to interpret the dream. She explained that the woman in white was my future master Anajon from whom I would receive the *potya*. I just followed the way shown me in dream

> and went to Anajon's place. Since she had seen me in her dream shortly before my arrival, she accepted me and I became her *shogird*. After one year, she gave me the *potya* and I started healing.

Proceeding from Basilov's claim that in Central Asian 'shamanism' apprenticeship was only occasionally present, Penkala-Gawęcka ascribes the existence of the master-apprentice relationship among contemporary spirit healers in Kazakhstan to the decline of the healing tradition during the Soviet period (Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming). She argues that in pre-Soviet times healing ceremonies were collective events and, thus, people were familiar with their form and content. Under communist rule, spirit healing became a more private observance and continues to be, even nowadays. Thus, Penkala-Gawęcka concludes that:

> Ordinary people do not have an intimate knowledge about the attributes and demands of healing, thus the role of the master-teacher who introduces the newcomer into the profession has significantly increased. This seems obvious to the researcher, however, from the point of view of healers it is still the spirits who in fact teach and guide candidates and the role of the master is limited to giving them some necessary help (Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming ).

As for Khorezm, the situation appears less clear. Although we lack information about the institution of *shogirdlik* in the past, we cannot assume that its present appearance is an innovation based on changed circumstances. The demand for the 'collective dream' as its precondition suggests that it follows traditional templates well-known from the context of Sufism (for examples, see Ewing 1990: 58), with which the indigenous healing system also shares a number of other characteristics such as the *zikr* or *jar* mentioned above. My data suggest that *shogirdlik* is first of all regarded as necessary in cases where healers cannot lay claim to inherited capabilities. Indeed, none of the healers who came from families with an on-going tradition of healing reported that they had joined a master at the beginning of their career, while all others did. However, roughly half of the healers had at least one or two *shogird*s whom they introduce into the trade of *folbinchilik*. In some cases, it was the healers themselves who diagnosed the healing abilities of a patient who turned to them for help in a personal crisis. Thus, 'through appointing new candidates for healers, experienced practitioners contribute to the rebirth of tradition of spiritual healing' (Penkala-Gawęcka Forthcoming).

## 8.6 The reputation of healers

The reputation of healers is not stable but is subject to constant negotiations between them, the patients and the wider social environment. In order to strengthen their reputation, healers would emphasise the number of their

clients and tell stories about successful treatments they had carried out. While some of the healers I talked to never admitted having failed in either a diagnosis or a cure, others admitted occasional failures. For the latter, they usually blamed the patients either for not having followed the healer's advice or for not believing strongly enough. Belief in the efficacy of the healing is generally perceived as a precondition of successful treatment. For example, the herb healer Egembergan-*xo'ja* explained:

> Taking the pulse of a patient, I can feel whether or not he has a pure heart and whether or not he believes in my ability to heal. If the patient has at least 90 percent belief in the *tabib*, treatment is possible. However, if he believes less then 40 percent, the *pir*s do not even allow trying it.

Some healers also reported a temporary inability to heal, which they ascribed to their having themselves become victim to magic, carried out against them by one of their colleagues. By pointing out their colleagues' jealousy, the healers seek to enhance the patients' confidence in their ability: only a mighty healer inspires the envy of other healers. On the other hand, in order to undermine the reputation of their rivals, my interlocutors often accused them of carrying out black magic or described them as being greedy and unserious. As one healer/diviner explained:

> I have been serving the people for 13 years but I have never betrayed anybody. However, other *tabib*s do this. They write false *duo*s for the sick, knowing full well that it would not help them and they will come back in order to get another one. This they do out of greed for money. But I am afraid of God. I do not betray.

In order to avoid failure, when an experienced healer recognises a serious ailment, he sends the patient to the medical doctors. It can even enhance the healer's reputation when he recommends bio-medical treatment and it succeeds, as was the case with Feruza, a young bookkeeper from Shovot. She had bronchial pain and turned to Maryam-*opa* who diagnosed that her ailment was a case for the doctors and sent her to the hospital. Feruza explained: 'She told me that I would spend two weeks in the hospital and recover. It happened exactly as she said.' The event strengthened Feruza's confidence in the healer and since then she recommends that all her friends and relatives go to Maryam-*opa*, which has increased her practice. Stories about the effectiveness of individual experiences with a particular healer are generally communicated among neighbours and relatives and are the foundation on which their reputation and credibility are established.

Among those who call on the services of spiritual healers one can find representatives of all social strata and educational backgrounds: farmers, traders, workmen and housewives as well as people with university training.

Although men are no less ready than women to principally acknowledge the effectiveness of spiritual healing – under the condition that the healer possesses 'real power' (*haqiqiy guch*) – women in general tend to be more frequent visitors of healers and diviners then men.

The growth of interest in spiritual healing does not mean that it enjoys undisputed legitimacy. Those who adhere to the materialist worldview consider the activities of religious healers of all kinds to be hocus-pocus. Others may acknowledge that healing with the help of spirits may be effective but refuse to call upon the services of such healers on religious grounds. Thus, all the imams I spoke with condemned such practices as sorcery (*sehr*), which is forbidden in Islam. Davronjon, the imam at the Ulli Pir sanctuary explained:

> Of course, it is possible that an individual works together with *jin*s. *Folbin*s may have command over *jin*s that attached themselves to them. However, these are non-Muslim *jin*s. The *folbin*s heal and predict the future with their help. But such things have no place in Islam. It is not allowed for Muslims to carry out sorcery or to turn to people who use such practices. The only thing you permissibly can do in order to undo magic or the effects of malicious spirits is to follow the example of the Prophet and to resort to God by means of prayers. You may turn to a mullah or a *tabib* only if he resorts to prayers and breathing, since both are allowed by Islam.

Most *folbin*s I spoke to were at pains to tell me that they pray *namoz* at least once a day and that they only heal in the state of ritual purity. Some also advise their patients to carry out the ritual ablution before spirit exorcism or other spiritual treatment is carried out for them. A part of the healers explained that they started praying *namoz* at the same time that they took up the profession of a healer. Knowledge about the correct way of praying, they claimed, was given to them in the very same dream in which they received their call. The emphasis on good Islamic conduct is a means by which the healers seek to avoid the reproach of not being 'true' Muslims. Apparently for the same reason, even healers who openly deal with spirits in their therapeutic practices often refuse to be called *folbin*; rather, they insist on being addressed as *tabib*, a term that is not tainted with idolatry (*shirk*). Rasanayagam, who made similar observations during his research on spiritual healing in other parts of Uzbekistan, concludes:

> Healers are emphasizing that they are working in the service of God and establishing this by setting up themselves from those who are not. I argue that when healers distance themselves from the *baksh*is and *folbin*s, and when they distinguish their *azizlar* [Islamic saints] from the *jinn* of the latter, they are establishing themselves as good

> Muslims, and the moral ambiguity of healing power makes it all the more necessary to do so (Rasanayagam 2006b: 383).[177]

Nowadays in Khorezm, particular healing practices such as invocations accompanied by the drum are presented as part of the region's cultural heritage that derives from Zoroastrianism. In line with this, one of the healers I worked with, the *folbin* Oyto'ti, performed spirit invocations for a film celebrating Khorezm as the homeland of the Avesta. The film was broadcasted on local TV on the occasion of an official festival devoted to the memory of the Avesta. Thus, while *folbinchilik* (or at least aspects of it) experiences a positive valuation in the official, local historiography, it has been challenged by the new Islamic purists rather than by its secular opponents. However, at least since the end of the 1990s, Islamic criticism of tradition no longer has the opportunity to express itself in public. The fear of being accused of 'Wahhabism' has made people careful not to show disapproval of religious activities favoured or at least tolerated by the authorities as part of the nation's 'golden heritage'. Individuals, who in private conversations with me clearly condemned healing with the aid of spirits, divination as un-Islamic, remained silent when people at social gatherings exchanged accounts of their experiences with particular *folbin*s.

[177] The author's assumption, however, that the healers' identification of their supernatural helpers with saints rather than with *jin*s is due to recent contestations on the side by followers of a more scripturalist Islam, is questionable. As has been shown earlier in this chapter, ethnographic data testify that the helper spirits of the healers have long ago been replaced by Islamic saints.

# *Chapter 9*
# Conclusion

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and alarmed by the worldwide growth of militant Islamic movements that were gaining influence in some parts of Central Asia in the 1990s, Western political analysts began asking what role Islam would play in the political development of the region. Much of the literature on Islam in post Soviet Uzbekistan (and in Central Asia in general) is the work of policy experts who saw the reassertion of Islam as the most serious threat to regional security, political stability and democratisation in the region. On the other hand, so far little research has been done on the articulation of Islam in various local contexts. By looking at contemporary forms of everyday Muslim religiosity in the province of Khorezm in the westernmost area of Uzbekistan, it has been my aim to contribute to a more balanced understanding of what is going on in the field of religion in a geographical area that, up to now, has largely escaped scholarly attention. I was particularly interested in how the overall political transformations following the decline of the Soviet Union affected people's attitudes towards religion.

Of the newly independent states of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is generally regarded as the country where post-Soviet Islamic revival has taken the most visible form and where fundamentalist tendencies are the most strongly pronounced. However, my ethnographic data reveals a great deal of diversity in the religious orientation and practices of the Khorezmians, which should warn us to be wary of generalisations, not only within one state but even more so within a particular geographical setting.

In the introductory chapter of this book I showed that Western analysts portrayed Islam in the Soviet era in a highly generalised manner, paying almost no attention to possible differences either between each of the Muslim republics or within them. I have argued that, in view of the diversity of pre-existing modes of religiosity, one can assume that Soviet policy and ideology affected people's religious life differently in the different parts of

the Muslim territories and this consideration should be taken into account when discussing the role of Islam after the downfall of the Soviet regime.

In my discussion of the regime's post-independence discourse on Islam, I have shown that the Uzbek government – in order to legitimise being in power and to consolidate the new nation state – severely condemned the anti-religious policy of the Soviets as an attack against the spiritual values of the Uzbek people and their 'golden' historical heritage. This official view, however, is not generally shared by the local population. My research revealed that many, if not most, Khorezmians remembered the socialist past very favourably. Fuelled by economic degradation and the loss of social security experienced by a large part of the population following independence, nostalgia for the Soviet era triumphed over negative memories of restrictions imposed by the communists on the practice of religion. I argued that the positive evaluation of the Soviet regime's policy towards religion is in part due to internalised secularist sentiments on the side of the population. On the other hand, the case of Khorezm also appears to confirm the notion that the destruction of the institutional basis and the learned traditions of Islam were less dramatically experienced in regions where 'local' rather then 'normative' Islam was the dominant form.

The title of this book – 'Religion is not so strong here' – reflects the general self-perception of the Khorezmians who regard laxity in religious observance as a typical feature of their province that predates Soviet influence. In discussions with me, most people evaluated this 'traditional' indifference towards Islamic prescriptions in positive terms, as evidence of the lack of religious fanaticism, particularly when comparisons were made with the religious devotion of their fellow countrymen outside the region, particularly in the Ferghana Valley. Indeed, when I was conducting my research in Khorezm a decade and a half after the decline of the Soviet Union, Islam in the region was far less visible in the public sphere than in other parts of the country I visited, such as Andijon, Samarqand, and Bukhara. Differences between the religious culture of Khorezm and other parts of Uzbekistan have been repeatedly noted in the literature and were ascribed to the relative isolation of the province from the rest of Transoxania (Mavarannahr) that became known as Uzbekistan after the 'national delimination' by the Soviets in 1924. As Bregel suggests, the geographic isolation of Khorezm contributed 'to various features of its culture that made it quite distinct from its larger neighbour, Mavarannahr' (Bregel 2003: 66).

For a long time in Central Asia, the Uzbeks together with the Tajiks have been known for their devout religiosity which is often contrasted to the more 'superficial' Islamic beliefs ascribed to the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen. While the popular stereotypes seem to hold true as far as the role of

religious expression in the public sphere is concerned, when compared to Uzbekistan as a whole, Khorezm appears to deviate from the general Uzbek pattern and to display signs of religious pragmatism, which renders it more comparable to its Turkmen neighbours. However, indifference towards Islamic prescriptions should not be taken for a lack of religious commitment or misunderstood as a sign for the people's being little more than 'culturally' or 'nominally' Muslims. I came across only a very few people who claimed to be atheist or agnostic; in general, even those who were the most ignorant of the formal tenets of the religion expressed their faith (*imon*) in Islam and thanked God for being a Muslim.

In my discussion of the main contours of religious life in Khorezm, I showed the deep concern that people display for an Islamic burial and the well being of their dead. Even if in their lifetime people do not behave according to the requirements of Islam, nevertheless they aspire to be buried as Muslims in the hope of God's mercy in the afterlife. I have argued that since concern for the afterlife is a thoroughly religious issue, their insistence in having a proper Islamic burial demonstrates that the commitment of the Khorezmians to Islam goes beyond being a mere marker of collective or cultural identity. Through the observance of Islamic funerary rites, the Khorezmians confirm their attachment to the Islamic 'great tradition' and demonstrate their claim of being part of the *umma*, the worldwide community of believers.

The example of Khorezm illustrates that the vigorous reassertion of Islam in Central Asia during *glasnost* and in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union is not necessarily an enduring phenomenon. By the end of the first decade of independence, Islam had largely withdrawn from the public sphere, to an even greater degree in Khorezm than in other parts of the country; there was a considerable drop in mosque attendance and many of the newly constructed mosques had already ceased operating. I maintain that this development is due only in part to the religious policy of the regime, which became increasingly repressive from the mid-1990s onwards. In general, the surge of interest in religious issues has waned as the people have 'turned to normality', as some of my interlocutors emphasised. As a whole, religion did not appear to be a major force in everyday life; most of the people's time and energy seemed to be bound up with survival and efforts to improve the conditions of their lives. Moreover, as the regime ascribed blame for the series of militant attacks against government bodies in Tashkent and in the Ferghana Valley to Islamic extremists, a large part of the population came to think that too much concern with religion was counterproductive to peaceful development of the country.

Emphasis in orthopraxy, which concerns itself primarily with canonical religious rituals and is often regarded as a particular characteristic of Islam, was largely absent in Khorezm, where the people regard 'belief of the heart' as the necessary requirement of being a Muslim. During the time of my fieldwork, I observed that only a small percentage of the population manifested strict obedience to the religious rules. Of the five 'pillars' of Islam, fasting in the month of Ramadan and observing the rituals connected with it became appreciably more popular since independence, with about 20 percent of the people participating in this increasing trend. However, as in the case of many customary norms and practices that are religious in origin, the daily celebration of *iftar* (the breaking the fast) does not necessarily require regular personal religious observance. Over the last few years, the significance of evening neighbourhood gatherings on the occasion of breaking the fast has increased because of the role they play in strengthening communal relationships as well as reinforcing Muslim identity, even for those who do not keep the fast.

As I have shown in this book, for most of the people in Khorezm, religious practice was largely limited to the celebration of life-cycle events and the commemoration of the dead, much in the same way that it used to be during the Soviet era. While life-cycle rituals markedly resisted the Soviet struggle against the traditional Muslim way of life, many other long-established religious practices were either abandoned or withdrew into the domestic sphere. Of these practices, the institution of shrine visitation (*ziyorat*) experienced the strongest revival since independence; endorsed by the government and with the blessing of the official religious establishment in present-day Uzbekistan, *ziyorat* became the most visible sign of Muslim religiosity in the public sphere in Khorezm. The practice of *ziyorat* is strongly related to concerns about health, prosperity and well being as are other religious practices – such as religious healing, magic and divination – that have also witnessed a revival, though to a lesser degree, in the last decade and a half. I have argued that the resurgence of religious healing – whether by seeking recovery from illness at a shrine or by relying on services offered by healing practitioners – has coincided with the dramatic deterioration of the state provided medical care system since independence. On the other hand, as the example of the healer-saint To'xtavoy indicates, the current situation – in which old certainties and life conditions have been wiped out by post-independence social upheavals – makes recourse to miracles and saints inevitable and increases the likelihood of the birth of new saints to meet people's needs.

Another issue raised at the beginning of this book refers to the notion that is prevalent in many ethnographical studies, according to which reli-

gious beliefs and practices among Muslims which deviate from or contradict canonical, 'orthodox' Islamic teachings are largely local phenomena. Soviet scholars who worked on religious issues in Muslim Central Asia unanimously viewed 'popular' religious practices as 'survivals' of pre-Islamic traditions, mainly of 'shamanism' and, in the case of Khorezm, Zoroastrianism. However, as I demonstrated through frequent references to similar phenomena in other parts of the Islamic world, what is labelled local in the literature is often equally part of universal – although not canonical – Islamic traditions. In other words, in many cases 'local' or 'popular' Islam is just as global as are beliefs and practices that are rooted in the founding texts of the Qur'an and the *hadith*. This holds true for most of the beliefs and practices discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading 'Dealing with the supernatural' and even more for those related to saints and shrines. Some of the notions and rituals that surround death and the dead appear to be more characteristic of Central Asia as a whole; this might indicate a common pre-Islamic origin of the cult of the dead in the region which however, has been incorporated into a Muslim sense of meaning.

The decades of Soviet modernisation and anti-religious policies impacted deeply on people's knowledge about the doctrinal and ritual basics of Islam. Furthermore, many customary beliefs and practices lost their former significance as a result of the interruption of inter-generational transmission or because people increasingly viewed them as superstitions. This applies particularly to the religious healing of the *folbin*s, in which the healing practitioner relies on the help of spirits to extract the evil from the patent's body. Unlike neighbouring Kazakhstan, where similar spirit exorcism rituals are supported by the state as part of the Kazakh 'national heritage', the *folbin*s' traditional mode of treatment is unlikely to witness a spectacular revival in present day Khorezm. Here, the current upsurge of interest in religious healing has promoted methods regarded as more modern or more Islamic. Thus the post-independence reassertion of religious healing is not a straightforward revitalisation of pre-Soviet healing traditions. Rather, religious healing in present-day Khorezm evidently involves both the reconstruction of traditions and the incorporation of new methods and modern meanings.

Like all other Muslim communities in post-Soviet Central Asia, the Khorezmians are grappling with tensions between the local heritage, the Soviet legacy, the new state ideology, and the pull of a religious modernism that is informed concomitantly by diverse external and internal influences. In my discussion of customary religious practices, such as shrine visitation, magic, divination, and religious healing, I have shown how these contradictory influences are manifested in people's everyday behaviour. People hold

varying opinions concerning which beliefs are strictly correct and which rituals qualify as superstitious acts. In recent times, due to the greater availability of textual sources as well as the activity of Islamic missionaries in the first years of independence, awareness of universalistic alternatives to customary beliefs and practices has grown considerably. However, with the exception of religious professionals, I came across very few who went so far as to denounce them as utterly un-Islamic. The tensions between different interpretations of 'truly' Muslim religiosity have not – at least, not at the time of my research – led to outright conflict in the community. What emerges from looking at the different modes of religious behaviour described in this book is a picture of temperance and tolerance. This tolerance derives from a general attitude towards religion, reinforced through seven decades of Soviet modernisation and secularisation that advocated the view that religious belief is a matter of personal consciousness rather than a public issue. And so, at least for the time being, this prevailing attitude prevents not only Islamic puritans but also religious militants from making major inroads in the region.

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*"... anthropology needs a broader vision. It needs to shake off its strong association with the primitive and the exotic and become genuinely global in its comparisons. From this perspective, more sustained attention to Eurasia and a renewed focus on its underlying unity might launch the transformation of our parochial scholarly traditions into a mature cosmopolitan science."*
*– Chris Hann, in his Preface to this series*

# "Religion is not so strong here"
## Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism

This book examines religious life in the province of Khorezm in western Uzbekistan in the context of the overall political transformations which followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The people of Khorezm consider themselves to be less religious than their fellow countrymen and there has been no sharp increase in the observance of the normative tenets of Islam since independence. For the great majority, religious practice remains connected to life-cycle events and to concerns about health, wellbeing and prosperity. The author focuses on the elements of everyday religiosity including domestic rituals, shrine-related activities and various forms of religious healing. She also analyses the effects of state intervention on particular expressions of Muslim religiosity and the growing tension between those who adhere to local 'customary' Islam and representatives of new, more puritan understandings.

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