Healing with spirits and the formation of Muslim selfhood in post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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Since Uzbekistan gained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam has re-entered the public sphere and people there have joined the rest of the Muslim world in contemplating reflexively what it means to be Muslim. This article explores this process in the context of healing practices involving spirit agency. It argues that this form of healing, as an imaginal encounter with spirit agents, constitutes a particular mode of access to divine knowledge and power through which people validate their own particular concepts of Muslim selfhood. It explores how the content of these encounters and the cosmology invoked by healers are changing in response to the increasing influence of scripturalist interpretations of Islam, and how healing practice is interpreted through social interaction within the healers’ communities.

Within the Soviet Union, the place of religion in the public sphere was restricted and closely regulated by the state. For the majority of the population of Central Asia, Islam was largely experienced as an element of national and cultural identity, manifested in such events as life-cycle rituals, shrine visitation, and various forms of religious healing (Akiner 1996; Khalid 2003). While the public sphere was dominated by values of socialist modernity, the private sphere of the family was a space for the expression of local identity and culture, part of which was self-ascription as Muslim (Kandiyoti & Azimova 2004; Tett 1995).

Beginning in the last years of Soviet rule when Gorbachev’s reforms allowed greater religious freedoms, and particularly since Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, Islam has re-emerged into the public sphere and many Muslims have begun to ask themselves in a more reflexive way what it actually means to be Muslim. State authorities, however, continue to regulate public religious expression closely, especially in relation to Islam, which is viewed as a potential basis for political opposition to the regime. In much of the Muslim world, movements which might be glossed as modernist or reformist and which challenge what are seen as non-Islamic practices derived from local traditions are frequently at the forefront of debates about what constitutes ‘correct’ Muslim belief and practice.¹ In Uzbekistan, however, the state attempts to monopolize the answer to the question of what it means to be a Muslim. Groups
independent of the government which advocate a modernist interpretation are treated as militant extremists and are prevented from openly propagating their ideas.

Local Muslim practice, much of which would be considered heterodox by followers of a scripturalist interpretation of Islam, is, however, not viewed by the present regime as threatening and is allowed relatively free rein. In an environment where other forms of religious expression are circumscribed, these local practices have become an important site in which people are able to shape their sense of Muslim selfhood. In this article I will examine how people explore what it means to be a Muslim through one of these practices, healing with the aid of spirits.

Possession healing is of course not the only context in which people address this question. Since independence, the number of madrassas (Muslim religious schools) has dramatically increased. Although controlled by central government, they offer education in the central texts of Islam and the orthodoxies of the Hanafi legal school (the version of Islam supported by the state). There are a number of government-approved religious publications available to a popular readership providing basic Islamic knowledge, manuals for conduct referring to the Qur’an and Hadith as authorities, and published sermons of state-approved imams in book and cassette form. Moreover, people are exposed to these ideas if they attend Friday prayers at the mosque, or even at life-cycle events such as wedding feasts where popular preachers, often madrassa-trained, deliver sermons to the guests. Through a discussion of healing practices, I will examine how this scripturalist interpretation of Islam is influencing ideas of Muslim selfhood and how people relate to changing ideas of Muslim orthodoxy.

The material for this article was collected during two periods of field research totalling six months carried out in and around the city of Samarkand between July 2003 and April 2004, and a further four months in a village near the city of Andijan, which I am calling Pakhtabad, from May to August 2004. During the course of this fieldwork I observed the activities of sixteen healers, four of whom were men. I also conducted unstructured interviews with these healers and with people who had recourse to this type of healing. The language of the interviews was usually Uzbek or, in Samarkand city, occasionally Russian.

A particular mode of access to divine power and knowledge

Much of the anthropology of healing, spirit possession, and sorcery in the Muslim world and elsewhere has sought to explain these phenomena in terms of strategies aimed at overcoming socio-economic disadvantage or at securing material or social benefit. They have been interpreted, for example, as means by which marginal actors in society, often women, gain some measure of authority, agency, and sense of community (Doumato 2000; Lewis 1998), in terms of charisma and strategies to gain legitimacy among other healers and clients (Bellér-Hann 2001; Lindquist 2001a), or as the response of disillusioned, marginalized groups in post-colonial societies to incomprehensible processes of globalization which leave them destitute while others around them prosper (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999).

Some anthropologists, however, have criticized such explanations as reductive (Boddy 1988; 1994; Kapferer 2003; MacPhee 2003; Nourse 1996). The analyst, they argue, imposes his or her own system of rationality and so fails to grasp the full significance of sorcery and possession practices. Instead they suggest that possession and sorcery should be examined in their own terms. Strategic actions and discourses only have
meaning within shared conceptual frameworks, even if these are being negotiated or challenged. In the present case there are evolving and diverse concepts of what it means to be a good Muslim. If we want to explore the processes by which people develop self-representations as good Muslims in the context of healing, we need to move beyond an analysis of ‘rational strategies’ and follow Jennifer Nourse (1996) in taking seriously the cosmologies present in healing practices. This means examining the particular mode of access to divine power and knowledge manifested within them.

In doing so I draw upon Thomas Csordas’s phenomenological study of healing among Catholic Charismatics (Csordas 1994). He describes how the experience of suffering and healing is interpreted by sufferers as an experience of the sacred. In what he terms ‘embodied self processes’, a ‘sacred self’ is objectified in orientation towards this divine Other. This article is not a detailed phenomenological exploration of healing of the type Csordas undertakes; I take from his work the idea that people can develop their sense of moral selfhood through ‘imaginal’ encounters which are interpreted as encounters with a divine Other.

I borrow the term ‘imaginal’ from Csordas to refer to an experiential nature of encounters with healing spirits which goes beyond mere representations in mental imagery. This type of encounter derives its power from the fact that imagination has a spontaneous quality and is never completely under conscious control. When filtered through local interpretative models of healing, this spontaneity is experienced as a direct encounter with spirit agents. The imaginal mode of experience is not confined to healing practitioners and their encounters with healing spirits. It is also manifested in the dreams of non-healers, which are interpreted as guidance from God in making important decisions, in visions of physical places directing sufferers to a specific healer, in waking visions by ordinary people in which they encounter spirit beings, as well as in what Csordas terms the ‘somatic mode of attention’ (1994: 67-70), where relief from illness is experienced as an encounter with divine agency.

While subjectively experienced as spontaneous and autonomous, episodes of illness, healing, and dreams are shaped within what I am calling local interpretative models. People develop their sense of selfhood through immediate experience, but that experience only derives its particular meaning within interpretative models. In her study of dreams and self-representations among Pakistani Sufis, Katherine Ewing (1990) argues that the phenomenology of dreaming is shaped by existing cultural codes for interpreting dreams. In constituting self-representations through dreams, people creatively break apart and combine cultural concepts. For many people in Uzbekistan dream encounters and experiences of healing, which in other societies might be interpreted as the playing out of an individual’s inner psychological issues or as exotic or irrational beliefs, are intelligible as the intervention of spirit agents because they are interpreted as such within local models of healing. Moreover, Ewing states that the success and durability of the self-representations depend on their being accepted in social interaction with others and their validation in the dreamers’ subsequent life experience. In other words, we must also take account of relations of power and ‘authorizing processes’ (Asad 1993: 37).

In this article I explore how healing practices and the cosmologies of healers have responded to changes in the knowledge and practice of Islam since independence as people have begun to have greater access to formal Islamic training and religious literature. I examine how interpretations by healers of their imaginal encounters are
influenced by changing conceptions of what constitutes correct Muslim practice, how these interpretations are developed through interactions with others, and how this process has led to a change in the content of the encounters themselves. I will also examine how the particular mode of access to divine power and knowledge manifested in imaginal encounters enables healers and others to combine diverse ideas of correct Muslim practice and validate their own particular concepts of Muslim selfhood. These are often at odds with scripturalist interpretations of Islam, which are gaining in influence.

Healing cosmologies
The imagery and cosmologies which healers in Uzbekistan invoke include an eclectic mixture of Islamic cosmology and practice, Sufi ideas about chains of the transmission of knowledge, ideas from ‘New Age’ healing such as bio-energy, and biomedical knowledge. This mixture of imagery and practice is not unique to healing in Uzbekistan but has been observed among healers in a variety of settings from Kazakhstan and Russia to Bali (Barth 1993; Beller-Hann 2001; Lindquist 2001a). Bruce Kapferer has argued that sorcery practices are major sites for invention and innovation. They are ‘metacosmologies’ in the sense that they bring together acts and practices which are generally conceived of as existing in separate cosmological frames. At the same time, however, they are ‘oriented … through structurating dynamics … that work with already conventional cosmologically patterned procedures’ (Kapferer 2003: 21). The creative power of healing derives from its particular mode of access to divine power and knowledge, but this is interpreted within historically produced interpretative models. In order to put the current practices and cosmologies of healers in historical context I present a brief account of ethnographic studies of healing in Central Asia in the Soviet period.

One of the most detailed accounts of healing practices in the Soviet period is provided by Gleb Snezarev (2003). Basing his account on fieldwork conducted in the 1950s, he describes what he calls remnants of shamanism and its demonology in Khorezm province in Uzbekistan. He describes varieties of supernatural beings, which include among others jinns and pari. Jinns in his account are malevolent beings who cause harm to people who encounter them. They are found in such places as abandoned villages, houses, and mosques, in cemeteries, in the manure of horses and donkeys, and in ash. Pari both harm people and have a benevolent attitude and, like humans, include both Muslims and unbelievers. Men and women who were called by pari to serve as shamans were referred to as parikhon or folbin in Khorezm, and bakshi among Kyrgyz and Kazaks. This call sometimes came in the form of a dream, where the chosen person was offered one of the objects used by shamans, such as a tambourine or whip. Those called risked illness or madness if they refused. In addition, upon accepting the call the shaman had to visit a saint’s tomb to receive his or her blessing, again often through a dream. Snezarev provides a detailed account of the various healing rituals which shamans used to expel the problem-causing jinn with the aid of pari spirit helpers, including the placing of chicken blood on various parts of the patient’s body as food for the pari.

Historically, this type of healing has been attacked as un-Islamic as well as interpreted as an expression of Muslim practice. Vladimir Basilov (1992: 279-81) has described the hostile attitude of some imams and other religious authorities in the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods to the activities of baks (which he translates as shamans) on
the grounds that their activities contravened the doctrines of Islam. These shamans were healers who expelled illness-causing jinn and divined the future with the aid of spirit helpers. Although Basilov clearly differentiates shamans from Muslim religious practitioners, his own account shows that this distinction is not always plausible. He states that many mullahs also engaged in divination and healed by expelling harmful spirits, and some claimed to have spirit helpers. Moreover, he describes how shamans often presented themselves as exemplary Muslims, demanded that their clients perform the same ritual ablutions before their healing ceremonies as they would before performing prayers, used the Qur’an and Muslim prayer rugs in their divination and healing rituals, and claimed that their healing spirits were prominent figures from Islamic history or cosmology such as the angel Gabriel or Muslim saints (Basilov 1992: 282-4).

The distinction Basilov makes between shamans and mullahs is a problematic one. He adopts an essentialist conception of Islam which fails to take account of the heterogeneous nature of religious practice in most Muslim societies. Where Basilov and Snezarev presuppose the idea of a unitary, ‘pure’ Islam and attempt to distinguish this from non-Islamic or pre-Islamic practices, it is more productive to view all practice identified as Muslim by practitioners as part of a single local tradition. Disputes about what is or is not Islamic are struggles to define correct form and meaning – to define orthodoxy – within this tradition (Asad 1986).

It is clear from Basilov’s account that such disputes occurred in the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. I am arguing that since Islam has re-entered the public sphere following independence, scripturalist interpretations hostile to healers and diviners who work with spirits are becoming more influential and widespread. This is causing healers and their clients to reassess their practices.

I begin my account of present-day healing cosmologies with the following case study. This includes features common to most of the healers whom I encountered but it should be noted that imagery and practice vary from healer to healer.

Gulnorahon is 50 years of age, and lives and works in the town of Asaka in Andijan province in the Fergana Valley. She described her ancestors on both her mother’s and father’s side as ‘white bones’, descendants of the Prophet or of Muslim saints, and recalled performing the morning namaz (Muslim prayers) with her grandmother in her childhood. She has graduated from a higher educational institute and works as a school teacher. At the age of 25 she became ill and had a series of heart attacks, which persisted over ten years and resulted in her face being partially paralysed (a condition which people often associated with the influence of jinn). In 1989, when she was 35, the doctor who treated her in Andijan city for a heart attack suggested she turn to ‘our own musulmonchilik’ (Muslimness) and resort to a ‘spiritually pure person’ who could cure her by reading the Qur’an over her. Gulnorahon recovered after a female healer in Kyrgyzstan cleansed her of the hostile spirits possessing her.

During the healing process Gulnorahon had a dream in which a woman gave her seven objects connected with healing, including a tasbih (prayer beads) and a knife. When she subsequently related the dream, the healer summoned the spirit, asked her name, and identified her as Lojim Posha Hojaona, one of Gulnorahon’s ancestors who had performed the hajj seven times and become a tabib (healer) herself. She identified Gulnorahon as a healer and became her usto (master). Gulnorahon learned healing practice with her and was also shown how to heal in dreams by an oqsoqol (‘white-beard’ – old man). In fact, Gulnorahon said that in childhood she used to have dreams
where she saw spirit beings but she hadn’t known what they were at the time. In 1990
the ustoz gave her the dua (blessing and permission) to ‘work in accordance with Islam
and purity, to perform the prayers five times a day, and to work in a halol [religiously
correct] manner, not for monetary gain in this world but for God’. She gave her the
tasbih (prayer beads), knife, and other tools of healing, and also the spirit of her ances-
tor Lojim Posha Hojona as a spirit helper.

In 1991, after working as a healer for a short period, Gulnorahon completed a three-
month course at an ‘extrasense’ centre in Tashkent which her Kyrgyzstan master had
also attended. There she studied, as she put it, ‘how to perform the namaz [Muslim
prayers] and ilm [religious knowledge] from a domla [person learned in Islam],
anatomy and physiology from a doctor, and how to heal spiritually’. She subsequently
received a diploma.4 When I asked her why she felt the need to attend the course, she
replied that she needed to obtain official documentation (hujjat): ‘If you gather people
they will ask you if you have any documents. I am a teacher as well, and because there
are all sorts of world-views, this diploma gives me lots of strength.’ She added that her
documents gave her the right to investigate people who practise her form of healing
in Andijan. She claimed that there were a lot of charlatans pretending to heal people
for money, but she had read the Qur’an and had a dua (blessing) from a master. In
fact, Gulnorahon was the only healer I came across who had attended any sort of
formal training or had paper qualifications. Most had obtained a dua from another
healer or through a dream encounter with an ancestor, a Muslim saint, or some other
supernatural being.

In the course of her healing, Gulnorahon relies on her spirit helpers, whom she
refers to as azizlar (aziz avliolar is the term used to refer to Muslim saints) or otakhon-
lar (the plural of otakhon – literally meaning ‘father’). The fact that she and other
healers refer to their helping spirits in this way rather than as pari is significant, and I
will return to this issue below. She has a principal otakhon named Hurshid Mahsum,
who was also given to her (koy bergan) by her master in Kyrgyzstan. This otakhon has
a ‘deputy’ named Karim Polonoglu Nusrotilloh Qori, and they call on other azizlar as
necessary. Gulnorahon uses her azizlar to diagnose patients’ illnesses and to inform
her as to the healing actions she needs to perform, such as reading a specific sura (verse)
from the Qur’an. ‘I will read and they will stand behind me. Together we will heal, and
… they will tell me how to massage, to give heat, to pass bio-energy’.5 Gulnorahon
recounted how, when treating a Russian patient, her principal otakhon had called ‘the
head of the popes’ from the Russian’s own millat (national community). Her head
spirit has told her that he has spirits from every millat.

Gulnorahon’s healing contains a mixture of elements pertaining to Islam, knowl-
edge of biomedicine and anatomy, and what might be called ‘New Age’ philosophy.

...
I’ll do two rak’at [cycles] of the namaz [prayer] to give them strength to do the job. For example, I’ll place three osqols [old men], otakhonlar [ancestors] on the first person to come. If there’s a problem with the internal organs, a doctor otakhon will come, give injections and heal. I’ll ask them to give light from the third planet to the place which is cold. They will clean the client. This is not seen, you have to believe. I will cut the jinn out with my knife and the black things will fall off the person. The otakhonlar will sweep them up, and a person from the second planet will come and take them away.

In addition to healing with spirit helpers, Gulnorahon prepares herbal medicines and also takes paper on which verses of the Qur’an are written and dips this in tea, which the patient drinks.6

The cosmology and practice of most healers whom I observed share a set of central features, many of which are also described in the ethnographic accounts of healing in Uzbekistan during the Soviet period that I referred to above. These features include the initiatory illnesses by which the healer is identified as such by another healer, self-identification as coming from a line of healers so that healing is seen as a natural quality of the person transmitted by blood, obtaining the blessing and sometimes training from established healers, and being visited by ancestors or Muslim saints in dreams who might also pass on certain objects used in healing. The most significant aspect of the healing practice that I observed was that healers insist that their helping spirits and healing power come from God. The growing influence of scripturalist interpretations of Islam is reflected in healers’ own descriptions of the work that they do and the spirits who help them. Gulnorahon and the other healers whom I encountered emphasized strongly that their work was in the service of God (Allah yolida). The terms people generally used to refer to healers like Gulnorahon in Samarkand and Andijan were bakshi or folbin,7 but in Andijan (although not in Samarkand, a difference I will return to later) healers themselves denied being bakshi, stating that a bakshi and folbin worked with jinn, ‘bound’ people, cast spells to block people’s success, and worked for the sake of money. In contrast, the healers whom I interviewed all emphasized that they did not work with jinn, who were evil, but with azizlar sent from God. They also stressed that they never demanded money from their clients, but accepted whatever it was in their hearts to offer.

It has been observed that the special power which derives from connection with the supernatural is morally neutral, that the power of the Qur’an in the context of sorcery can be used to harm as well as to heal (Bowen 1993b: 187-8). In Uzbekistan, too, accounts of harmful sorcery practice included use of the Qur’an or spoken suras to bewitch or ‘bind’ people or objects, so it is a question of personal morality as to whether people act for good or harmful purposes (Barth 1993: 258). This moral ambiguity makes it necessary for healers to distinguish themselves as good Muslims.

This is evident in the account given by Zuhrahon, a healer in Pakhtabad who worked with otakhonlar, of a healing encounter with another healer in the village. On one occasion she went to the other healer, who promised to send ‘her people’ to heal Zuhrahon at home. When Zuhrahon went to sleep, she saw two well-dressed old men with white beards come into the room:

They were not [like] my people, they had horns. They stood beside me and turned their tasbih [prayer beads]. The old man behind me touched me and I felt a strong electric current. I was scared. They gave me an injection. Then in the morning I had no pain. My brother went to the woman and asked
what happened, and she said she had sent her people, but they had horns. They were probably shaitonlar [devils]. I don’t know if they were devlar [demons] or jinnlar. … My people don’t like her people [but] they really cured me.

It should be clear from what I have described that the cosmologies and imagery invoked by healers vary greatly from healer to healer. In fact, not all use the term otakhon in the same way. Fatimahon, a 63-year-old healer in a village near Pakhtabad, described herself as both an otinca6 [a woman who reads the Qur’an or other religious texts at women’s religious gatherings] and a perikhon [a person who heals with the aid of spirits]. She recounted being visited by the spirits of Imom Hassan and Imom Hussain, the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, after being chronically ill for eighteen years with an illness ‘given by God’. These spirits presented her with a Qur’an and continued to visit her over twenty years, during which time they taught her to read the whole of it. As a result of this she became an otinca, reciting the Qur’an at women’s gatherings and giving Qur’an lessons to girls. At the age of 57 she was struck down with another illness given by God, during which she was taken to the seventh level of heaven by angels and was shown all the aziz avliolar (saints). When Fatimahon related this to another otinca, she was told that she was to become a healer, and since then she has healed people with the aid of the two grandsons of the Prophet. Fatimahon, too, distanced herself from bakshis, saying that they use the blood of sheep and chickens, and that she and others like her only work with ilm, religious knowledge. She also belittled the otakhonlar of other healers, saying that they would disappear in time because they had no ilm:

Well, you have different millats [nationalities], we have our Uzbek millat, and Tajiks have their millat, Russians are different. Our azizlar have different millats as well. Because I was given ilm, mine come from God. Ours won’t disappear. They are the grandsons of the Prophet. Those of the bakshis and the otakhons, they are also God’s creations, but they are temporary. … Those people they show on the TV, they may be around for twenty or twenty-five years and then they will disappear, they haven’t got strength. The domlas [religious teachers] are ours; their ones don’t know the Qur’an, they don’t have ilm like us.

Despite the variation in imagery the logic is the same. Healers are emphasizing that they are working in the service of God and establishing this by setting up a contrast with those who are not. I argue that when healers distance themselves from bakshis and folbins, and when they distinguish their azizlar 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. Moreover, this occurs in a context where ideas about what it is to be a good Muslim in Uzbekistan are in a process of change, and I turn to this topic in the next section.

Orthodoxy in the making
Since independence, Islam has once more entered the public sphere in Uzbekistan and expressing religious belief publicly is no longer prohibited as long as this expression takes what the state authorities consider a non-political form. Nationwide, the number of officially registered mosques rose from 89 in 1990 to 1,905 in 2003, reaching a high of 2,362 in 1997.9 The number is much higher if mosques not formally registered are taken into account. In Samarkand city there were around twenty officially registered mosques at the time of my fieldwork, and one in my village field site in Andijan.
province. However, each of the mahallas (neighbourhood residential units) in the village had its own local mosque which, though unregistered, was known to the authorities. People attended these mosques during the week, and went to the registered mosque for the Friday prayer.

In recent years people have become more aware of what might be called scripturalist interpretations of Islam, most often that of the Hanafi school, as this is the only version tolerated by central government and the official state-regulated ulama (Islamic religious scholars). In addition to the new madrassas there are also private qorakhonas, schools where boys learn how to recite the Qur’an, and mullahs and otinca hold classes for boys and girls in their homes. In both Samarkand and Pakhtabad I came across many young men in their twenties and thirties who were learning about Islam either from the literature available, the recorded sermons of famous imams, or by attending private lessons.

These ideas reach further than to those who actively engage in a study of Islam, having an influence in wider society through, for example, mosque sermons and broadcasts on the television and other media by official ulama. Particularly in Pakhtabad, but also in Samarkand, communal gatherings have taken on a more Islamic character. These include mavlud gatherings (ceremonies held in honour of the Prophet’s birthday) which both men and women have started to organize, and hatma qoran, where the Qur’an is recited in honour of dead relatives. Women also organize gatherings called bibiseshamba and mushkul kushod, propitiatory rituals held to invoke aid in overcoming a problem faced by the hostess or her family and to give thanks for some success.10

Although many of these gatherings took place during the Soviet period, what is significant is that they have now become occasions where ideas about ‘correct’ forms of Islam are discussed. A number of people commented on the change in these communal gatherings since independence. A 40-year-old qori (Qur’an reciter) in Pakhtabad stated:

> Ma’ruzas [sermons] are deeper [than in the Soviet period], but not different because ma’ruzas are about the words of God and the Prophet, about the Qur’an and Hadith. Before, they may have talked about the tahorat [ritual ablutions before prayer], how to do it, but now most people know these things. Now they talk more deeply about things. … People have gone on the hajj, and they are talking more about these things in ceremonies, our young people are also hearing these things, and now young people are also going to the mosque.

An otinca in the village similarly observed that in the past people never gave interpretations of the Qur’an at religious gatherings or life-cycle ceremonies, but that now imams and otinca do this.

Public discussion of scripturalist interpretations of Islam is altering ideas of what it means to be a Muslim, and this is reflected in the practice and imagery of healing. Healing with the aid of spirits has historically been attacked as un-Islamic by some religious practitioners, but people are now becoming more aware that working or negotiating with jinn is considered a sin. The fact that all the healers whom I encountered in Pakhtabad stressed the difference between their azizlar and otakhonlar and the jinn of bakshis is an expression of their own and their clients’ changing ideas of Muslim selfhood. That this is a fairly recent phenomenon is supported by the claims of both healers and others in Pakhtabad and the surrounding area that otakhonlar only
appeared in the last ten years or so. As I noted above, ethnographers in the Soviet period wrote of spirit beings called *pari* who could be both harmful and benevolent to humans, whereas *otakhonlar* are unambiguously benevolent and sent by God. In fact, the phenomenon is so new that most of the healers who work with *otakhonlar* do not have a name for themselves.

Some of the healers working with *otakhonlar* linked their recent arrival with the revival of Islam in Uzbekistan. Gulnorahon stated that in the Soviet period there were *bakshis* and *qoris* who read the Qur’an, but she had not heard of people working with *otakhonlar*:

When religion returned, they [otakhonlar] returned as well. God sent them to make Islam stronger. The first people who came [for healing] didn’t pray. They were in a very serious condition. My *azizlar* told me to put a prayer rug in front of them, and I told them to go and pray after they were healed. In this way lots of people have gone back to Islam. By reading [the Qur’an] and purifying themselves the illness goes and people start reading the namaz. This is one way of strengthening Islam.

This was echoed by another healer in Pakhtabad who worked with *otakhonlar*, and who was also an *otinca*:

As the day of judgement draws near, lots of people will become ill from the effects of bad jinn. I was told this by a *parikhon*. That time has come now. People who say they cure with the power of God, with *azizlar*, will give healing. Why do I say this? In the past, lots of people used to die, now they don’t, only a few in the past ten or fifteen years. This is because in the past people used to defecate or urinate in the fields. This is not allowed in Islam. And in the past they did this and there was lots of illness. All the fruits and vegetables were affected. Now because Islam is strong, and faith is strong, it’s helping. ... *otakhonlar* are increasing and healing people.

In contrast to Andijan, the healers I encountered in Samarkand city and surrounding villages do refer to themselves as *bakshi* or *folbin*, just as their clients do. Although they also placed their healing within an Islamic framework by, for example, claiming that their healing power derived from God and that their spirit helpers were Muslim saints, they seemed less concerned about making a clear distinction between themselves and others who did not work in God’s service. This was true both of the Tajik-speaking healers whom I met in Samarkand city and the Uzbek-speaking ones in surrounding rural districts. I was not able to collect enough material on healing in Samarkand to make any definitive conclusions about this, but one tentative suggestion might be that the new concepts of Muslim belief and practice that I have described above are more diffusely spread in Samarkand than in the village in which I worked in Andijan province. A view commonly expressed in both Andijan and Samarkand was that people in the Fergana Valley, particularly in Namangan and Andijan, are ‘better Muslims’ and that Islam is ‘more developed’ there than in Samarkand.

**Authorizing processes**

Although scripturalist interpretations of Islam are becoming more widespread, people continue to relate to the question of what it means to be a Muslim in diverse ways. Many women express themselves as Muslims through their own distinct religious gatherings such as the *bibiseshamba*, *mushkul kushod*, and their version of the *mavlud*. Both men and women participate in *hatma qoran* with the aim of accumulating merit.
for deceased ancestors, something that many followers of scripturalist interpretations of Islam would consider unacceptable as they believe that no-one can atone for the sins of another.

While acknowledging this diversity, however, we need to explore the processes through which people come to accept particular concepts of ‘correct’ Muslim practice as more authoritative than others. People do not develop these ideas in isolation but through interaction with others. Fredrik Barth (1987; 1993) has emphasized the processual and creative nature of this interaction, describing how people choose between or combine alternative knowledge systems in conditions of uncertainty. He has coined the phrase ‘cosmologies in the making’ (Barth 1987), which I have alluded to in the heading for the previous section. However, what is less emphasized in Barth’s analysis, and what I want to incorporate more fully into mine, are the authorizing processes by which groups seek to promote their own interpretations and to preclude others.

At first sight, Muslim practice in Uzbekistan seems to be clearly differentiated along gender lines. As has been observed in many other Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod 1993; Doumato 2000; Holy 1988; Tapper & Tapper 1987; Tett 1995), men are associated with public worship in mosques, deeper knowledge of the Qur’an, the Hadith, and other Islamic texts, and practice of forms of Islam considered ‘orthodox’ by the formal religious authorities who manage mosques and religious educational institutions. Women, on the other hand, are largely excluded from regular worship at mosques, and their access to study at the official institutions of Islamic learning is limited. Of the nine madrassas operating under the Muslim Board, only one accepts girls (there is also a specialized Islamic secondary school for girls) while the Islamic Institute in Tashkent had twenty women out of a total of 140 students at the time of my fieldwork. In conversation, official imams in both Samarkand and Pakhtabad invariably characterized women’s religious practices such as the bibiseshamba as un-Islamic, and claimed that most women were ignorant of Islam. They criticized women who wailed and sometimes beat themselves at the ceremonies which follow funerals, and they denigrated the majority of otincas (called bibikhalfa in Samarkand) as being charlatans only interested in earning money.

Women themselves, of course, saw things differently. Many of the authors whom I cited above have made the point that although women’s practice of Islam is generally seen as less prestigious than that of men, and even un-Islamic, it nevertheless occupies an important position complementary to the more ‘orthodox’ male practice. Women in Uzbekistan express their identity as good Muslims precisely through participation in ceremonies such as the bibiseshamba and mavlud. Since the aim of these events is to gain merit and overcome difficulties affecting entire families, their participation is an expression of their concern for their families’ general well-being and protection. This is something recognized and supported by male family members.

Ideas about Muslim selfhood are not, then, simply determined by gender, since the ‘non-Islamic’ practice of women is validated as a proper Muslim expression by both men and women. What is important is the circle of significant others within which people place their actions and towards which they direct their intentions. While the religious leadership and others who follow a scripturalist interpretation of Islam consider that women’s practice falls short of correct Muslim conduct, for women themselves their practice is validated not only within a community of other women but also by male members of their households and communities who financially and morally

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support their attendance at, and organization of, religious gatherings. Men’s sense of Muslim selfhood is more closely associated with prayer at the mosque and so directly subject to the authorizing discourses of the ulama.

If we want a dynamic view of how people develop their sense of Muslim selfhood we need to study processes of authorization at the micro-level. Healing, an encounter with spirits sent from God, gives direct access to authoritative knowledge. By examining the way in which these encounters are interpreted by the perceivers themselves and reinterpreted in interaction with others, we gain an insight into how an individual’s ideas of Muslim selfhood evolve and are shaped by ideas of Islam prevalent in their communities.

I will begin to explore this through discussion of local interpretations of the healing practices of a male healer whom I am calling Rustam Qori. This person is a well-known qori (reader of the Qur’an) in Pakhtabad with a reputation as a powerful healer. He was born in 1949 and worked as a tractor driver in the collective farm for twenty-two years until the age of 38. He claimed that his mother was from a family of religious scholars (olims, domlas) and qoris, and stated that he had started learning about Islam from his mother’s father at the age of 7. In 1980 he had a dream in which this grandfather, who had died by this time, visited him and asked him to drink milk from his breast. Rustam Qori interpreted this as his grandfather passing on his knowledge. Soon afterwards he visited a woman, whom he termed a bakshi, to cure a swollen hand, and was told by her that he should stop being a tractor driver and become a healer. Since then he has been healing by reading suras from the Qur’an. He became locally famous when he cured the district governor (hokim), who had been suffering from a partially paralysed face.

Rustam Qori describes his healing power as coming from God. He stated that every letter in the Qur’an is associated with an angel, and when he reads the Qur’an he calls upon these angels to intercede with God to grant healing. Similar to Gulnorahon and the other healers whom I have described, he distanced himself from bakshis, saying that they were unacceptable in Islam because they foretell the future, which is considered a sin because this is for God alone to know. When I asked him why, in that case, he had turned to a bakshi for healing, he replied that he had been young at the time and afraid because of his injury.

The moral ambiguity apparent in Rustam Qori’s healing practice, where his healing power was validated by a bakshi but where he places it in a Muslim framework which defines the activities of bakshis as illegitimate, is reflected in the varied opinions about him expressed by others in the village. Faridahon, a 65-year-old otinca, criticized Rustam Qori for working with jinn, saying that he both ‘walks the path of din [religion] and is a bakshi’. She said that people should not mix the work of the devil with work in God’s service. She also expressed scepticism about healers who claimed to work with otakhonlar, saying that she believed only in God: ‘God gave me the Qur’an and I believe the Qur’an’. Despite this, she had recently visited a woman in Margilan, a town not far from Andijan, in order to receive healing. This healer claimed to have died, been raised from the dead by the power of God, and learned to read the Qur’an and seven languages on the night that this happened. Faridahon described how this woman healed people with the help of aziz avliolar sent by God, and was astounded at how she was able to discern facts about her patients’ lives and their problems in an open ‘séance’. The healer had identified Faridahon as someone who herself had pure spirit helpers and invited her to become an apprentice. Faridahon seemed to be struggling
to come to terms with the discrepancy between an idea of proper Muslim practice which precluded healing with spirits and its association with *jinn*, and her own personal healing experience.

Zuhrahon, a healer whom I referred to earlier who works with *otakhonlar*, was much more positive about Rustam Qori. She had herself started healing in 1986, and had been identified as a future healer in her childhood by a *bakshi* to whom she had been taken for a problem with her eye. After her father died in 1986, her eye problem returned and she turned to a male healer who used the Qur’an rather than spirit helpers. This person told her to work as a healer, but to do only good works and not to ‘bind threads’ (cast spells) in the way of *bakshis*. Zuhrahon does not heal by reading from the Qur’an. In fact, she tried it once and was so frightened by the visions she received when she was able to see her spirit helpers for the first time that she turned to Rustam Qori for advice. He told her to continue healing but not to read from the Qur’an or she would be driven insane. Zuhrahon interpreted this incident in the light of a commonly held idea that formal reading of the Qur’an is primarily a male activity. She stated that *qoris* (a male profession) were considered great people because they could read the Qur’an without fear and cure people with it. The only women who read the Qur’an, she claimed, were *pashakhons*, or descendants of the Prophet. A number of *otincas* in Pakhtabad supported this gendered distinction and expressed the view that women were incapable of *qaroat*, the formal chanting recitation of the Qur’an, but could only read the text with normal intonation. At women’s religious gatherings there was less recitation of the Qur’an in Arabic than at men’s gatherings.

The fact that Rustam Qori and Zuhrahon stated that they were identified as healers by *bakshis*, but at the same time distanced their practice from them, may be a result of the changing ideas about the acceptability of working with *jinn* that I described in the previous section. Both of them had become healers before independence, when *otakhonlar* had not yet appeared on the scene and when recently promoted scripturalist interpretations of Islam were less widely incorporated into people’s ideas of proper Muslim conduct. As I have already argued, in recent years in Pakhtabad it has become more important for healers to distinguish their own activities from those of *bakshis*, although Zuhrahon’s account shows that even in 1986 their activities were considered morally reprehensible by some.

Through these accounts we catch a glimpse of how these healers’ ideas of correct Muslim practice are developed through interaction with others in their community, as well as through their own direct encounters with spirit agents. Scripturalist interpretations of Islam are playing an increasingly important role in this process, but their influence depends on the importance of those who promote these views in an individual’s circle of significant others. Despite the exhortations of imams during Friday sermons that good Muslims should not resort to people who work with spirits, healers like Gulnorahon and Fatimahon, the *otinca/perikhon* I described earlier, establish themselves as ‘pure’ Muslims by claiming that their healing is founded on a mastery of *ilm*, Islamic knowledge. In Fatimahon’s case this is obtained directly from the grandsons of the Prophet. Gulnorahon also draws on the legitimating power of ‘official’ documentation and authorization with her diploma from an institution registered with the state authorities. They are able to do this because officially appointed imams and others who promote a scripturalist interpretation of Islam are not part of the sphere of interaction within which healers validate their own self-representations. However, insofar as the message promoted by the imams has been incorporated into the moral
frameworks of members of the healers’ own communities, it has influenced healers’ interpretations of their encounters with healing spirits.

For many men, on the other hand, the authorizing discourses of the ulama have a more direct and significant influence. Ilkhomaka is a 60-year-old retired knife-maker in Pakhtabad. Since the age of 40 he has been regularly praying at the mosque, abstaining from alcohol, and trying to observe the tenets of Islam. During our conversation, the subject turned to bakshis and healing. Ilkhomaka admitted to undergoing a chilla (a period of isolation) in order to be cured, and said that others would be astonished at this and censure him. He seemed embarrassed to talk about this until the host of the house in which we had met reassured him, saying that my interest was purely scientific, and that the host’s own mother was a healer who worked with spirits. Ilkhomaka then related his search between 1982 and 1991 for a cure for his daughter who suffered from epilepsy, during the course of which he had turned to the state healthcare system, bakshis, and any other healers whom he had been able to find. In 1991, when he himself was ill and in hospital, he had a dream in which he saw a house that he had never visited before. When he sought it out it turned out to be the house of a bakshi, and although his wife, an otinca, was against it, he took his daughter there for healing, but without success. He himself, however, was put into a chilla for fifteen days by that bakshi in order to become a healer. In the end he decided not to practise as a bakshi, but continued to go to the bakshi for his own healing. He described a healing experience when, after performing the evening prayers and going to sleep, he was visited by the bakshi’s spirit helpers, a black man and woman who read the Qur’an over him. They were followed by a doctor and a nurse in white gowns who did an operation on his side, where he had been experiencing some pain. When he woke up later he felt fine.

Like Faridahon, Ilkhomaka was struggling to reconcile his own healing experience with ideas of proper Muslim practice which condemned working with jinn. His experience convinced him that jinn were real, and that biomedical intervention was of little help in curing afflictions caused by them. A person had to go to a jinnkash, someone who was able to work with jinn. However, he drew the line at actually working as a healer himself as this would be incompatible with his self-representation as a practising Muslim who observed the tenets of Islam to the best of his ability. Because he was a man who now prayed regularly in the village mosque, his sense of Muslim selfhood was developed to a large degree through interaction with the imam and other men who prayed there, before whom he would be embarrassed to admit that he had undergone a chilla and turned to bakshis for healing.

I do not want to suggest that people passively accept the dominant opinions of those around them. An individual’s interpretative frameworks are products of his or her own individual life experiences. Moreover, by examining how people address the question of what it means to be a Muslim at the micro-level it becomes clear that this is not a case of one interpretation becoming accepted as more authoritative and replacing others. Although scripturalist interpretations of Islam are becoming more influential, and men who attend worship at the mosque are influenced more directly by them, in constructing themselves as Muslims both men and women combine multiple ideas of Muslim selfhood and practice. Gulnorahon and the other healers whom I have described identify themselves with the ‘correct’ Islam of the ulama, but do so in ways that those ulama would not recognize as legitimate. Ilkhomaka, the retired
knife-maker, prays regularly and observes the tenets of Islam as well as he is able, but at the same time he resorts to bakshis for healing.

Barth has argued that when choosing between differing traditions of knowledge, ‘people respond to opportunities, interests, and strategic constraints through practical action’ (1993: 322). However, I do not believe that individuals make choices in such a detached, strategic manner when it comes to forming their self-representations as Muslim. These choices must also be persuasive and authoritative, and the mode of access to divine power and knowledge manifested in healing is one way in which people develop a persuasive and authoritative concept of Muslim selfhood. Through these encounters individuals creatively combine multiple, often contradictory, ideas of correct Muslim practice. They construct themselves as ‘proper’ Muslims according to the orthodoxies authorized by official imams while maintaining their own, often highly individual, interpretations and practices.

NOTES

This article is based on fieldwork conducted as part of my fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. I am grateful to the many people in Uzbekistan who aided me in my research, and the healers and patients who freely gave their time and shared their experiences. All healers’ names in the paper are pseudonyms. An earlier version of this article was presented at a seminar at the Max Planck Institute, and benefited from the comments and suggestions of the participants. I am grateful to Chris Hann for reading and commenting on this article, and to the anonymous JRAI reviewers.

1 A number of anthropologists have given accounts of disputes between ‘modernists’ and ‘traditionalists’ in the Muslim world. See, for example, Horvatich’s study of Islam in the Philippines (Horvatich 1994), or Bowen’s work on Indonesia (Bowen 1993a; 1997).

2 I use the term ‘imam’ to refer to the person officially appointed by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan to head a mosque, and ‘mullah’ to refer to the unofficial male religious practitioners appointed by the leader of the mahalla (neighbourhood unit), or recognized as such by the community, who officiates at local religious ceremonies.

3 Within Islamic doctrine jinn are one of the three intelligent beings created by God, the other two being humans and angels. Imams and others with formal Islamic education whom I talked to in Uzbekistan expressed the belief, based on references to jinn in the Qur’an, that there are both Muslim and unbelieving jinn, just like human beings. In Snezarev’s account this quality is attributed to pari while jinn are exclusively harmful. Most people I talked with associated jinn with dirt, pollution, and illness.

4 The centre was founded by a retired university professor who had been on the hajj and who had herself graduated from a parent centre in Moscow to which the Tashkent centre had been affiliated during the Soviet period. After independence it was registered with the state authorities and in fact became a private firm belonging to the founder. Galina Lindquist (2001b) has described such institutes and healers who use bio-energy in Russia.

5 Gulnorahon and healers whom she trained were the only healers whom I encountered who referred explicitly to ‘bio-energy’. I surmise this is because she and her master had attended the training institute in Tashkent. Gulnorahon had adapted this knowledge to the local interpretative model of healing with spirits.

6 This is a form of healing widespread in the Muslim world.

7 In Andijan folbin was more commonly used for women who foretell the future rather than perform healing, but in both Samarkand and Andijan provinces the usage of these terms was imprecise.


9 Source: Statistics of the Committee of Religious Affairs of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The reason for the decline after 1997 is likely to be increasing government concern with Islamic opposition groups and the passing of the law ‘On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations’, which required all mosques to be re-registered.

10 See Kandiyoti & Azimova (2004: 34ff.) and Louw (2005: 223) for accounts of these events.

11 On the whole, men’s mawlud tend to be shorter, are more often chanted completely in Arabic by trained reciters (qori), and are organized on an ad hoc basis. Women’s mawlud, on the other hand, are often more social occasions accompanied by a meal (although men’s mawlud might also involve a meal), they are much
longer affairs which involve a whole mahalla, and women take it in turns to host the gathering. See Kandiyoti & Azimova (2004) for a description of women’s mavluds in Uzbekistan, and Tapper & Tapper (1987) for an account of the difference between men’s and women’s mavluds in Turkey.

REFERENCES


**Guérison par les esprits et formation de l’identité musulmane dans l’Ouzbékistan post-soviétique**

**Résumé**

Depuis l’indépendance de l’Ouzbékistan, consécutive à l’effondrement de l’Union Soviétique, l’islam a fait son retour dans la sphère publique et les Ouzbeks se sont joints au débat réfléxif qui anime le monde musulman sur ce qu’implique le fait d’être musulman. L’auteur explore ce processus dans le cadre des pratiques de guérison faisant appel à l’intervention des esprits. Il affirme que ce mode de guérison, rencontre imaginaire avec des agents venus du monde des esprits, constitue un mode particulier d’accès au savoir et à la puissance divins, grâce auquel les gens peuvent valider leurs conceptions spécifiques de l’identité musulmane. Il étudie la manière dont la teneur de ces rencontres et la cosmologie invoquée par les guérisseurs évoluent en réponse à l’influence de plus en plus prononcée des interprétations scripturales de l’islam, et dont la pratique de guérison est interprétée à travers les interactions sociales dans les communautés des guérisseurs.

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