FEMALE SHRINE PILGRIMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY KAZAKHSTAN

by

Atikah binti Adzhar

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in
(Eurasian Studies)

at

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY -
SCHOOL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
2022

Abstract

Ethnographies and popular belief posit that women dominate as pilgrims in Islamic shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan. This thesis attempts to examine the larger phenomenon of female pilgrim majorities in Islamic shrine pilgrimage and what factors are responsible for it by focusing on a case study of shrine pilgrimage at Aisha Bibi shrine in Kazakhstan as recorded through fieldwork. Islamic shrine pilgrimage first developed through Sufi orders and were a tangible mark of Islam in newly converted lands. Over the years, it has faced recent challenges to its orthodoxy yet it still remains popular with Muslims around the world, particularly women. This thesis finds female predominance in modern Islamic shrine pilgrimage as the result of not only the unique historical and political particularities specific to each host country, such as the impact of Soviet atheism and modern Kazakhstani nation building in developing Kazakhstani shrine pilgrimage, but also of broader social traits of shared by women across the world, which is widely indicative of women's role in today's global societies.

Table of Contents

Introduction 2

Islamic Shrine Pilgrimage 2

Methodology 7

Chapter Summaries 14

Chapter 1: History of Shrines in the Muslim World 17

Shrine Pilgrimage in the Muslim World 18

Shrine Pilgrimage in Central Asia 28

Chapter 2: Women and Shrine Pilgrimage 52

Women as Shrine Authorities 52

Women as Shrine Pilgrims 62

Chapter 3: Aisha Bibi Shrine in Kazakhstan 72

Female Shrine Pilgrims **84**

Pilgrim Motivation at Aisha Bibi Shrine **92**

Conclusion 100

Bibliography 104

Introduction

This thesis examines the micro-phenomena of Islamic shrine pilgrimage at Aisha Bibi shrine in Taraz, Kazakhstan and its female majority pilgrims in order to understand the larger landscape of female predominance in Islamic shrine pilgrimage. Originating as a space for Islamization, Sufi brotherhood activity, and saint memorialization, Islamic shrines have spread to all corners of the Muslim world, and today, they perform a different yet similarly popular function of attracting regular Muslims who come bearing wishes in hopes that the saint will intercede between them and God for a resolution.

The main thesis of this work is to grasp the scale and nature of women's presence in modern Islamic shrine pilgrimage and to understand why women tend to predominate as shrine pilgrims. Through examination of historical and ethnographic records and my fieldwork at Aisha Bibi shrine in summer of 2021, I find that the historical development of shrine pilgrimage in Islam, and in Central Asia specifically, has resulted in a point of reversal in the reputation of shrine pilgrimage, from one that has been historically orthodox to one that is criticized by textualist colonialists, reformers and Islamists. I find it is at this point in the modern era when women started becoming more dominant in shrine pilgrimage, as records from the 20th century onwards demonstrate women's predominance as shrine pilgrims and the existence of female religious authorities across the Muslim world. The presence of female pilgrim majorities and religious authorities as seen in Kazakhstan as well as across cultures suggests that women's large presence in shrine pilgrimage can be explained not only by local individual circumstances, but also by national and even global social historical trends.

Islamic Shrine Pilgrimage

Muslims visiting local shrines dedicated to important Islamic personages is a centuries old tradition practiced throughout the Muslim world, and as we will see from fieldwork in Kazakhstan, still popular today. In Muslim societies, pilgrimage to the graves of Muslim saints, and even pilgrimage to the graves of relatives, is commonly called *ziyara*, which is Arabic for 'to visit'. The term *ziyara* can be found in many languages spoken by Muslims, often to specifically refer to the visitation of graves whether that of saints or relatives.

What constitutes a saint or a shrine is the result of wider Islamic historical and intellectual traditions mixed with local political and cultural particularities of each region. Nevertheless, even as some shrines are globally revered while others are only famous in the neighborhood, the practice of Islamic shrine pilgrimage is well documented in the Muslim world throughout history, is replete with universal commonalities, and has long captured academic, theological, and state attention.

Shrines are commonly called either by the Arabic *maqam* or *mazar*, the Turkish *turbe*, or the Persian and Urdu *dargah*.[1] These terms are commonly used throughout Muslim languages and, like *ziyara*, are used to mean multiple things. For example, in Kazakhstan, *mazar* more often refers to non-specific graveyards, while the specific Kazakh term, *kesene*, is increasingly being used in the past decades to refer to saint shrines specific to shrine pilgrimage since the past couple decades.

---

[1] Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, "Introduction" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Eds. Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, volume 147. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 16.

Though Muslim shrines most often refer to the built structures over the graves of Muslim saints, the conceptual foundation of shrines is that of sacred spaces tied to the Islamic theological concept of *baraka,* which is Arabic for blessing, and *karamat*, which means miracle. Saints are legitimized through their sacred lineages and through displays of miracles, such as bringing dead objects back to life,[2] all of which are memorialized through written and oral traditions and are what lead to the belief that *baraka* flows in their shrines. Pilgrims visit shrines to receive such *baraka*, which they believe are blessings from God passed down through the saint. Pilgrims find importance in *baraka* to resolve personal troubles such as monetary and health issues or for important life cycle occasions.[3] Women asking for *baraka* in order to become pregnant is a particularly popular shrine pilgrimage motivation across time and place.[4]

The expectation of pilgrims that they may receive *baraka* from making shrine pilgrimage can best dictate what is considered a shrine. The most common type of shrine in Islam are the presumed graves of deceased individuals communally regarded as saints. In Islam, saints are called by the Arabic *wali* or plural *awliya,* which means "friend" of God, signifying the saint's closer position to God than average Muslims.[5] This encompasses all types of figures, both real and legendary, such as Sufi leaders,

---

[2] Katia Boissevain, "*Sainte Parmi les Saints: Sayyda Mannûbiya ou les Recompositions Culturelles dans la Tunisie Contemporaine*," New Edition [online]. (Tunis: Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2005) DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.irmc.497 Chapter 1 Paragraph 3.
[3] Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi. "Who Owns the Shrine? Competing Meanings and Authorities at a Pilgrimage Site in Khorezm", *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 25 No. 3 2006, 245.
[4] Ingrid Pfluger-Schindlebeck, "The Caucasus," 324; Azim Malikov, "Central Asia," 325; Michelle A. Rein, "North Africa," 328 in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2007)
[5] Ephrat et al. "*Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes*," 1

historical figures, soldiers who died in war,[6] founding members of lineages, tribal ancestors,[7] figures of Islamization, prophets, and *sahaba*, Muhammad's companions.[8] Due to the nature of shared Islamic and cultural heritage across regions, as well as the common progression of forgotten, revitalized, and newly venerated saints, shrines in different countries dedicated to the same figure as well as shrines with different recorded saints throughout history are typical in the global Muslim shrine landscape.[9]

In addition to graves, shrines can also be fixtures of topography adjacent to human passage.[10] For example, caves and mountains all over the world have been made into shrines and have long histories of pilgrimage, some even predating Islam.[11] From these diverse types of shrines, it becomes clear that shrine pilgrimage is a phenomenon which undergoes constant changes in regards to its subject of veneration, yet its sacredness is its defining trait which continually attracts pilgrims.

Once at a shrine, which often has shrine keepers or religious authorities present, pilgrims across cultures tend to perform similar actions which aim to appease the saint in order to be allowed to appropriate *baraka* and embody it for themselves. Pilgrims will read Quranic surah, make prayer, circumambulate the tomb or the shrine while touching it, commission animal sacrifice, and leave personal belongings, bread or money at the shrine in order to initiate a sort of contract with the saint. Pilgrims will also bring home

---

[6] Tone Brinca, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 173

[7] Paivi Miettunen, "Agency and the Roles of Southern Jordanian Bedouin Women on Pilgrimage and Visiting Holy Sites" in *Approaching Religion* Vol. 8 No. 2 Dec 2018, 45

[8] Sergey Abashin, "Mazar of Boboi-ob: Typical and Untypical Features of Holy Places in Central Asia" in *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*, Eds. Shinmen Yasushi, Sawada Minoru & Edmund White (Paris: Librairie D'Amerique et D'Orient, 2014), 94

[9] Abashin, "*Mazar of Boboi-ob*," 93-4

[10] Ephrat et al., "*Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes*," 1

[11] Miettunen, "Agency and the Roles of Southern Jordanian Bedouin Women on Pilgrimage and Visiting Holy Sites" 46

soil and water, eat leftover bread, and distribute the sacrificed meat in order to absorb the holiness of shrine objects and also as a way to fulfill their end of the bargain.

This spiritually transactional and transformational aim embedded within the journey and rituals of shrine pilgrimage is what the practice has in common with the major Islamic pilgrimage, Hajj. The call for Muslims to make Hajj pilgrimage lies within the Quran itself, and it is mandatory for all financially and physically able adult Muslims to visit Mecca at least once in their lives. Hajj pilgrimage has been institutionalized as one of the five pillars of Islam since the time of Muhamad and is thus exempt from theological criticism and debate. However, this is not the case for shrine pilgrimage, which has faced and still faces criticism on the basis of the practice being polytheistic and an innovation not found in the Quran, known as *shirk* and *bida* respectively.[12]

Nevertheless, both Hajj and shrine pilgrimage remain popular and widespread among Muslims, with parallel rituals such as circumambulation, tomb or relic touching, and drinking from a sacred well prevalent within both types of pilgrimage.[13] In fact, throughout the Muslim world, there are such distinguished shrines where, if a pilgrim visits a certain number of times, it would equate with one pilgrimage to the Hajj.[14] In this way, although the Hajj has no saint specific to the journey nor is it a problematic pilgrimage in the eyes of Muslims whether fundamentalist or traditional, the Hajj and local shrine pilgrimage do contribute to a wider understanding on the importance of making physical journeys in order to attain blessings within Islam.

---

[12] Ephrat et al., p. 1

[13] Katia Boissevain, “Studying religious mobility: pilgrimage, shrine visits and religious tourism from the Maghreb to the Middle East” in *New Itineraries and Pathways in Pilgrimage studies*, 2017. Pg. 4

[14] Thierry Zarcone, “Pilgrimage to the "Second Meccas" and "Ka'bas" of Central Asia” in *Central Asian Pilgrims: Hajj Routes and Pious Visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz*. Eds. Alexandre Papas, Thierry Zarcone & Thomas Welsford (Berlin:De Gruyter, 2020), 251.

Furthermore, the importance of physical locations in religious practice is not restricted to Islam. For example, an important commonality between shrine pilgrimage and Hajj pilgrimage is their pre-Islamic heritage. Some rituals of the Hajj, such as procuring water from the *zam-zam* well and throwing stones at the pillars which represent the Devil, are related back to pre-Muhamad prophets, while the prohibitions against violence and sexual intercourse are taken from pre-Islamic pilgrimage traditions, including similar Jewish pilgrimage traditions found in the book of Exodus.[15] Similarly, there are saint shrines which were first venerated since the ancient era. For example, a Bedouin mountain shrine in Jordan was first venerated by the polytheistic Nabateans. Then, it was re-dedicated to the prophet Aaron by the Byzantine church, and in the fourteenth century, the shrine transformed into an Islamic shrine dedicated to the same prophet, where it remains revered to this day.[16]

The necessary takeaway from the pre-Islamic origins of Islamic shrines and pilgrimages is how spiritual veneration of sacred sites as well as objective-driven journeys are universally pursued human activities, across religion, geography and time. Of course, Islamic tradition is indispensable in legitimizing and shaping the desire for saints, shrines, and pilgrimages in the Muslim world, and any investigation into Islamic shrine pilgrimage must reckon with Islamic epistemological concepts such as *baraka*.

However, the presence of cultural and non-Muslim religious traditions in the rituals of shrine pilgrimage must also be kept in mind. For example, the scholarship of shrine pilgrimage, including terminologies such as ‘saints’ and ‘shrines’, is itself heavily

---

[15] Johan Hendrik Meuleman, “Religious Practices: Pilgrimage” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 319.

[16] Miettunen, “Agency and the Roles of Southern Jordanian Bedouin Women on Pilgrimage and Visiting Holy Sites” 46

rooted in Christian theology[17] and based on studies of major Christian pilgrimages such as in Lourdes, France.[18] The importance of Islamic shrine pilgrimage can be better understood when studied alongside Hajj pilgrimage and non-Islamic pilgrimages, which will allow for commonalities in pilgrimages to shine through and for peculiarities of Islamic shrine pilgrimage to also come to light. In the same vein, although the study of women in shrine pilgrimage can benefit from being restricted to a particular religion and region, as is done in this thesis, an attempt at a more comprehensive understanding of women's place in Islamic shrine pilgrimage must be placed in a larger perspective which examines women's role in local, national, and global society.

Methodology

This thesis uses anthropological and sociological theoretical frameworks, historical and ethnographic secondary sources, and primary source fieldwork which I conducted at Aisha Bibi shrine in Taraz city in south Kazakhstan in July of 2021.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis is largely based on the works of Mircea Eliade's conception of sacred space as well as Victor and Edith Turner's conception of religious pilgrimage. Romanian historian of religion Eliade understands sacred space as a space which constitutes a continuity of the profane world and becomes the *axis*

[17] Ephrat et al., "*Saintly Sphere and Islamic Landscapes*,"pg. 1
[18] Victor Turner & Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1978.

mundi, or central axis of all orientations, linking earth to heaven and the underworld.[19] Thus, the consecration of a sacred space signifies, for the conceptualizers of the sacred space, the creation of a new world on soil that was not their own[20]. The notion of sacred space itself and the constitution of it as a break from the profane and a break from the cosmology of the land's previous world, is an apt description for shrines, which in Islam, began as a tool of Islamization by Sufis travelling across the world. Eliade also posits that for the construction of a sacred space to endure, it must be "*animated, that is, it must receive life and a soul*."[21] Specifically in the case of Aisha Bibi shrine, where the eponymous 10th century saint woman was thought to have died where the shrine stands, the legend of her death in that particular location is what animates communal belief in the bestowal of *baraka* by Aisha Bibi, which is what drives shrine pilgrimage.

Eliade has covered the ground on how sacred space is conceptualized and the Islamic shrine pilgrimage at Aisha Bibi shrine in Kazakhstan aligns with his framework. The point of this thesis is not to question why or whether *baraka* is stored in shrines, but why pilgrims, women in particular, feel compelled to seek it.

When it comes to religious pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner kickstarted serious study of the subject and linked it to the rite of passage, which comes in three phases of separation, limina, and aggregation.[22] They find that religious pilgrimage, usually a voluntary endeavor even in the case of the heavily caveated Hajj pilgrimage, fits this tripartite process. This is because the pilgrim is usually pushed by their

---

[19] Mircea Eliade, "*The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*," Tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest, 1963), 21
[20] Eliade, "*The Sacred and The Profane,*" 32
[21] Ibid, 56
[22] Victor Tuner and Edith Turner, "*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*," (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 2

individual circumstances to make pilgrimage, and on the journey itself as they encounter difficulties and meet others on the same path, they begin the process of separating from their localized persona and enter into a liminal zone, which includes sacred spaces as in accordance with Eliade's elaboration of them as points of continuity break.

The "*good work*"[23] of shrine pilgrimage does not usually guarantee any form of salvation or reward, but what pilgrims do gain is the belief that they have moved themselves closer to achieving grace from God as a result of their freely elected journey. Pilgrims then return to the fold of profane society a different person, in some traditions they become more spiritually enriched, and in other traditions, such as in Hajj pilgrimage, pilgrims experience a significant boost in social status. These three steps to the rite of passage of shrine pilgrimage does not include whether or not the wish was granted. Tangible results are not taken as a given or even the main focus of shrine pilgrimage; it is the journey and the request that defines it.

What is important to keep in mind about Turner and Turner's conception of religious pilgrimage is its liminal status and the potentiality of liminality. Conceiving shrines as liminal spaces necessarily forces attention to also be paid to the society outside the shrine. It is the profane society which creates the problems in need of intercession, the legitimization of saints and prayer, and the maintenance of and mobility towards the shrine. Whatever factor about shrine pilgrimage which attracts women should be looked for outside the shrine; though the shrine presents itself as a host which provides a specific type of solution, that is, the promise of a blessing, it is not always the case that pilgrims come specifically desiring blessings, nor do pilgrims even

---

[23] Turner & Turner, "*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*," 16-17

need to have a reason for making pilgrimage in the first place. Factors outside the shrine such as normalization of shrines as cultural recreation spaces or traditional even spaces play as much part as religious history and tradition. Furthermore, the potentiality of intercession must also be kept in mind because pilgrims visit shrines knowing that their wishes probably will not be fulfilled, at least not completely, tangibly, or immediately. But it is the extra work they have put in which they believe has bought them extra grace and extra potential for their wishes to be granted. Pilgrims calculate pilgrimages with potentiality, not necessarily guarantee, in mind.

Secondary Sources

The historical secondary sources utilized in this thesis conform to current Western historiography of Central Asian and Soviet history, which argues for the continued survival of Islam in Central Asia, albeit in a changed form, after the Soviet experience. This is in contrast to Soviet and even some post-Soviet scholarship which tends to describe Islam in Central Asia as one of 'survivals' from pre-Islamic culture, and whose Islam has been further degraded if not completely wiped out over the decades of the Soviet Union. This conception has been especially applied to the Kazakhs because they were widely nomadic and nomads were thought of as less strongly Islamized compared to the sedentary region, such as Uzbekistan. Even when forced sedentarization and collectivization from the 1930s began to sedentarize the population, because the Kazakhs would go on to become some of the most Russified in the region, they would still be considered as some of the least Islamic in the region.

This is a view which has been internalized in Kazakhstan, to an extent. Scholarship by Kazakhstanis sometimes uses these conceptions of 'survivals' and nomads as poor Muslims, and it is also why southern Kazakhstan, which is largely sedentary and neighbors Uzbekistan, is considered the heartland as opposed to the Russified northern steppe. This internalization of the south as sacred and nomads as less Muslim plays a large part in nation building and the revival of Islam, which revolves around heralding shrine pilgrimage and the sacred perception of the south.

This thesis functions on the ample evidence that even during times of nomadism, Kazakhs and others in Central Asia were definitively Muslim and performed Islam, which includes shrine pilgrimage. Scholars of pre-modern Central Asia, in particular American historian Devin DeWeese, have demonstrated the deep impact Islam has had on Central Asian literary life and also how Central Asia itself has greatly contributed to the development of Islam and Sufism in early Islam, of which shrines played a major role[24]. American historian Eren Tasar's scholarship is especially heavily utilized here as his work on Soviet Central Asian muftiates, particularly his 2017 book *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991*, is directly pertinent to this thesis. In this book, Tasar focuses on shrine pilgrimage in Soviet Central Asia

---

[24] Devin DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57, 2014; *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*. Eds. Devin DeWeese & Jo-Ann Gross, (Leiden: Brill, 2018); "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufis in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia" in *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*. Ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); "Sacred Places and 'Public' Narratives: The Shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavi Sufi Order, 16th - 17th Centuries," in *The Muslim World* Vol. 90, Fall 2000; Chapter 6: Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The "Description of Khwārazm" and the Experience of Pilgrimage in Nineteenth-Century Central Asia" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Eds. Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, Vol. 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2021); "Shamanization in Central Asia," Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient Vol. 57, 2014.

precisely because it was a popular tradition which attracted great attention from the Soviets who would eventually bring the practice into the fold of the state. As a result, shrine pilgrimage remained under control of the government even in independent Central Asia today, including Kazakhstan.

The question of gender in shrine pilgrimage, whether in Central Asia or the wider Muslim world, has not been under exclusive study. The ethnographic works used here come from female anthropologists and historians focusing on 20th and 21st century female pilgrims and religious authorities in North Africa, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia based on different perspectives pertaining to shrine pilgrimage such as Sufism, Shi'ism, colonialism, and capitalism. Studies on shrine pilgrimage in contemporary Kazakhstan have been spearheaded by anthropologists Bruce Privratsky in his 2001 book *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*, Ulan Bigozhin in his 2018 article *Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan*, and Azim Malikov in his 2019 article *Shrines and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan*. However, scholarship with a gendered focus on Kazakhstani shrine pilgrimage is still sparse, and this thesis hopes to contribute to this niche.

Fieldwork

From 6th to 24th July 2021, as a Masters student at Nazarbayev University and with university funding, I conducted on-site fieldwork at Aisha Bibi shrine 20km from Taraz city in south Kazakhstan. The fieldwork was completed with the linguistic aid of Aruzhan Auyez, a female Kazakhstani undergraduate student from the same university.

The fieldwork consisted of participant observation and interviews with shrine keepers, government workers, and pilgrims.

For the participant observation portion, I spent alternate days on-site, each field day consisting of at least 6 hours from noon until the shrine's closing time at 6pm. During these times, I would record sermons and pilgrim behavior and also perform a comprehensive but non-exhaustive gendered tally of adult pilgrims to determine if there are any immediate and obvious gender patterns.

For the interview portion, Auyez would come on site every alternate on-site day. As I lack proficiency in spoken Kazakh, Auyez and I would discuss which people to interview and we would approach them. She would initiate conversation in Kazakh as most interviewees preferred Kazakh, except for a minority of interviewees who preferred Russian. We introduced ourselves as students performing research. Auyez would ask the same questions about their background and their motivations for coming to Aisha Bibi and doing shrine pilgrimage, and whether they felt the practice was gendered. I could understand many of the responses and Auyez would translate into English longer ones. We decide on the spot whether to ask more questions if the interviewee appeared obliged. As Auyez and I were unmarried, interviewees tended to make personal comments and inquired about my Malaysian background. All interviews were voluntary and recorded on audio. All three male Kazakh shrine keepers agreed to in-depth interviews although other government workers refused to be recorded or identified. Audible and useful interviews were later transcribed and translated into Russian or English by Auyez and transcription services.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, "*History of Shrines in the Muslim World and in Central Asia*," utilizes historical secondary resources to capture the development of Islamic shrine pilgrimage. The first half looks at shrine pilgrimage in the wider Muslim world from Sufism in early Islam until now. The second half examines Islamic shrine pilgrimage in pre-modern, Tsarist, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Central Asia and how Soviet anti-pilgrimage policies have affected Islam and shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia today.

Chapter 2, "*Women and Shrine Pilgrimage*," uses 20th and 21st century anthropological and historical ethnographic data which record the lives of women involved in shrine pilgrimage; the first half looks at female religious authorities in India, Ethiopia, and Iran, while the second half looks at female shrine pilgrims in Turkey, Iran, and Indonesians in Jerusalem. The chapter explores women's spaces in shrine pilgrimage and how they maintain and even enlarge their presence.

Chapter 3, "*Aisha Bibi Shrine in Kazakhstan*," utilizes the fieldwork results to paint a snapshot of how shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan looks today and who are the men and women who participate. The first half of the chapter lays out the post-Soviet development of shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan while the second chapter analyzes the interview results to investigate pilgrim, and especially female pilgrim, motivations.

Chapter 1: History of Shrines in the Muslim World and in Central Asia

Introduction

Today shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan, as in much of the Muslim world, is experiencing a resurgence in national significance, but it was not always in such a secure position. Rapid modernization and decolonization in the mid to late 20th century had called into question shrine pilgrimage's continued relevance, and even survival, as urbanization left rural shrines derelict and nationalization drives gave to governments the control of shrine property. However, these large-scale changes did not bring about the demise of shrine pilgrimage, just as previous attempts to quash the practice had failed to sever the attraction of shrine pilgrimage over Muslims.

That attraction lies in the theoretical basis of shrine pilgrimage, in which chosen saints are attributed with *baraka*, or worldly blessings from God, which regular Muslims could appropriate through pilgrimizing their shrines. This concept was formed in early Islamic history along with other fundamental Islamic doctrines, and it has become the most tangible and beneficial Islamic rite for illiterate and marginalized Muslims, buoying shrine pilgrimage through periods of theological and colonial attacks. The practice of shrine pilgrimage is still alive today and even growing in many areas of the Muslim world, as touristic and nationalizing projects increase the significance of shrines and attract pilgrims on a scale larger than ever before.

In this chapter, shrine pilgrimage is shown to have been a distinguished Islamic space for Sufi activity and politics for most of its existence since its origin, and that it underwent the most serious theological and physical attacks in the modern era by European colonialists, Muslim reformers, and Islamists. Since then, the practice has remained popular yet is now vulnerable to claims of superstition and unorthodoxy stemming from Muslim theologians, colonialists, and fundamentalist Islamists. In the case of Central Asia, the Soviet Union leveled lethal challenges to Islam and shrine pilgrimage as the state dismissed the practice as superstitious. I argue that this modern period of destruction of reputation is what will set the stage for women's increasing presence in shrine pilgrimage. When shrine pilgrimage was firmly in the breast of Islamic orthodoxy, male Sufis controlled the practice which later fell into the hands of colonial states. The presence of women at shrines during these times are rarely recorded. Most mentions of women are those of saints and little is written about women as shrine pilgrims, whereas modern ethnographies beginning with the colonial era until now demonstrate a significant, often predominating, presence of women in shrine pilgrimage. Thus, I find that it was when the practice gained a grayer reputation when women could perhaps gain a footing to continue in shrine pilgrimage. To see this linear progression, Chapter 1 will illustrate the historical development of shrine pilgrimage.

This chapter aims to situate modern Kazakhstani shrine pilgrimage into the wider landscape of shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia and in the Muslim world. Shrine pilgrimage in Islam has a common origin in 8th century Baghdad, but ever since, the practice has evolved according to local traditions and colonial history. The first half of this chapter covers the origins of shrine pilgrimage in Islam, while the second half looks

at the specific Naqshband Sufi and Soviet colonial history of Central Asia. All this history culminated in the culture of shrine pilgrimage of Kazakhstan today, which is what is currently under investigation in this thesis.

Shrine Pilgrimage in the Muslim World

Shrine Pilgrimage and Sufism

As Islam began to spread throughout the Byzantine Christian lands from the 7th century onwards, there have been indications that Muslims shared worship of Christian saints and shrines since early in the history of Islam[25]. However, it was the development of Sufism and its organized brotherhoods that led to the Islamic theological basis of sainthood and allowed for the accumulation of political and economic resources to build and maintain shrines.

Sufism today is most commonly understood as the 'mystical' form of Islam, conjuring images of whirling dervishes and legendary poets, but Sufism was actually first founded by medieval religious scholars, with excellent qualifications and public recognition, and Sufi orders would remain in Muslim public life through the passing of traditions and through the physical embodiments of Sufism, primarily shrines[26]. Shrine pilgrimage, like Sufism itself, would begin from within the ranks of scholars and later diffuse into all forms of Muslim life.

---

[25] Nile Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," (West Sussex:John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 92-93
[26] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 2

Shrine Pilgrimage in Early Islam

The origins of Sufism as a distinct tradition within Islam, which would herald Islamic shrine pilgrimage, can be traced back to 9th century Baghdad. This was a time of diverse and rapid Islamic theological and philosophical development. Under the auspices of Abbasid caliphs who sought political legitimacy through religious involvement, Arab and Iranian religious scholars came together in the flourishing Abbasid capital to debate Quranic, Hadith, and legal knowledge. This era would produce and codify landmark Islamic intellectual traditions such as Islamic law, *sharia*, *hadith*, *sunna*, Sunnism, and Sufism. At this time, Sufism was not created with motive or coherence, as exemplified by how the term had not been a form of contemporary self-identification but was applied retroactively by later Sufis[27].

Sufism, as a term, is thought to derive from the word for 'wool wearer', *as-suf* in Arabic, which connotes a relation to the wool wearing 7th century Eastern Christian ascetics of Syria. There were prominent Sufis who were also ascetics, such as the foundational Sufi, Rabia of Basra, who famously refused marriage in her pursuit of total devotion to God. However, it would be an underestimation to consider the origins of Sufism as simply a derivative of Christian asceticism. Mutual borrowing was a natural result of Baghdad being the most cosmopolitan capital in the world at the time, and larger currents of Sufi thought actually pushed back against asceticism, finding the extreme seclusion and celibacy of asceticism as oppositional to *sunna*.[28]

[27] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 16-17
[28] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 15-21

From the mid-800s emerged specialist interpreters who utilized discursive resources of the past, primarily the Quran and Hadith. Ideas such as the destruction of the lower self in pursuit of higher spirituality, or *fana*, and the existence of a select group of people who are 'Friends' of God, or *awliya*, became widely popular.[29] These ideas were not self-flagellatory as in the vein of the ascetics, and their reliance on Arabic terminology meant that words which carried Islamic epistemological concepts, such as *awliya* or saint, were resiliently replicable and could later be spread by Sufis far across the growing Muslim world.[30]

Even at this juncture in the mid-9th century, Sufism had already begun developing ideas which would later form the theological foundation of the practice of shrine pilgrimage. Tustari of Basra, who died in 890, had developed an idea of a Muhammad beyond that of a mere human. He argued that there is a Muhammadan Light, or *Nur Muhammad*, which originated in God and which first brought out Muhammad, then the prophets, then the *awliya*, and then the rest of humanity in a ranked social hierarchy. While all Muslims were obliged to strive towards deepening their relationship to God, only the *awliya* could fully understand all aspects of the Quran and occupied the space closer to God[31]. This idea of an exclusive circle of 'Friends' of God is the progenitor for the heightened status of saints in Islam. Even as shrine pilgrimage has been prevalent in or around Muslim communities until then, this conceptualization of *baraka* laden *awliya* is what constitutes Islamic shrine pilgrimage today.

---

[29] Ibid, 9, 40
[30] Ibid, 29, 43
[31] Ibid, 34-35

These proto-Sufi ideas, including the concept of saints, would travel to the east of the Abbasid empire in the 10th century into Khurasan, a Persian speaking region comprising eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. This region had been largely Zoroastrian, with Buddhist and Christian presence, until the early Muslim conquests of 632. In Khurasan, institutions central to shrine pilgrimage, such as the innovation of Sufi lodges, or *khanaqas* in Persian and *madrasah* in Arabic, started to take shape, giving a physical presence to Sufism. In addition to that, the importance of visionary experiences in legitimizing saints and the beginnings of a master-disciple relationship replete with initiatory rituals and long-term commitment to knowledge passing were first evidenced during this time[32].

These Khurasani traditions would travel back to Baghdad and create more quintessential Sufi traditions, such as the chain of transmission, known as *silsila* in Arabic. In a *silsila*, Islamic knowledge is passed down from master to disciple, creating a verifiable chain of knowledge passing only between those initiated into the relationship. This generational transmission in Sufi lineages had become formalized by the 12th century, and the tradition also gave way to notions of transmission of *baraka* from the prophet down through the successions via sacred lineages.[33] It is this *baraka* which would become central to the concept of shrine pilgrimage.

Between the 12th and the 15th centuries, Sufi brotherhoods, also known as *tariqa,* which means ‘path’ in Arabic, became even more sophisticated and centralized. Sufi brotherhoods expanded outwards into Central Asia, South Asia, and North Africa while propagating the *baraka* from prophetic sacred lineages and chains of transmission

---

[32] Green, “*Sufism: A Global History*,” 46-50
[33] Ibid, 53-54

of knowledge.[34] As the *awliya* doctrine diffused, creating the widespread belief in a selected group of Islamic 'saints', traditions such *karamat*, or miracles, which acted as proof of sainthood, started becoming attached to saints and shrines. Sufi brotherhoods quickly became the focus of attention for Muslim communities, particularly for the rural, the illiterate, and the dispossessed, and not least of all women, for whom other avenues of religiosity were effectively closed off.[35]

As Sufi brotherhoods gained territory and public respect, subsequent political authorities participated in transactional relationships with Sufi brotherhoods to seek legitimacy. Sufi brotherhoods would accumulate political, real estate, and economic gains that were then poured back into increasing and beautifying *khanaqah* lodges and shrines dedicated to Sufi order founders and saints. With conversion of new Islamic territories increasingly being brokered by Sufis who are later sanctified as lineage founders and Islamizers, the number of Muslim saints increased as medieval shrines grew more prestigious.[36]

[34] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 82, 90-91
[35] Ibid, 100-102
[36] Ibid, 99-100

Shrine Pilgrimage and 19th Century Islamic Reform

Shrines and shrine pilgrimage under Sufi orders continued for centuries as both Muslim populace and Muslim rulers benefitted from pilgrimizing and patronizing shrines. And for as long as it has existed, the thriving practice has also attracted its fair share of criticism, first coming from Muslim theologians concerned with orthodoxy or with the accumulating power of Sufis. Notably Ibn Taymiyya, a famed Muslim jurist from the 14th century, was critical of the practice[37], and later challenges, including from Sufis themselves, such as Shah Waliullah in the 18th century, would continue to assail the practice as an unfounded 'innovation'[38]. Shrine pilgrimage faced stronger challenges in the 19th century as Western colonial powers took control of the large areas of the Muslim world and they came into contact with Sufi groups and shrines.

The political power and public respect garnered by Sufi brotherhoods and the shrines they operated immediately drew colonial attention. As the first step of the colonizing project, Western cultural specialists such as French Orientalists in the Maghreb,[39] British surveyors in South Asia,[40] and Tsarist ethnographers in Central Asia[41] were dispatched in order to gain information on the local political structure. Sufi brotherhoods and shrines, with their historical presence and wealth, naturally fell into

[37] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 100-101
[38] Ibid, 166
[39] Katia Boissevain, "Studying religious mobility: pilgrimage, shrine visits and religious tourism from the Maghreb to the Middle East" in *New Itineraries and Pathways in Pilgrimage studies*, 2017, 9
[40] Kelly Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*," (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 33
[41] Eren Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991,"* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2017), 31

focus and had to be sorted and analyzed, as colonial powers viewed these Islamic institutions as either potential allies or potential threats.[42]

The findings from these colonial ethnographic dispatches formed the Western understanding of Sufism in the 19th century, in which Islam was dichotomized into scriptural and legal orthodoxy and mystical or fanatical Sufism[43]. French, British, and Russian bureaucrats and scholars wrote of shrine pilgrimage as being 'survivals' of the Maghreb's pre-Islamic Berber or Roman heritage,[44] South Asia's Hindu past,[45] and vestiges of Central Asian shamanism,[46] emphasizing shrine pilgrimage as a product of external influence not supported by fundamental Islamic texts.

However, due to the nature of the colonial project, this dichotomic Western view of Islam wherein Sufism and its shrines are considered as unorthodox, did not stay only within the fold of Western colonial authorities. Up until the 19th century, government officers, traders, and many new roles in colonized countries began to be filled by indigenous subjects who were schooled in colonial languages and schools.[47] This created a new class of indigenous Muslims who had internalized the Western view of Islam as a religion oriented within orthodox scriptures and laws in opposition to Sufism and shrines, despite the latter being integral to Islam for many Muslims.[48]

The challenge to Sufism, and specifically shrine pilgrimage, would only grow from there. By the early 20th century, large swathes of Muslims throughout the world

---

[42] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*," 32
[43] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 30-31
[44] Boissevain, "Stu*dying Religious Mobility*," 10
[45] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*," 30
[46] Devin DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57, 2014, 1
[47] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*," 40-41
[48] Ibid, 35

experienced modernization through Western education and urbanization, severing new generations of Muslims from shrine pilgrimage. Reformist Muslims emerged as a political force at the end of the 19th century throughout the Muslim world, questioning how Islam could have fallen to the West and how to spur social and economic progress from within Islam. Reformist discourse had internalized the Western dichotomy of Islam, and laid the blame of Islam's colonization on backwards practices such as shrine pilgrimage, which was considered superstitious and unislamic as it could not be found within the foundational texts.[49]

Going into the 20th century, the legacy of colonialism and nationalism would create different trajectories for shrine pilgrimage and the Sufi brotherhoods behind them. On the extreme end, Islamic reformist discourse arguing against shrine pilgrimage would bring destructive consequences to shrines in parts of the Muslim world. The most symbolic and consistent anti-pilgrimage sentiment occurred in Saudi Arabia. There, the Wahabbis, Islamic fundamentalists opposed to non-Quranic traditions like shrine pilgrimage, destroyed the tombs of Muhammad's family in the early 19th century, and later the Saud family would re-raze the tombs in the early 20th century,[50] a modernized continuation of Islamic criticism against shrine pilgrimage as being unorthodox. In the Muslim lands of the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik Revolution saw shrine lands confiscated while the Great Terror in 1937-1938 purged thousands of

---

[49] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 34

[50] Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, "Introduction" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Eds. Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, volume 147. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 16.

Muslim clerics, striking fear of public worship.[51] Meanwhile, when the Turkish Republic was created in 1923, the secular ideology of Kemalism also appropriated Islamic reformist thought and shuttered shrines and made prominent ones into museums. [52]

Not all Muslim lands in this time, however, experienced such sustained anti-pilgrimage campaigns. In North Africa, Islamic reformist thought and colonial fears of fanaticism due to Sufism led to the marginalization, but not widespread destruction, of shrines in the French Maghreb.[53] In Southeast Asia, in Indonesia, shrines and graves were traditionally watched over by 'keepers of the key' and during the Dutch occupation until the mid-20th century, colonial authorities would preside over who would be given the right to be the keeper.[54] In South Asia, many Sufis were considered part of the Mughal local elite and British colonial policy tended to preserve them as allies, with British colonial authority even patronizing major shrines unofficially.[55] In West Africa, in Senegal, Sufi brotherhoods initially opposed French authorities but later pragmatically cooperated with the French government, to the extent where 90% of Senegalese today belong to a brotherhood.[56]

---

[51] Marianne Kamp, "Where Did the Mullahs Go? Oral Histories from Rural Uzbekistan" in *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50, 2010, 503-8

[52] Ephrat et al., "*Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes*," 12

[53] Katia Boissevain, "*Sainte Parmi les Saints: Sayyda Mannûbiya ou les Recompositions Culturelles dans la Tunisie Contemporaine*," New Edition [online]. (Tunis: Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2005) DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.irmc.497 Chapter 2 Paragraph 48

[54] James J. Fox, "Interpreting the Historical Significance of Tombs and Chronicles in Contemporary Java," in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, Eds. Henri Chambert-Loir & Anthony Reid (Australia: Allen & Unwin, University of Hawai'i Press Honolulu 2002), 160, 216

[55] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*, 27

[56] Amber B. Gemmeke, "Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge" in *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 79 No. 1, 2009, 128-130, 147

Shrine Pilgrimage Today

The period of decolonization in the mid to late 20th century brought about falling numbers in shrine pilgrimage as rural shrines become neglected and shrine property in the form of *waqf* Islamic real estate endowments become nationalized and Sufi brotherhoods are broken up or caught in reformist discourse.[57] However, entering the 21st century, postcolonial Muslim governments have begun to realize the extent of popularity and reverence held by Muslim populations towards shrines. Saints and shrines are given national and ethnic identities beyond just religion as shrines across the Muslim world are increasingly folded into nationalizing projects which serve to create a postcolonial national identity and legitimize the state. Historically and architecturally distinguished shrines are being tapped as heritage tourist sites, which bring in income and development as well as projecting state-approved religious narratives to domestic and international audiences.

For example, in Iran, major shrines today are popular touristic, religious, and economic sites which celebrate and memorialize Shi'i history and identity according to the ideological precepts of the 1979 Islamic revolution.[58] In Syria, even the burial location of the shrine of a recently deceased saint turned into a state attempt to bolster the religious legitimacy of the government following violent confrontations involving the Ba'athist regime from 1979-1982.[59]

---

[57] Boissevain, "Studying religious Mobility," pg. 15

[58] Ladan Rahbari, "Chapter 4: Shi'i Muslim Women's Pilgrimage Rituals to Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh's Shrine in Qom," in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond: Reconfiguring Gender, Religion, and Mobility*, Eds. Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm (London: Routledge, 2020.), 77, 86

[59] Paulo G. Pinto, "Chapter 17: Territories of Memory: Ritual and Dreams in the Making of a Contemporary Syrian Saint" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Eds.

Shrine pilgrimage is not only being reinforced and restored, but innovations in the practice are also being made. For example, mass migration to Britain in the 1960s to 1970s created a Muslim diaspora who are now creating Sufi brotherhoods and shrines in Britain based on South Asian tradition and British Muslim political and social trends.[60] New saints and shrines are still being created all over the Muslim world, whether traditional figures such as a Sufi sheikh in Syria[61] or local figures such as a Soviet-era healer in Kazakhstan.[62]

At the same time, access to Hajj pilgrimage has become more systematic and modernized, ballooning from 160,000 pilgrims in the 19th century to 2,000,000 in the 21st century.[63] Undoubtedly, Hajj pilgrimage, as the less theologically problematic pilgrimage in Islam, is increasingly coopting the role shrine pilgrimage had played as the spiritually fulfilling physical pilgrimage tied to divine blessing. However, shrine pilgrimage's long and rich history makes it evident that the practice is deeply important for the neighborhood and regions in which the shrines reside, to the extent where colonial and nationalist governments continue to appropriate the practice, while fundamentalists seek to destroy it. Shrine pilgrimage has faced historical challenges from colonialism and Islamic reformist thought, and it faces renewed challenges today from Islamic fundamentalist groups such as ISIS. But because shrine pilgrimages offer a spiritual

---

Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, Vol. 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 492

[60] Ron Geaves, "Continuity and Transformation in a Naqshbandi Tariqa in Britain: The Changing Relationship Between Mazar (Shrine) and Dar-al-Ulum (Seminary) Revisited," in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, Eds. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 65

[61] Pinto, "*Chapter 17: Territories of Memory*," 487

[62] Ulan Bigozhin, "Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan" in *Central Asian Affairs* Vol. 5, 2018, 239

[63] Johan Hendrik Meuleman, "Religious Practices: Pilgrimage" in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 319

outlet tailored to local histories and tastes, it will continue being reinvented and reintegrated into the fabric of Muslim life.

Shrine Pilgrimage in Central Asia

Pre-Modern Central Asia

The development of shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia closely followed after the development of theological discourse in 8th century Baghdad, which had paved the way for the veneration of saints and shrines. Sufis have been recorded in Central Asia, a region not far from the core Islamic dynasties, since the 10th century and probably earlier, preceding the recorded term 'Sufi' itself.[64] The Islamization of Central Asia is commonly attributed to the work of Sufis who roam the 'pagan' steppes spreading Islam to nomads, an idea that is supported by the many shrines in Central Asia dedicated to Sufi saints credited with bringing Islam to the area.[65]

Sufis in Central Asia have long been thought of as the original Islamizers of the region, even though the Islamizing Sufi narrative is most likely a product of later eras. Prominent Sufi figures, such as Ahmad Yassawi, who died in 1166, are known for bringing Islam to the nomads but Islam has been located within the region preceding such figures. Growing political instability in Baghdad in the 9th century had already

---

[64] Devin DeWeese, "Introduction" in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*. Eds. Devin DeWeese & Jo-Ann Gross, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 37-38

[65] Devin DeWeese, "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufis in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia" in *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*. Ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 336

begun pushing Sufis into Central Asia.[66] By the 10th century, Central Asia was already producing indigenous Sufis,[67] indicating a firm Islamic presence in the sedentary cities of Central Asia. The early Islamic presence in the region evidently predates the many famous Sufis widely acknowledged as its Islamizers.

Indeed, Yassawi's later popularity is a good indication of when and how Sufism took root in an increasingly Muslim Central Asia. Although Sufi figures such as Yassawi[68] and the Qalandar wandering dervishes[69] have been present in Central Asia since the 12th century, it was with the Mongol conquest of Central Asia in the 13th century that Sufism could take strong political root in the region. The popular narrative attributing Islamization to Sufis developed around this time, as Sufi figures became useful tools with which the new rulers could gain Islamic legitimacy.[70] Mongol rulers were quick to appropriate shrines, which represented the lineage of the Prophet's descendants, and they expanding and beautified shrines, creating the handsome shrine complexes of today,[71] such as Khoja Ahmad Yassawi's.

With the incoming ruler of Central Asia in the 14th century, Amir Timur, Sufi figures would go on to play an even larger role in Central Asian political life. The Naqshbandiyya order was founded in the early 14th century by Baha al-din Naqshband from Bukhara, whose spiritual master was Amir Kulal, who was also Amir Timur's most

---

[66] Alexander Knysh, "*Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*" (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 74
[67] Knysh, "*Islamic Mysticism: A Short History,*" 81
[68] DeWeese, "*Khawaja Ahmad Yassavi as an Islamizing Saint*," 353
[69] Knysh, "*Islamic Mysticism: A Short History,*" 272
[70] DeWeese, "*Khwaja Ahmad Yassavi as an Islamizing Saint*," 340
[71] A. Azfar Moin, "Chapter 4: The Politics of Saint Shrine in the Persianate Empires," in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* Eds. Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 112-113

trusted spiritual adviser.[72] It was Amir Timur who instructed for a grand mausoleum to be built for Ahmad Yassawi at the end of the 14th century,[73] cementing the henceforth inextricable link between political legitimacy and Sufi shrines in Central Asia. By the 15th century, later Timurid rulers would be linked with the Naqshbandiya order[74] and by the end of the 15th century, Naqshbandi Sufis had become so widespread and politically relevant that they would dominate the Central Asian political and religious sphere through to the Soviet period, with groups claiming Naqshbandi heritage still active in Central Asia today.[75]

The rise of the Naqshbandiyya order in Central Asia was intrinsically related to shrines. Shrines like Ahmad Yassawi's would continue to play a large role in Central Asian life, not only as spiritual and political centers, but also as economic powerhouses which attract religious visitors by the thousands while functioning as sites where welfare and government patronage was disbursed.[76] In this way, shrines became integrated into regional life as Islamic real estate endowments, or *waqf.*[77] Through the system of *waqf*, real estate would be owned and managed by Islamic actors, with profits often channeled into building and maintaining mosques and shrines.

In Central Asia's case, this was the Naqshbandiyya order, the Sufi brotherhood which had become so deeply rooted in the region that one of its leaders was actually

---

[72] Knysh, "*Islamic Mysticism: A Short History,*" 218
[73] DeWeese, "*Khawaja Ahmad Yassavi as an Islamizing Saint*," 353
[74] Knysh, "*Islamic Mysticism: A Short History,*" 222
[75] Ashirbek Muminov, "Chapter 9: Sufi Groups in Contemporary Kazakhstan: Competition and Connections with Kazakh Islamic Society" in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*. Eds. Devin DeWeese & Jo-Ann Gross (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 284
[76] Robert McChesney, "*Central Asia: Foundations of Change*," (New Jersey: Darwin Press, 1997), 72-73
[77] Devin DeWeese, "Sacred Places and 'Public' Narratives: The Shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavi Sufi Order, 16th - 17th Centuries," in *The Muslim World* Vol. 90, Fall 2000, 353

the largest landowner in Central Asia in the 15th century. The order expanded into obtaining arable land and distributing land to saintly families, all with the permission of the Timurid dynasty. Its communal trust, political power, and physical presence saw the order outlasting the Timurid and Shaybanid dynasties, as it increasingly became involved in the lives of Central Asians beyond spiritual activities, such as solving legal disputes, managing tax breaks and cash grants, and even issuing travel passports[78]. Even at the end of the 19th century, between one-tenth and one-fifth of total agricultural land of the Bukharan emirate, for example, was still entrusted in *waqf,*[79] exhibiting the colossal tangible presence of Sufism and its associated shrines in generations of Central Asian life.

A look at the Islamic literary genre of shrine guides can attest to the thriving culture of shrine pilgrimage in pre-modern Central Asia. Shrine guides are often commissioned by the wealthy and serve more as hagiographies of regional saints than as functional guidebooks. Shrine guides of major Central Asian cities, such as Bukhara and Samarkand, have existed since the 13th century, but by the 17th century, more shrine guides have been produced covering more regions, such as Sayram and Osh.[80]

For example, one particular shrine guide dated between 1873 and 1887 covers 173 shrines in the Khwarazmian region of Central Asia, today located in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The shrine guide, which gives directions and a condensed backstory of the saint shrines, exhibits the sheer number of shrines in the region which evidences the holiness of Khwarazm. It harks back to well-established and popular saint tomb

---

[78] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History,*" 149

[79] Beatrice Penati, "On the Local Origins of the Soviet Attack on "Religious" Waqf in the Uzbek SSR (1927)" in *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 36, 2015, 40

[80] DeWeese, "*Sufism in Central Asia*," 47-48

shrines while also introducing newer shrines, such as a shrine for people martyred by the Russians, and different forms of shrines, such as a hill which used to be a tower of heads supposedly created by Genghis Khan.[81] This piece of literature shows how, at this point in time in Central Asia, the region had accumulated enough saintly presence that the land of Khwarazm itself was blessed and deserving of deep spiritual contemplation.[82] By the 19th century, shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia was ubiquitous and widely encouraged, as shrines became pillars of spiritual, political, and economic power in the region.

However, shrine pilgrimage, while thoroughly diffused in the Islamic landscape, was never far from criticism. By the 17th century, the sheer number and variants of Sufi orders and rituals across the Islamic world triggered debate on whether Sufi practices which did not appear in the Quran and in *hadith*, such as shrine pilgrimage, were "praiseworthy innovations" or *bida hasana* in Arabic, or "reprehensible innovations" or *bida sayyi'a* in Arabic.[83] A strain of Sufi thought which was critical of innovation was the Mujaddidiya branch of the Naqshibandiyya order, originated by Indian sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi in the 17th century.[84] When Mujaddidiya sheikhs arrived in Central Asia in the 18th century, the debate between Sufis of opposing sides allowed rulers to exploit the divide to strengthen control.

---

[81] Devin DeWeese, "Chapter 6: Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The "Description of Khwārazm" and the Experience of Pilgrimage in Nineteenth-Century Central Asia" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Eds. Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, Vol. 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 197-198
[82] Ibid, 209-210
[83] Green, "*Sufism: A Global History*," 155
[84] Ibid, 164

Tsarist Central Asia

The Tsarist empire finally conquered all of Central Asia at the close of the 19th century, but the protracted war in the Muslim Caucasus around the same time had ignited a fear of Muslim fanaticism,[85] which was also shared by other Western empires of the time who were also facing bloody battles with Muslim colonies.[86] The Tsarist empire decided to ignore Islamic institutions allowing them to proceed as before lest intervention inflame fanaticism.[87] However, Tsarist officials did continue keeping an eye on Central Asian Muslims, observing how practices like shrine pilgrimage enabled fanaticism. In this way, Tsarist and Western empires shared a tendency of viewing Islam from a scripturalist perspective, which had the effect of favoring Islamic texts as opposed to Sufi folk practices, such as shrine pilgrimage, which were blamed for inciting fanaticism.[88]

From the late 19th century until the 1920s, modernist Muslim reformers throughout the Muslim lands of the Tsarist Empire began cross-regional discourse questioning why Muslim civilizations had lost to the West. Known as the Jadids, meaning ‘new method’ in Arabic, these reformers pinned down several aspects of Islamic tradition they deemed as backwards and hindering to progress, among which were Islamic education, women’s position in society, and shrine pilgrimage.[89] The Jadid approach to shrine pilgrimage was not too different from the Tsarist view of the practice

---

[85] Alexander Morrison, “*Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868-1910: A Comparison with British India*,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53
[86] Green, “*Sufism: A Global History*,” 189
[87] Adeeb Khalid, “*Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*,” (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), 106
[88] Tasar, “*Soviet and Muslim*,” 31-33
[89] Khalid, “*Central Asia*,” 114-121

as fanaticism. However, because the Jadids were working towards social progress within the bounds of a scripturalist Islam, their attack on shrine pilgrimage was rooted in the understanding that the practice was not supported in Islamic fundamental texts.

Already by the 20th century, the Mujaddidis, Tsarist officials, and Jadids had become the foremost critics of Islamic folk practices, with all three singling out shrine pilgrimage as a reprehensible practice that should be discarded from Central Asian Islam. However, despite their opposition towards shrine pilgrimage, the Mujaddidis, Tsarist officials, and Jadids did not actually go beyond discourse to systematically eradicate shrine pilgrimage through physical or violent means. It took until the Soviet control of Central Asia for shrine pilgrimage to face possible extinction.

Soviet Central Asia

Under Stalin's destructive policies of dekulakization and collectivization from 1928 to 1932, *waqf* endowments, which likely included shrine properties, were seized by the state and repurposed as collective farms and storage depots. What followed it was the largest threat to Islam, the Great Terror from 1937 to 1938, during which intellectuals, religious leaders, and class enemies were rounded up and arrested, deported or executed by the millions in a centrally directed campaign of political repression. The purges reached Central Asia and proved deadly for Muslim clerics and many others, succeeding in deterring public worship and severing Islamic knowledge transmission due to the purging of Islamic religious authorities.

In Central Asia, mosques and religious schools were shuttered, and some were destroyed, forcing worship into the domestic sphere.[90] Shrines were just as ubiquitous in Central Asian towns as mosques[91] and were also subject to closure and destruction with some transformed into Red Reading Rooms, Red Teahouses, and even horse stables.[92] Although the violent situation halted public displays of Islamic worship in Central Asia for much of the 1930s, many religious figures who went into hiding would reappear in public later on when antireligious campaigns eased up. Regular Muslims began their new Soviet lives at collective farms while still passing on Islamic recitations and privately performing religious rituals.[93]

From 1943 to 1945, Islam and specifically shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia would receive further impact from Soviet policy changes. Stalin had introduced religious reforms, which still had the ultimate aim of liquidating religion, but through the creation of state religious institutions that would manage religious affairs towards the goal of eventually subsuming religion with Soviet legality.[94] In Central Asia, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, or SADUM, and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, or CARC, were created to oversee Muslims and Muslim institutions of Central Asia. Due to the centrality of shrines in Central Asia, especially those of famous saints, shrines would be an important asset of interest for SADUM and CARC throughout their time in the Soviet Union.

---

[90] Kamp, "*Where Did the Mullahs Go?*" 509-512
[91] Ibid, 511
[92] Adeeb Khalid, "Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR," (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 350-353
[93] Ibid, 507-515
[94] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 2

CARC was SADUM's party liaison in Moscow[95] while SADUM oversaw dogmatic and practical issues of Central Asia's mosques and shrines. In the 1940s through to the 1950s, with the promise of religious freedom and while the new religious institutions were still finding their footing, mosques and schools opened up again and pilgrimage to Central Asia's major shrines skyrocketed, with one major shrine attracting between 50,000 and 70,000 pilgrims.[96] Despite the violent repression of the 1930s, shrine pilgrimage was not forgotten in Central Asia.

With the death of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev came into power in 1953, ushering in an era of utopianism and progress, rejection of Stalin and Stalinist policies, and re-emergence of revolutionary ideas, namely atheism. In 1958, the party released two decrees calling for more anti-religious propaganda and calling for an end specifically to shrine pilgrimage, which would profoundly affect Central Asia.[97] Khrushchev's newfound hardline stance against religion was buoyed by revolutionary zeal and without a specific objective in view, unlike Stalin's anti-religious campaign of the 1930s which sought to exterminate the clergy class.[98] This left CARC and SADUM with the job of regulating Islamic institutions according to the aims of the anti-religious decree.

CARC and SADUM's anti-religious offensive was anchored in different yet converging ideas of shrine pilgrimage as unislamic spaces and practices which must be rooted out. In CARC's case, the party conception of Islam was informed by the legacy of Tsarist religious norms, wherein acceptable Islam was the scriptural and textual, while the folk and pagan aspects were fanatical. This notion was further boosted with an air of

---

[95] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 78-79
[96] Ibid, 127
[97] Ibid, 194
[98] Ibid, 201

Islamic legitimacy because Jadidism also espoused a similar idea, which perceived Sufi folk practices, particularly shrine pilgrimage, as not rooted in Islam.[99]

In 1958, when SADUM welcomed its second leader, Ziyovuddin Qori Boboxonov, shrine pilgrimage found itself yet another opponent. Qori was a product of Naqshbandiyya master-disciple lineage, yet he never adopted disciples, instead taking up a hardline stance against shrine pilgrimage, declaring it as *bida.*[100] With this, SADUM under Qori had turned the anti-religious campaign from one which targeted Islam into one which targets harmful *bida* practices.[101] SADUM sought to delegitimize other forms of Islamic authority while projecting themselves to Central Asians and the state as the rightful sole religious authority of Central Asia.[102].

Although not as comprehensive and destructive as Stalin's anti-religious drive in the 1930s, Khruschev's anti-pilgrimage campaign swept through Central Asia from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Access to shrines were shut down, restricted, or subject to roadblocks;[103] imams at mosques under SADUM control were ordered to deliver Friday sermons urging against shrine pilgrimage;[104] exposé pamphlets decrying Central Asia's most popular shrines were issued and posted onsite; sacred objects at shrines were burned or desecrated so pilgrims could not touch them;[105] shrines were monitored and guarded during high season, and assets such as antique Qurans and donations were

[99] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 118-119
[100] Ibid, 155
[101] Ibid, 161
[102] Ibid, 142
[103] Ibid, 97, 226
[104] Ibid, 222
[105] Ibid, 159

confiscated while shrine keepers were kicked out.[106] Shrines were also repossessed by SADUM from generational shrine keepers and maintained using private funds,[107] and in the case of the iconic Throne of Solomon mountain shrine in Osh, a cavern was excavated in order to house a "Museum of Atheism".[108]

By the close of Khrsuchev's administration in 1964, by certain measures, shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia did indeed decrease. From 70,000 pilgrims on *eid al adha* in the 1940s, pilgrimage on the same holiday in the 1960s attracted only 2,500 people.[109] However, Khruschev's anti-pilgrimage campaign spearheaded by SADUM in the 1950s and 1960s did not at all mean an end to shrine pilgrimage.

For one, SADUM targeted major shrines,[110] meaning most Muslims had continued access to their local shrines where surveillance was lower, if not non-existent. And even SADUM's actions at high profile shrines were not met unchallenged: the closure of Ahmad Yassawi's shrine brokered many complaints by an imam's constituents,[111] while anti-pilgrimage notices placed on shrines were ripped off the next day.[112] Pilgrims were also quick and creative in circumventing anti-pilgrimage initiatives: during *eid al adha* at the Throne of Solomon in Osh in 1963, when pilgrims were blocked from reaching the top of the mountain, they instead thronged at the cemetery at the foot of the mountain. On 1964's *Eid al-Adha*, pilgrims had learned that guards would

[106] Ibid, 229
[107] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 190
[108] Ibid, 240
[109] Ibid, 24
[110] Ibid, 226
[111] Ibid, 222
[112] Ibid, 231

disperse by noon and so most waited out until later in the afternoon to visit the Throne of Solomon’s shrine.[113]

Another problem plaguing the anti-pilgrimage campaign was party reliance on local non-SADUM authorities to cooperate in discouraging shrine pilgrimage. Not only did this take away authority from SADUM in managing religious institutions, but it also left the efficacy of the campaign in the hands of local authorities, who stood to benefit from the economic boost from shrine pilgrimage.[114]

Overall, Khrushchev’s campaign precipitated an observable decrease in the numbers of shrine pilgrims at major shrines. However, shrine pilgrimage remained protected by local authorities, who were incentivized to keep the practice going while gaining more and more authority to manage their assets during this time. And the creative circumventions by Central Asian Muslims evidences how, even as they avoided visiting high-profile shrines, the mindset of belief in shrine pilgrimage and Islam remained little changed even at the close of the campaign.

Leonid Brezhnev’s rule beginning in 1964 ended the utopianism and anti-religious zeal of Khrushchev’s era and instead kickstarted SADUM’s foray into foreign affairs. SADUM was allowed to engage with the wider Muslim world to showcase the progress of Soviet Muslims.[115] Shrine pilgrimage was a particularly central concern for Muslim dignitaries, as the shrines of important saints such as Imam al-Bukhari and Baha al-din Naqshband were located in Central Asia. Foreign Muslim dignitaries who met with SADUM members abroad questioned them on the state of the shrines, while

[113] Ibid, 237
[114] Tasar, “*Soviet and Muslim*,” 189, 240
[115] Ibid, 277

dignitaries hosted at SADUM headquarters insisted, even to the point of tears, that they be brought to the shrines. This was a problem, because even as the party line towards religion softened from hard line back to moderate, shrine pilgrimage was still considered as superstitious and the shrines had been left in a poor state. It was only in the 1970s when SADUM successfully petitioned to restore some of the major shrines and retain them under SADUM supervision.[116]

By the 1980s, interest in the atheist project within the party had waned, and state control over Islam was strong enough such that inroads were being made into unregistered Islamic activity[117]. By the 1990s, the institutionalization of Islam through centralizing control of religious institutions and dogma was thoroughly absorbed by specialized state institutions like SADUM. Hurtling towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union, national interests would result in republics such as Kazakhstan forming its own independent national muftiate, while SADUM became the muftiate of a newly independent Uzbekistan.[118] Even after independence from the Soviet Union, the choice for the five Central Asian republics to form their own national muftiates speaks to the deeply rooted Soviet legacy of institutionalized Islam in Central Asia.

Central Asian Islam, and consequently shrine pilgrimage, was profoundly impacted by the Soviet experience. Sufi lineages and master-disciple relationships, which once dominated Central Asian Muslim society, became significantly less prominent in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. The practice of shrine pilgrimage used to be diffused into Central Asian political, social, and economic life before the

---

[116] Tasar, "*Soviet and Muslim*," 291-293
[117] Ibid, 320-321
[118] Ibid, 366

arrival of the Soviets, but then received successive dogmatic and physical attacks from Tsarist and Soviet officials and Muslim reformers.

Nevertheless, although Islamic religious leaders were repressed and shrine pilgrimage was discouraged at different points during Soviet history, the legacy of Islam in Central Asia was never, at any point, successfully buried, and this is most clear when viewing shrine pilgrimage. Even after Stalin's Great Terror and Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, Soviet Central Asians continued visiting shrines and kept religious rituals and knowledge alive even when observance of Sufi practices was restricted to the private sphere.[119]

Post-Soviet Central Asia

The notion that shrine pilgrimage has never left Central Asia is even clearer when viewing the emergence of shrine pilgrimage as a central focus in national heritage projects in modern post-Soviet Central Asian states, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. These two countries have the largest populations in the region and are also both ruled by governments strongly interested in promoting shrine pilgrimage in pursuit of creating a distinct national identity.

In Uzbekistan, the government under Islam Karimov, who ruled Soviet Uzbekistan and later independent Uzbekistan until his death in 2016, heavily utilized the imagery of saints and sanctioned shrine pilgrimage as a laudable aspect of Uzbek

[119] Paolo Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia" in *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 3, No. 30, Sep 2019, 17

Muslim identity. Uzbekistan's history of shrine pilgrimage and Sufism, which included distinguished Muslim civilizational figures such as Bahauddin Naqshband, was integral in reinforcing the kind of tolerant and unique Muslims Uzbeks have historically been[120].

A legacy of Soviet institutionalization of Islam, the preservation and maintenance of shrines in Uzbekistan is under state control, and the state used that control to mold shrine pilgrimage into an integral aspect of Uzbek Muslim life. However, the state's endorsement of shrine pilgrimage brings up contemporary issues. The government's emphasis on Sufism is meant to act as a counterweight to external Muslim elements such as fundamentalist Wahabbism, but as previously covered, criticism of shrine pilgrimage is not foreign to Central Asian Muslims. In addition to that, in modern day Uzbekistan, state funding of shrine sites reinforces and justifies state presence and control over Islam, while religious authorities are faced with problems balancing the state's official position on shrine pilgrimage versus the reality where pilgrims appear to pray directly to the saints, constituting *shirk* or idolatry.[121]

Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, a similar process of reinterpreting saints and shrines through the national lens has also been unfolding under the rule of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the leading authority figure of Kazakhstan from the Soviet era until now. The geography of Kazakhstan itself is now swept up in the drive to nationalize Islam.

---

[120] Johan Rasanayagam, "*Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*," (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 108
[121] Rasanayagam, "*Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan,*" 141

Sacred South Kazakhstan

South Kazakhstan, which borders Uzbekistan, is the most densely populated region of Kazakhstan and is widely considered to be its spiritual center. The region has a large majority of Kazakhs and a significant minority of Uzbeks and is home to ancient, continuously populated cities of the Silk Road, such as Taraz. This is where the region was first Islamized and where the country connects to other Central Asian sedentary religious centers. South Kazakhstan is home to the city of Turkistan, which houses the shrine complex of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi, a 12th century Sufi respected throughout the region and whose shrine was first built by Timur and is currently undergoing grand restoration by the Kazakhstani state. Other Islamic shrines, some related to Yassawi and others predating the Mongol conquest, are also scattered throughout the region, which used to attract religious pilgrims who could not make Hajj pilgrimage.[122]

It is this religious sanctity of the south which the Kazakhstan state increasingly moves to appropriate and repurpose, in addition to erecting national and religious monuments in the north. Kazakh ancestor worship, which is integral in Kazakh tradition and identity, is also increasingly used to encourage nation-building: Khoja Ahmad Yassawi, who was a saint revered across geographical and ethnic lines is now more and more thought of as a Kazakh saint to modern Kazakhs.[123] Saint reverence increasingly follows national and ethnic lines, such as how Uzbekistani anthropologist Azim Malikov noted that modern Kazakh visitors tend to visit the shrines of Kazakh saints and heroes such as Khoja Ahmad Yassawi and Abylai Khan, while Uzbek visitors

[122] Azim Malikov, “Shrines and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan,” *Muslim Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, eds. Babak Rahimi, Peyman Eshagi (University of North Carolina Press, 2019) 150-153
[123] Malikov, “*Shrine and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan,*” 160-162

tended to visit shrines such as Rabiga Sultan Begim in the Yassawi shrine complex, who is believed to be the great-grand daughter of Amir Timur, a widely popular historical figure who is central in Uzbekistani identity formation.[124]

The encroaching state involvement in south Kazakhstani religious life is best symbolized by the rapid development of Turkistan and Khoja Ahmad Yassawi from a small town and decaying shrine complex to a growing city with an international airport, shopping centers, and universities, some of which is funded by foreign parties such as the Turkish Religious Foundation[125]. The state's attempt to build Turkistan into a multi-recreational zone centering on the increasingly Kazakh-ified saint Khoja Ahmad Yassawi reflects the changing demographic composition of pilgrims and the changing nature of shrine pilgrimage. Shrine pilgrimage in Kazakhstan can now be procured via commercial tour packages.[126] Pilgrims, or visitors depending on the observer, can participate in secular trips to observe historical, natural, and architectural wonders or travel in groups with a primarily religious motivation.

Kazakhstan, Religion, and Shrines

The process of nation building in Kazakhstan following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 faced acute problems: the newly sovereign state had to build and administer a nation independent of the Soviet system. This is despite inheriting Soviet borders and bureaucracy, a population of majority Russian ethnics at the time of

[124] Ibid 162
[125] Ibid 164
[126] Ibid 163

independence,[127] and a Kazakh population which had been widely Russified and urbanized after being forcibly sedentarized by the Soviet government by way of collectivization and mass famine since the 1930s. When the independent Kazakhstani state embarked on the nation building process, some scholars argued that it was a continuity of the Soviet integrationist policy of *korenizatsiya,*[128] or 'indigenization', which was first brought forward in the Soviet Union in the 1920s in order to encourage national languages and national elites as part of early Bolshevism's decolonialist rhetoric.[129]

Although *korenizatsiya* and its impracticalities would take a back seat as the Russian language became the state medium, the process of indigenization had taken root. In the 1960s, the Kazakh Soviet Sociliast Republic was helmed by Russian educated Kazakh cadres, namely Dinmukhamed Qonaev, the First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party from the 1960s through to the 1980s, and Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was the First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party at the end of the 1980s and later became the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.[130]

Qonaev's cordial relationship with the then General Secretary of the Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev allowed him to fill the local cadres with Kazakhs instead of Russians, and often those who shared his tribal affiliation. Also from the 1960s to the 1970s, Kazakh Soviet specialists were the largest in number compared to those of other

---

[127] Catherine Alexander, "The Culture and Properties of Decaying Buildings," *Focaal* No. 44 Winter 2004, 3
[128] Azim Malikov, "Sacred Lineages in Central Asia: Translocality and Identity," *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus* Ed. Manja Stephan-Emmerich and Philipp Shcroder (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018) 135
[129] Terry Martin, "*The Affirmative action empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1933*," (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001) 10-12
[130] Gulnar Kendirbai, "Challenging Colonial Power: Kazak Cadres and Native Strategies," *Inner Asia* Vol. 10 No.1 (2008): 79

minority nationalities,[131] helping to establish a growing Soviet Kazakh middle class. Urbanized and Russified Kazakhs, in conjunction with Kazakh leaders deft in handling Soviet politics, boosted Kazakh concerns at the regional and even central level.

The continuation of Kazakh nation building after 1991 had to carefully balance the processes of 'Kazakhification', which sought to nationalize the traits of the titular ethnicity and affirm the primordial right of the Kazakhs to their land as enshrined in the constitution,[132] with 'Kazakhstanization', which sought to promote a civic identity amongst the multi-ethnic and multi-religious state; an identity where the state had control over religious life. The building of a state ideology revolves around these processes, and the propagandization of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi as a Kazakh saint is a part of this.[133]

The Kazakhstani state's nation building and its presence in religious life, and shrine pilgrimage in particular, picks up where the Soviet Islamic state apparatus left off. After nearly 70 years of Soviet attempts to weaken Islam’s position in Central Asia, Islam survived but in a changed form. The importance of Sufi orders and Khoja sacred lineages in Kazakhstan was significantly diminished and replaced by Kazakhstani state religious apparatus, while shrines, some of which were destroyed and others made into museums during the Soviet period, emerged with a new layer of secular historical, national and cultural significance on top of its Sufi Islamic roots.[134]

The acculturation of Kazakhstani state control over religion was underway. In 2011, the Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations was enacted, affirming

---

[131] Kendirbai, “Challenging Colonial Power: Kazak Cadres and Native Strategies,” 78
[132] Alexander, “The Culture and Properties of Decaying Buildings,” 3
[133] Malikov, “Sacred Lineages in Central Asia: Translocality and Identity,” 136
[134] Malikov, “Shrine and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan” 154

freedom of conscience while recognizing the special place of the Hanafiya Islamic jurisprudence school in Kazakhstani spiritual life and also requiring religious organizations to register with the state, effectively dwindling the number of religious groups allowed to operate. This furthered the process of state control over religious life and the nationalization of saints and shrines. State control over Kazakhstani religious life fell under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstani descendant of SADUM, and the Agency for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which would later be subsumed by the Ministry of Culture and Information and in 2018, be renamed the Ministry of Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan;[135] the trajectory of state control over religion, particularly Islam, from a matter of public conscience into a tool of nation building is plainly evident here.

What should also be noted, however, is that state involvement in religion was not one sided, nor was it only at the ministerial level. With independence from Soviet atheism and newfound government support in religious life as a form of nation building, local actors also took initiative in involving themselves and the state in local religious life, often intersecting with saints and shrines. The re-traditionalization and revival of pre-Soviet Kazakh traditions, itself generating new traditions, became prominent after independence. State religious policies, such as organizing shrine celebrations, disseminating shrine pilgrimage literature, and standardizing shrine management, including shrine etiquette, have all become part of the Kazakh spiritual experience.

Some individuals and groups have become empowered by the state's attention to religious life. Khojas, who suffered a loss of communal power over the Soviet era,

[135] Ibid 156

saw shrines not only as sacred spaces but also as a connection between them and their saintly ancestors, potentially reviving the high status they once held amongst Kazakhs.[136] Even in northern Kazakhstan, at the Aqkol shrine complex in Pavlodar region, a Kazakh businessman has heavily invested in the shrine of a Soviet-era Kazakh healer, at times against the behest of the saint's successor family, and has gained considerable grassroots political support due to his image as a shrine and ancestor venerator.[137] Indeed, citizen initiative and fervor in shrine pilgrimage can even overwhelm state ambitions. The spiritual sect, *Ata Zholy*, which is Kazakh for Way of the Ancestors, was founded in Kazakhstan in 1997 and called for a return to traditional Kazakh Islamic traditions including shrine pilgrimage and ancestor worship. The movement organized lucrative shrine pilgrimages but was eventually deemed illegal in 2009 stemming from allegations of psychological abuse to its members.[138]

As the Kazakhstani government ramps up its efforts to locate and develop sacred spaces, such as through the Rukhani Zhangiru program, which is Kazakh for Spirit Renovation, and was started in 2017 to inventory sacred spaces of all religions to mark for further development.[139] The role of Islamic shrines as a cultural marker of Kazakhness will only increase, as it unfolds a new chapter in the communal narrative of Islamic saints and shrines as they have now become nationalized and ethnicized.

The reemergence of shrine pilgrimage in 21st century Central Asia shows how deeply rooted the practice had long been in the daily lives of Muslims of Central Asia,

---

[136] Malikov, "Shrine and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan" 156
[137] Ulan Bigozhin, "Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Affairs* Vol. 5 (2018) 233-239
[138] Malikov, "Shrine and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan" 157-158
[139] Ulan Bigozhin, "Sacred Geographies in the Eurasian Steppe: The Aqkol Shrine as a Symbol of Kazakh Ethnicity and Religiosity," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* Vol.3 No. 3 (2019): 132-133

surviving through underground practices and constant changes in Soviet atheist policy. The importance of shrine pilgrimage in nation-building processes by post-Soviet governments is prime acknowledgement of how shrine pilgrimage attracts so much popular attention that it cannot be fully repressed, even with violence. Shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia has undergone major changes in form, from the great prestigious Naqshbandi Sufi shrines of the pre-modern era to the shuttered and neglected shrines of the Soviet decades. Today, it reemerges in yet another new form, as the old practice has to perform new tricks, this time as a way to create and propagate a distinct national identity for the newly independent Muslims states of Central Asia.

Although scholarship about Islam in Soviet Central Asia and about shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia in particular is steadily increasing over the years, when it comes to women's religious rituals and shrine pilgrimage in Central Asia, modern scholarship can only rely on Soviet or Tsarist ethnographies, which mention the women of shrine pilgrimage only in passing. Although Soviet and Tsarist ethnographies capture snippets of female *dhikr* groups,[140] female shrine religious authorities and shrine pilgrims,[141] not as much work has been done to understand how large of a role woman have had in Kazakhstani Islam and shrine pilgrimage.

More needs to be done to uncover specifically the role women had in shrine pilgrimage in the pre-modern era and in Central Asia. Chapter 2 attempts to make up for the dearth of gendered focus on shrine pilgrimage in historical material by centering the voices and actions of modern women in shrine pilgrimage.

---

[140] Devin DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57, 2014, 333-334
[141] Paolo Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 30 No. 3, 2019, 1-3, 8

Chapter 2: Women and Shrine Pilgrimage

Introduction

This chapter looks at the women of modern Islamic shrine pilgrimage in a wide variety of countries and contexts, from the vantage of female shrine authorities and shrine pilgrims, in order to identify in what capacity and to what extent women have participated in shrine pilgrimage and how the gender dynamics of women in shrine pilgrimage can come to be skewed with female predominance.

As seen in Chapter 1, during much of the pre-modern era, Sufi shrines were often the seat of Islamic power and therefore were dominated by male figures. The Islamic legitimacy of Sufi shrines was largely unquestioned for as long as Sufi brotherhoods kept peace with the ruling class. But it is that very influence of Sufi brotherhoods which have attracted criticism of unorthodoxy regarding the Sufi brotherhoods and their related activities, such as shrine pilgrimage, from within Muslim communities. And with the arrival of Western colonial powers, the influence of Sufi brotherhoods over Muslim public life would erode as waves of Muslim reformist and Islamist thought severed shrine pilgrimage from its place in Islamic orthodoxy, although not totally or irreversibly.

In this chapter, I argue that the modern transformation of shrine pilgrimage from one of the most distinguished spaces of Islamic power to a still popular but oft-derided superstitious practice is a result and facilitator of women's predominance in shrine pilgrimage. I find that shrine pilgrimage today has become a practice that is particularly

accessible to women due to its low participation barriers. Shrines, especially neighborhood ones, do not require Islamic knowledge or specific monetary or time demands, unlike the scheduled prayers at mosques or the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. Due to its ambiguous nature of Islamic legality, shrine pilgrimage has created opportunities for women to become religious authorities, which would be rare or unthinkable in formal Islamic spaces such as mosques and madrasas, where according to tradition, religious authority is reserved for men. Madrasas historically accepted only men while certain practices, such as Friday prayers, are traditionally reserved for men. With shrine pilgrimage, the space for unsanctioned female authority is wider and women's presence in shrines are traditional in living memory, thus increasing the likelihood of women's pilgrimizing of shrines.

Even as shrine pilgrimage opens up more space for female pilgrims and religious authorities, challenges to women's presence in such spaces will still follow. Based on contemporary and historical ethnographies from the 20th and 21st centuries, the first half of this chapter looks at three female shrine authorities, who occupy a position of significant religious and spiritual authority over male and female shrine pilgrims, but who must also reckon with traditional gender norms of restrictive modesty placed upon Muslim women. These women are demonstrated to justify their presence and authority in shrine pilgrimage not by rebuking the different standards of traditional Islamic gender norms, but by appropriating Islamic orthodoxy, whether through sacred lineage, dress, privileged information, and spiritual prowess in order to legitimize their authority.

The second half of this chapter looks at female shrine pilgrims, three different groups of female pilgrims who are part of larger female-dominant shrine pilgrimage

practices. Although all three case studies bear witness to the fact that women form the largest bulk of shrine pilgrims in their respective pilgrimages, interestingly, neither groups share much superficial commonality with each other. Instead, the reason for women's collective motivation to make shrine pilgrimage lies in the nuances in social mobility afforded to Muslim women in their respective societies, even as shrine pilgrimage still somehow manages to consistently produce female majorities.

The Women of Shrine Pilgrimage: Shrine Authorities and Pilgrims

Women as Shrine Authorities

This section on Women as Shrine Authorities looks at three cases of women who function as shrine authorities in different capacities: Female shrine inheritor and saint, or *wali*, in early 20th century Eritrea; female Sufi masters, or *pir*, in 1990s North India; and female prayer leader and healer in 1990s Iran.

Eritrea

Based on historical records and 2009 field data from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt, Italian sociologist Silvia Bruzzi and Ethiopian anthropologist Meron Zeleke looked at the life Sitti Alawiyya al-Mirghani (1892 to 1940), the sole lineage representative of the Khatmiyya order in Eritrea.[142] Alawiyya's grandfather, Sayyid Uthman al-Mirghani, was

[142] Silvia Bruzzi and Meron Zeleke. "Contested Religious Authority: Sufi Women in Ethiopia and Eritrea", *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 45, No.1 (2015), 41

from Central Asia of Meccan ashraf descent and founded the Khatmiyya order in the Hijaz around 1840. Sayyid Uthman encouraged his disciples to proselytize in Africa and his son, Sayyid Hashim al-Mirghani, eventually settled in Eritrea with a local woman. The Khatmiyya order became very popular in Eritrea and Somalia, and Sayyid Hashim, as a beloved representative of the order, became the mediator for the Muslims of the Eritrean colony with the Italian colonial authorities. Upon his death in 1902, Italian authorities built a shrine for Sayyid Hashim at the port town of Massawa and overlooked his two daughters in search of a representative for the order, instead putting Sayyid Gafar al-Mirghani, nephew to Sayyid Hashim, in charge of the order. He was given control of an Italian-built mosque in a different town, Keren, which was on the mainland.[143]

Italian colonial authorities, acting partly based on intelligence fed by local men such as Sayyid Gafar, had presumed that women could not appoint new representatives for an order and thus appointed a male, but this was contrary to reality. Alawiyya was a charismatic figure and her shrine location on the Red Sea attracted more people than Sayyid Gafar's mainland mosque. Alawiyya became the custodian of her father's shrine and controlled the community network while her residence hosted pilgrimage from both Muslims and Christians, situated as it was along the way for African Muslims on their way to Mecca and Ethiopian Christians on the way to Sinai. Alawiyya herself was actively involved in politics, organizing fundraising campaigns for

[143] Buzzi and Zeleke, "*Contesting Religious Authority,"* 43-44

Libyan independence during the Italian war in Libya and negotiating peace in the midst of the Italian war in Ethiopia.[144]

Alawiyya's popularity was contrary to Italian expectations, and they worried a split in the Khatmiyya order would emerge, and they forced her into recognizing Sayyid Gafar as the official successor. In 1917, Sayyid Gafar would deliver a sermon at his mosque excoriating women who perform outside of Quranic prescription for female conduct, implying Alawiyya's authority was illegitimate on grounds that female authority in equivalence to male authority was an innovation, or *bid'a*. No clear outcome came from this rivalry. Alawiyya continued practicing from the shrine and was recognized as the lineage inheritor, *wali*, while Sayyid Gafar never was. Throughout her time, Alawiyya deployed appropriations of Islamic orthodoxy. To divert claims of Islamic illegitimacy, Alawiyya would wear special trousers underneath a traditional dress, which distinguished her from a common woman while still embodying Islamic orthodoxy and authoritative dress. She also wore a veil which covered all but her face, allowing her mobility and visibility as a Muslim political authority while still abiding by normative Islamic female prescriptions. She also wore a veil similar to Catholic nuns as a way of appealing to Christian Africans and Italians, as a symbol of missionary authority in an order which did not distinguish between Christians and Muslims.

[144] Ibid, 44-46

India

In the next case study, based on fieldwork in the Indian states of Bihar and Rajasthan between 1996 and 2002,[145] American anthropologist Kelly Pemberton studies female religious authority at the Mu'in al-din Chisthi shrine belonging to 18th century Gudri Shah Chisti Sufi order in Ajmer, Rajasthan, and the Sharaf al-din Maneri shrine belonging to 14th century Firdausi Sufi order in Patna, Bihar.[146] Like Alawiyya's complex entanglement of female religious authority and Islamic orthodoxy, Pemberton found at these orders female Sufi master-disciple, or *pir-murid*, relationships. While kinship connections with established male Sufi authorities have long opened some space for women to participate as religious authorities, it was when mass media, literacy, and global transportation developed in the 20th century that Sufi orders sought to expand their influence, which allowed women to gain more opportunity to participate as religious authorities, facilitating formations of female Sufi master-disciple relationships.[147] Historically, women could attain informal authority at shrines due to their presence, but Sufi orders tended not to formally acknowledge them.[148] However, at the shrines investigated, which are still being maintained over generations by the same Sufi families who are often related to the saint and have wide communal and even national importance, Pemberton found that if female members of Sufi families, or *pirzade*, positioned themselves discursively as conforming to Islamic orthodoxy, they

---

[145] Kelly Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India,"* (South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 3
[146] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrine in India*," xii-xiv
[147] Ibid, 12-13
[148] Ibid, 84

can leverage their privileged knowledge of Sufi orders to lay formal claims to spiritual authority and even take in female disciples.[149]

By looking at the *pirzade* of both shrines and without divulging individual details, Pemberton learns from the *pirzade* that women can and do take on a guidance role and act as custodians of family customs. Women of the family tend to be familiar with specific family etiquette, such as which *sura* should be read, and can take on female disciples according to formalized rituals and impart religious guidance.[150] Similar to Alawiyya, the *pirzade* voluntarily undergo seclusion by refraining from large ceremonies and sitting separate from family men as well as male and female guests. However, their seclusion is enforced in a way complementary to the women's role as religious authorities, as they practice less stringent seclusion from formal male disciples of the male Sufi masters, and during closed rituals inaccessible to the public, female members take part and even act as stand-in for the male master. There are also female-only rituals overseen by the *pirzade* and the male Sufi master, who presides over both male and female exclusive rituals. The *pirzade* are also often key in advising the male religious authorities on topics of custom.[151]

Furthermore, the *pirzade* do not only advise or reproduce male systems of religious authority, they also function in parallel and in conjunction with male authorities. Female disciples and daughter in laws are entered into formalized relationships with a senior *pirzade* who teaches the family *silsila* traditions marked by ritual exchanges and orders of succession parallel with male *pir-murid* relationships. The matriarch even has

---

[149] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrine in India*," 76, 83
[150] Ibid, 83
[151] Ibid, 91-92

standing to substitute for her son in accordance with his wishes or circumstances.[152] Age, education level, and personal nature of female disciples and *pirzade* increasingly affect the scope of female religious authority as seclusion between men and women break down and an influx of highly educated and foreign female Sufi family members and order adherents further disintegrates the bounds of formal and informal authority.[153] And depending on the tradition of the order, formal female appointment of disciples is freely acknowledged[154]. The scope for female religious authority at Indian Muslim shrines is not bound solely by gender, but by a complex network of familial and generational ties, marital and maternal status, education level, social class, personality, and order reputation. These factors, in lockstep with normative Islamic ideals of female seclusion, itself a shifting construct, can legitimize women as authoritative Sufi figures.

Iran

Meanwhile in Iran, Iranian anthropologist Azam Torab's 1992 to 1993 fieldwork amongst male and female religious circles of south Tehran[155] looks at a female prayer healer Mrs. Sabri, who mediates with the spirit of 7th century Shi'a female saint, Zaynab, at a shrine dedicated to Zaynab which Mrs. Sabri had built in her home. Zaynab is an important Shi'a figure; her brother is the third Imam, Husseyn, and Zaynab's martyrdom was politically reinvented after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Zaynab's struggle in protecting orphans and widows during the Battle of Karbala was

---

[152] Ibid, 93-94
[153] Pemberton, "*Women Mystics and Sufi Shrine in India*," 92-93
[154] Ibid, 100
[155] Azam Torab, "*Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*," (Leiden:Brill, 2006), 1

recontextualized into a political rallying call for women to support the nation and even participate in battle during the Iran-Iraq War. After the war, Zaynab's image was reconstructed again, this time into one of motherhood and nurture as her birthday became national 'Nurses Day'.[156] It is this conceptualization of Zaynab which healers such as Mrs. Sabri, who has no formal religious affiliation, mobilizes in order to legitimize their healing business which is said to satiate demand for healthcare which the state has failed to fill.[157]

Shrine authority Mrs. Sabri is depicted as an emotionally captivating and beloved modest woman. On 9th December 1992, Torab attended one of Mrs. Sabri's weekly prayer healing sessions at her home, which had been converted into a healing center. Torab heard about her through word of mouth, as women from all layers of society gathered to make vows to Zeynab with Mrs. Sabri as intermediary.[158] The center consisted of a large carpeted sitting room with an armchair, microphone, and marble table for Mrs. Sabri, who had an assistant present. The room was decorated with religious items such as herbs to dispel the 'evil eye', Quranic inscriptions, and pictures of Imam Ali, the ayatollah, and the Supreme Leader.[159] The environment is lively as the women present chant *salawat*, an Islamic incantation, and one woman after another speaks up about their wishes.

Mrs. Sabri charges 400 toman, or less than 2 USD at the time, for her services, and Torab notes that this roughly corresponds to the same price as a visit to the doctor, drawing parallels between Mrs. Sabri's prayer healing sessions are of equal value to a

---

[156] Torab, "*Performing Islam*," 68-70
[157] Ibid, 80-83
[158] Ibid, 68, 72
[159] Ibid, 72

visit to a doctor. The payment was voluntary and was split with half paid now and half paid later, only if the wish comes true. In this way, Mrs. Sabri is careful not to seem too keen on collecting money and instead gives all participants the chance to anticipate their miracles themselves. The women who pay must be recorded saying they were cured, which acts as independent proof of Mrs. Sabri's powers.[160] The female shrine authority also appropriates sacredness of other forms of Islamic worship, such as pilgrimage to the nationally revered city of Qom, which Mrs. Sabri offers to lead. She weeps and cries out, beseeching understanding that she is a pious woman who values veiling and prayer and is also a modest woman who is not hungry for money, as those who maliciously gossip like to claim. The session ends at midday as people peter out.[161]

What becomes apparent over the session is the constant reaffirmation Mrs. Sabri has to make in order to legitimize her gift and ability but while still reiterating modesty and humility. Like Alawiyya and the *pirzade*, Mrs. Sabri struggles for legitimacy as a female religious authority and so must constantly reaffirm her abilities by appropriating Islamic orthodoxy by channeling a martyr saint. But unlike the other shrine authorities, Mrs. Sabri is at a double disadvantage as she lacks lineage or privileged knowledge. She must reside in the informal space of public worship and refrain from making claims of legitimacy beyond her humble intercessory powers. Even with borrowing the sanctity and blessing of nationally revered saint Zaynab, here we see the limits for women to act as shrine authorities if they do not already benefit from proximity to holy men.

---

[160] Torab, "*Performing Islam*," 74
[161] Ibid, 78-80

Conclusion

With the story of these three types of female religious authorities, the clearest commonality is their dual action of appropriating Islamic gender norms while wielding religious authority which contradicts those norms. Modesty requirements, family lineage, and even colonialism discourage women from fully becoming religious authorities despite their constant presence at shrines, and even places approximating the power of shrines. Gendered segregation and seclusion, precipitating out of social and religious norms, in particular appears to be the largest culprit in barricading women into informalized and domesticated sites of worship. However, what Alawiyya, the *pirzade,* and Mrs. Sabri show is that the way to overcome this hurdle is not to repudiate the gendered restrictions but instead to appropriate the basic element of Islamic female normativity and incorporate it into their form of religious authority. This can be done whether by dress in Alawiyya's case, by social grouping in the *pirzade*'s case, or by space in Mrs. Sabri's case. When these women segregate and seclude themselves and enshrine it in their persona, they project themselves as, in part, agreeing with their more formally accredited male critics by acknowledging the importance of Islamic norms for women, while at the same time weaponizing those very norms so they can better operate amidst criticisms arguing against women's participation as religious authorities.

Another important commonality between these women is the large audience of male and female shrine pilgrims and female Sufi disciples waiting in the wings for these types of female religious authorities. This large extant demand provides another shield against criticism for these women to act as religious authorities; in Alawiyya's case, she is even protected from colonial authority. This systematically available group of Muslims

who seek religious authority that is unsanctioned by formal Islamic institutions points at the same root of shrine pilgrimage's popularity; an alternative avenue for regular Muslims to turn to when other options have failed or even simply as an alternative recreational destination socially acceptable for women's participation.

The time setting of these three case studies showcases the varied standing of shrine pilgrimage in different time periods and societies: in Alawiyya's case, her multi-faith shrine was directly challenged by her male blood relative as well as a colonial-funded mosque; in the Indian *pirzade*'s case, shrines were still an important part of religious life; and in Mrs. Sabri's case, newly erected shrines and prayer healings were popular but Mrs. Sabri did not claim herself more than a humble intermediary. We can see that shrine pilgrimages are still widely practiced and acknowledged, either implicitly or explicitly, as being Islamic, and therefore the women who can act as authorities are also judged according to Islamic standards, which paradoxically threaten to expel them from the practice. Italian colonial authority and potential Indian and Iranian clerical authority are never far from the horizon, looming over Alawiyya, the *pirzade*, and Mrs. Sabri who must in turn behave in ways which serve to bolster or protect their Islamic credibility.

Modern shrine pilgrimage opens up a unique niche in which women with sacred lineage, knowledge, and spiritual prowess can become Islamic authorities. However, it is the presence of such unsanctioned religious authorities, moreso if they are women, in shrine pilgrimage which often casts a shadow of Islamic legal doubt over the practice in the first place. The female shrine authorities must then legitimize themselves using the very gender norms which are used to restrict them from other Islamic spaces.

Women as Shrine Pilgrims

This section on Women as Shrine Pilgrims looks at three groups of female shrine pilgrims: small town Turkish women and local shrine pilgrimage in the early 1980s; Iranian women traveling to Qom in 2015; and Indonesian women traveling to Jerusalem for pilgrimage tours in 2017. Despite being located in different centuries, involving women of different nationalities, and conducted in very different countries, all of these ethnographic examples depict the consistently significant female presence in shrine pilgrimage and the gendered and non-gendered motivations these women hold.

Turkey

British-American anthropologist Nancy Tapper conducted fieldwork in Egirdir, Turkey from 1980 to 1984 in which she looks at the mobility and motivations of Egirdir women in regard to local shrine pilgrimage.[162] Tapper viewed shrine pilgrimage at this time in Turkey as being impacted by social norms of respect. Respect as a Turkish social construct is developed upon Islamic ideas of gender in relation to God; men are associated with reason while women are associated with animalistic souls. Therefore, women have to exercise more discipline and control in order to overcome their carnal

[162] Nancy Tapper, "Chapter Twelve: Ziyaret: Gender, Movement, and Exchange in a Turkish Community," in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination* Eds. Dale F. Eickleman and James Piscatori (California:University of California Press, 1990), 422

nature and achieve salvation. This translates to how men can freely control their movements while women must be more limited and discerning with their movements outside the home. As a result, Tapper finds that women feel confined in their homes and search for opportunities to go outside, and shrine pilgrimage is one such opportunity.[163]

Men may visit shrines with their family but they do not go only with other men. They consider shrines as rather unislamic and men think that women only visit to ask for fertility. Women, on the other hand, are more conscious and sensitive with regards to shrine pilgrimage. They are more aware of the local shrines, reading Quranic recitations when they pass by any shrine. They are selective when making shrine pilgrimage: women may choose to go alone with the intention of asking for intercession for very personal issues, or they may choose to go with friends and family to a particularly distant shrine in order to enjoy their time outside together. Women understand shrine pilgrimage foremost as a ritual of respect, and secondly, a ritual only asking for saintly intercession with God in exchange for a vow. A vow can consist of simple offerings to the shrine such as prayer or alms, but a vow of significant value can involve a group of women, a female religious authority, and traditional cooking and sweets making ritual.[164]

The notion of women as less intellectual than men is an established Islamic gender ideology that justifies women's restricted mobility. In this way, Tapper argues women's pursuit of shrine pilgrimage as a form of resistance and respite against their mundane repression. The men seem to exhibit typical understandings of shrines as less Islamic, likely due to traditional orthodox interpretations and shrine pilgrimage's connotation of superstition which may well be in connection with women's presence. An

---

[163] Tapper, "*Ziyaret,*" 400-403
[164] Ibid, 413-414

yet, shrines are clearly still Islamic enough that husbands still allow women to visit. In this context, shrine pilgrimage acts as a societal pressure release valve, a small luxury allowed to women. Tapper finds shrine pilgrimage as being important for women as it functions as an escape so women can pay respect to God, yet the very construct underlying their restricted mobility in the first place is the notion of respect. In the 1980s Turkish context, shrine pilgrimage can be understood as a cyclical cause of and solution to societal norms of respect; just as Islamic normativity designates shrine pilgrimage as a religious grey area, it also necessitates shrine pilgrimage in order to release pressure from the constant enforcement of respect, particularly for Muslim women.

Iran

The next group of shrine pilgrims is related to the female saint, Lady Masoumeh, and also comes from Iranian sociologist Ladan Rahabri's 2014 to 2015 fieldwork in Qom, Iran. Rahbari interviewed and joined a group of five middle aged Iranian women who traveled together by car from Tehran to visit Lady Masoumeh's shrine in Qom.[165] Rahbari interprets the women's journey as significant; the two-hour drive is a self-secluding space where the women were free to sing out loud, which is normally frowned upon, and they naturally drift into sensitive personal and political issues which serve to

[165] Ladan Rahbari, "Chapter 4: Shi'i Muslim women's pilgrimage rituals to Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh's shrine in Qom," in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond* Eds. Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm (London: Routledge, 2020), 79

heighten their emotions before the pilgrimage.[166] Their planned journey also allows for fuller control, as the women emphasize their choice to restrict their own movements outside the home. Their families encourage shrine pilgrimage and saving their mobility for this further valorizes the ritual. The women go as far as planning the journey around when none of them are menstruating, which in Shi'a Islam is compulsory for most worship spaces but not Imam shrines like Lady Masoumeh. Nevertheless, the women plan around this, carefully adorn themselves, and take ablution before the trip.[167]

Conversation and laughter die down as they near the shrine. Food and charitable contributions were brought along in order to contract a vow, similar to the Turkish case. The ambience inside the shrine is solemn as the women do not talk and conduct their prayer and donations separately. At the shrine itself, the private is refracted into the communal, as their personal issues, which moved them to visit the shrine, become a commemoration of Shi'a suffering and martyrdom, such as that which Lady Masoumeh and all Shi'a Muslims underwent.[168] After a few hours when they have finished, they regroup and peruse religious souvenirs. Rahbari argues that such onsite shopping is included in the overall pilgrimage experience, as the women purchase memorabilia to gift others because it has been blessed by being in the shrine's vicinity.[169] Shrine pilgrimage in the Iranian context takes on a decidedly political tone. The author finds that the type of women who embark on shrine pilgrimage to begin with are more likely to be politically conscious and supportive of state ideology.[170] They are aware of their

---

[166] Rahbari, "*Shi'I Muslims Women's Pilgrimage,"* 82, 85
[167] Rahbari, "*Shi'i Muslims Women's Pilgrimage,"* 80-81
[168] Ibid, 83-84
[169] Ibid, 84-85
[170] Ibid, 86

seclusion and consider it their honor to maintain and they take more steps than necessary to execute a pilgrimage journey as pure, smooth and emotionally heightened as possible.

In agreement with Tapper, Rahbari also finds that shrine pilgrims are often overwhelmingly female and they are cognizant of their restricted mobility and ergo value shrine pilgrimage as a sacred journey and vow which is an honor for them to undertake, often in the company of other women. In opposition to Tapper, Rahbari's pilgrims find their mobility to be something under their control and its restriction is a conscious choice on their part to practice their piety. Also different from the Turkish women, the Iranian women are particularly attuned to politics and the experience of shrine pilgrimage explicitly ties their personal struggles with the overall struggle of Shi'a Iran. In the case of Iran, shrine pilgrimage is a state sanctioned, fully distinguished Islamic public worship as it plays an important role in furthering Islamic Revolutionary precepts and heightens national awareness of Shi'a historical and contemporary persecution. Women's participation in shrine pilgrimage is not a detriment to Shi'a Islam, but a monument to it.

Indonesia

The third group of female shrine pilgrims are Indonesian pilgrim tourists to Jerusalem, who were joined by German anthropologist Mirjam Lucking in her fieldwork between 2017 and 2019. Against a background of upward social mobility amongst Indonesians, Lucking follows the increasingly popular boom in Middle Eastern pilgrimage tourism and the politics of shopping which follows. Lucking noted that nearly

all pilgrimage groups she has observed from 2012 to 2019 were majority female.[171] In 2018, Lucking followed one such trip to Jerusalem, which began with the pyramids in Egypt, al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, pilgrimages to prophetic sites, and archaeological sites in Petra before flying back to Jakarta.[172] She compares the politics of shopping between Christian and Muslim Indonesians to examine emergent disparities.

The trips were not gender exclusive but the author found that Indonesian tourists comprised mostly, sometimes exclusively, of women, most of whom were urban middle class.[173] International pilgrimages of Indonesian pilgrims highlighted many cultural continuities: Indonesian women tended to participate in female-dominant leisure activities at home, such as neighborhood associations and reading groups, where they engage in similar rituals of communal eating and praying and gift purchasing as when they are abroad. The women's generous donations in solidarity with Palestinian is congruent with local shrine pilgrimage practices, where women also contribute alms in order to make a religious vow with God. Another continuity is that women make primary decisions in shopping, which the author finds reflective of Indonesian cultural norms wherein women are in charge of money.[174]

In examining the Indonesian Christian and Muslim habits on the Jerusalem pilgrimage, Lucking finds that the groups spend as much time in shops as they do in houses of worship; this remains true for both Muslim and Christians. Pilgrims of either

---

[171] Mirjam Lucking, "Chapter 5: Israeli Dead Sea Cosmetics and Charity for Palestinian Children Indonesian Women's Shopping Activities While on Pilgrimage to Jerusalem" in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond* Eds. Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm (London: Routledge, 2020),
[172] Lucking, "*Israeli Dead Sea Cosmetics,"* 94
[173] Ibid, 99
[174] Ibid, 97-98.

religion also tended to make purchases at sites they feel to be most blessed; for Christians, they shop at Bethlehem and Nazareth whereas for Muslims, they shop at Jericho and Hebron. Both groups also display similar appreciation for locally produced cosmetics with miraculous qualities though they diverge in preference for religious souvenirs, as Muslim pilgrims prefer pictures of the Al-Aqsa Mosque while Evangelical Christians prefer Jewish paraphernalia[175]. The setting of international pilgrimage necessarily restricts the type of pilgrims to wealthier people who will have more social and physical mobility both at home and abroad. And despite the attention paid to spot disparities between Christian and Muslims Indonesians, Lucking ultimately finds that nationalized and socially mobile lifestyles tend to breed far more similarities in social, economic and cultural habits between different religious groups than disparities. Shrine pilgrimage, when removed from the local context and observed amongst a specific privileged social group, can ameliorate religious differences and magnify similar nationalized and cultural behaviors such as understandings of location and blessings, the value of shopping and souvenirs, and prevalence of female social activities.

Conclusion

The women as shrine authorities section provided case studies of women performing different roles from each other yet who nevertheless share substantial commonalities. This section of women as shrine pilgrims, however, appears as the opposite: all three groups of women exhibit superficially similar behavior, such as female majority groups, a voluntary desire to make shrine pilgrimage, the relationship

[175] Ibid, 99-101

between location and blessing, the contribution of alms and other goods in order to make a religious vow with God, the forms of mobility restriction, if any, for women, and the consideration of shopping or material expenditure as part of the experience. However, the underlying impetus for all three groups of women greatly differ: Turkish women in the 1980s seized on local shrine pilgrimage as an excuse to leave the house, Iranian women in 2015 saw shrine pilgrimage as a personal and political honor and duty, while Indonesian women in 2017 participated in Jerusalem pilgrimage as an extension of domestic continuity where women frequently socialize in female only circles, while also in accordance with a more uniformly nationalized and upwardly mobile lifestyle.

Female shrine pilgrims in different time settings and in different societies obviously face different challenges to their physical and social mobility. The Turkish women are depicted as blatant victims to Islamic traditional gender norms, which see women as unfit to have full control of their movements, and they therefore must rely on shrine pilgrimage, a practice suspiciously regarded by men yet still considered Islamic, in order to gather with other women and leave the home. The Iranian women's ability to leave the home is also restricted, though depicted as a restriction which was done of their own accord in pursuit of the same traditional gender norms which usually encouraged them and the Turkish women to stay home. The Indonesian women, meanwhile, are shown to not only frequently leave the home, but that they leave the home for considerable distance and time. As wealthy Indonesians, these women appear to face few challenges of social mobility at home and abroad yet still self-select themselves into organized female social groups at home and into organized female

pilgrim groups abroad. The Indonesian case takes the issue of mobility one step further than the Iranian case, who were already more mobile than the women in the Turkish case, showing how even with potentially unlimited mobility, women still perform shrine pilgrimage in a majority. If we take the Indonesian case as the most modern and touristic extension of shrine pilgrimage, it is still unclear whether modern shrine pilgrimage is a practice that has been socialized to be female oriented, or women's socialization involves movement as a group, including for shrine pilgrimage.

The starkly different societies and women's position within them should suggest drastic changes in predominance of women in shrine pilgrimage along the flow of time. And indeed, this is the case when comparing the Turkish women who can only leave the home to make shrine pilgrimage versus the Indonesian women who can regularly leave the home to work and even make shrine pilgrimage abroad. And yet, all three cases result in female majority, or even female exclusive, shrine pilgrimage groups.

Interestingly, the motivation of all three groups appears to be diametrically opposed: one end views shrine pilgrimage with other women as the only option for respite from severely restrictive norms, while the other end views shrine pilgrimage as an exclusive treat that is best performed with other women as recreation. In the middle is a view of shrine pilgrimage as an achievable reward for self-imposed restriction alongside other women. These different views still result with the similar outcome of predominantly female shrine pilgrimage; this can partly be explained by the presence of female shrine authorities, such as in the case of the Turkish women, but this is not the case in all the groups.

Ultimately, the motivation underpinning women's decision to make shrine pilgrimage, and often with other women, to the point of women often making up the majority of shrine pilgrims, is shifting and multi-faceted. The different demographics of the women in this section, yet the similar results across the board, suggests a need to look at larger gendered trends in religion and society. In this section, too, the dynamics of Islamic traditional gender norms seek to restrict women from leaving the house and participating in shrine pilgrimage, yet at the same time, the questionable yet adequately Islamic nature of modern shrine pilgrimage acts as a valve which allows, and even encourages, women to make shrine pilgrimage.

Taken together, I find that shrine pilgrimage is an Islamic sacred site where social continuities in broader society, such as gendered segregation and seclusion and gendered spending, are reproduced. But due to the contested nature of modern shrine pilgrimage, the continuities of social norms allowed to spill into shrines are ones which encourage women to perform an adequately Islamic practice together with other women. Perhaps shrines, as a voluntary sacred site, are easy yet spiritually fulfilling enough for women to visit? Perhaps shrines are a site which can be accessed after a certain threshold of material means, whereas more gendered and explicitly religious sites such as mosques are impervious to materially purchased access? To answer these questions, in Chapter 3 I will focus on one particular shrine in Kazakh society in order to discover gendered social themes. In the Kazakh case, attributions of love and women's happiness in addition to the presence of unsanctioned female religious authorities will use the themes of gendered segregation and seclusion and social continuities as developed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3: Aisha Bibi Shrine in Kazakhstan

Introduction

This chapter examines the results of my fieldwork conducted at Aisha Bibi shrine in southern Kazakhstan in the summer of 2021. For the fieldwork, I conducted participant observation and 40 interviews with religious authorities, shrine and government workers, and pilgrims in order to capture the gender dynamics of modern Kazakhstani shrine pilgrimage and in order to understand the motivations of modern Kazakhstani shrine pilgrims, how they conduct pilgrimage, and what factors lead to female predominance in shrine pilgrimage in contemporary Kazakhstan.

In Chapter 3, I argue that female pilgrim majorities in shrine pilgrimage must be understood by further delineating the motivations of shrine pilgrims. My fieldwork results depict a certain type of shrine pilgrimage, wherein the pilgrim has a specific motivation and seeks *baraka* with urgency and grand potentiality, and another type of shrine pilgrimage, wherein the pilgrim has no specific wish and seeks *baraka* with no particular urgency or potency. Women, whoa re socialized to bear traditional family responsibilities such as love, marriage, and fertility, become predisposed to visiting shrines with the intent of the first type of shrine pilgrimage, which fosters a social environment encouraging more women with intention for the second type of shrine

pilgrimage to perform. Shrine pilgrimage's historical popularity but also its modern connotations of superstition as beheld by men, and the prevalence of female religious authorities at shrines are important factors facilitating both types of shrine pilgrims, thereby resulting in a female majority shrine pilgrimage in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Fieldwork

The chosen shrine was Aisha Bibi shrine 20km outside Taraz city in Southern Kazakhstan. My initial proposal was to conduct fieldwork at two shrines, one female saint shrine in the south and one male saint shrine in the north, in order to compare and contrast the shrine pilgrims prevalent at each space. However, due to funding, logistic and language issues, only Aisha Bibi shrine was studied. Aisha Bibi shrine, as one of the most, if not the most prominent female saint shrine in Kazakhstan, was initially expected to draw in a female heavy crowd thus projections and questions would be molded to account for this by asking shrine workers and pilgrims about other shrines they visit and their thoughts on gender and shrine pilgrimage.

Furthermore, though not included in this thesis, I also visited other famous sites in Taraz; Aisha Bibi's husband's shrine, Karakhan, and Tekturmas. Also, after the fieldwork I visited 7 large and small shrines in Turkistan, Sayram, and Shymkent, including Arystan Bab and Khoja Ahmad Yassawi. Although the interviews there are not recorded here, I have observed that in Kazakhstan, there are large state-controlled 'museum-ized' shrines such as Khoja Ahmad Yassawi and Aisha Bibi, and then there are small neighbourhood shrines which are maintained by generational keepers and more popular for family grave visitations than shrine pilgrimage. In terms of popular

recognition and shrine architecture and facilities, Aisha Bibi shrine appears to have more in common with Khoja Ahmad Yassawi shrine than it would with, say, Karashash Ana shrine in a Sayram neighbouhood. This is to say, that while Aisha Bibi is a nationally recognized female saint shrine, the gendered relationship between saint and pilgrim is not straightforward as other factors such as national importance and accessibility can also affect the gender ratio of shrine pilgrims. Given the restrictions, Aisha Bibi shrine was adequate for this fieldwork in terms of determining a base gender count of pilgrims and collecting interviews.

The fieldwork consisted of 12 days onsite research between July 9 to 24 2021. A typical onsite day lasts from 12pm to shrine closing time at 6pm, and observations and interviews were done on weekdays, weekends and *Eid al-Adha*. My female research assistant Aruzhan Auyez was present for 8 of those days, during which we performed interviews together, with her leading in Kazakh and translating and I listening and suggesting questions. A few questions were pre-determined and put forward to all interviewees:

What is your age and where are you from?

Did you come alone?

Why did you come today?

Why specifically Aisha Bibi shrine?

Do you think there are more men or women at shrines? If either, why?

Do you think shrine pilgrimage is a Kazakh practice or an Islamic practice?

The background and travel party questions were to establish a base understanding of the participants. The question on why they come usually intersects

with why they are specifically at Aisha Bibi; if they came for no reason, for a secret reason, if they have visited or will visit other shrines, then we try to ask for more reflections on their behavior at other shrines. The question about specifically why Aisha Bibi shrine often naturally leads in to answers revolving 'women's happiness' which segues into whether the participants have observed or felt any gendered proportions in shrine pilgrimage and if so, why they thought it was like so. The last question was to gauge how pilgrims contextualized shrine pilgrimage in their lives, but of course, this is not a true binary and answers reflected as much. Responses on nationalization of shrine pilgrimage and Islam and the Islamic perception of shrine pilgrimage, while interesting, are not within the scope of this thesis.

Shrine workers, such as the male security guards, female ticket masters, and shopkeepers, and religious authorities such as the three Kazakh male shrine keepers were interviewed more frequently for over longer periods, with increasing rapport producing more developed answers to earlier questions. Unfortunately, most of the shrine workers in the end did not want to be recorded or have their answers used. The three shrine keepers were more open and were subjected to more questions such as how they became shrine keepers, what they consider their duties to be, the relationship between the shrine and the state, their observations of the pilgrims, changes in pilgrim behavior over the years, and their views on shrine pilgrimage and Islam.

Recordings and notes from the interviews are transcribed and translated into English by Auyez and a transcriber service, altogether resulting in 42 coherent interviews, ranging from 10 minutes to 90 minutes, from 28 groups of pilgrims and the three shrine keepers of Aisha Bibi shrine. The vast majority of the pilgrims interviewed

came in mixed gender family and tour groups, and the men and women were as young as 20 and as old as 80. As Auyez and I presented as young women, we had an easier time approaching and interviewing women, who also tended to approach and welcome us first, whereas men who travelled in pairs or solo or men who came with women tended not to respond as much. Furthermore, there was a pattern of age-based deference wherein the oldest woman in the group tended to dominate conversation. In accordance with these circumstances, all relevant results from the fieldwork on pilgrim demography and motivations are unpacked below, with interview excerpts given false names and edited for clarity and brevity.

Aisha Bibi Shrine

The shrine of Aisha Bibi lies 20 km outside Taraz city center in a village, also named Aisha Bibi, along the busy Taraz-Shymkent highway in the Zhambyl region of southern Kazakhstan. The shrine compound today consists of Aisha Bibi's shrine, inside of which is her decorated tomb and carpeted seating and stools, and Babaji Khatun's shrine, which only has carpeted seating and no tomb. The shrine compound is fenced in and has a photogenic paved walkway heading towards Aisha Bibi shrine framed by rose bushes and benches. The compound itself has large shady trees, benches, and water fountains, so some groups take their time walking the courtyard, taking family pictures, and picking the tree for fruits. The only entrance of the compound is minded by a ticketing booth. Behind the booth is the security guard's hut which plays CCTV footage inside the compound and a long brick building which houses shops selling ice cream

and souvenirs. Behind the shops are a new bathroom and outdoor water pipes for drinking water and for making ablutions.

Outside the shrine compound, on the other side of the ticketing booth, is a small parking lot. Aisha Bibi shrine is only accessible by road and no busses drop off nearby and it is out of range of ride share apps. I hired Auyez's retired uncle, a Taraz native, to drive us there and back. All pilgrims we saw except two groups came by car, bus, or taxi. Of the two groups we witnessed walking to the shrine, one of them was a tour group who had walked in after parking their bus in the neighboring house and the other group, a young mother and daughter, walked an unspecified distance.

Taking up a couple spots of parking space is a recently erected Zhambyl tourism prefab booth minded by a female government employee. The only direct neighbor to the shrine compound is a private family home that has visible additional accommodation structures. I was told that the house has long been a dedicated accommodation for pilgrims who want to sleep near Aisha Bibi shrine and they also provide animal sacrifice services.

Every day at Aisha Bibi shrine, there will be one male security guard, one female ticket master, one female gardener, six to ten male and female shopkeepers, one female government worker in the tourism booth, and one male shrine keeper inside Aisha Bibi shrine itself. All personnel mentioned are paid salaries by the regional government.[176]

[176] As of 2021, Aisha Bibi shrine was being managed by the State Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve of Taraz, a regional-level government organization which manages the major historical attractions of Taraz such as Aisha Bibi shrine, Karakhan shrine, and Tekturmas shrine and park complexes. In total, three security guards and two ticket masters are employed but they take turns on a daily or near daily basis. Auyez and I have met and became familiar with all of them as well as all three shrine keepers.

The three shrine keepers, or *shiraqshi* in Kazakh, have a range of qualifications such as Sufi practitioner, Hajj, and museum docent. They had to pass qualifying exams set by the national religious ministry in order to be chosen to work as Aisha Bibi's shrine keepers. The three shrine keepers take turns with each other, each watching Aisha Bibi shrine for one week, Karakhan shrine in Taraz city center the next week, and a week off the following week. Their primary role is to stay inside the shrine and read Quranic surah for the pilgrims coming in, as well as collecting the donation money and maintaining the general cleanliness of the compound. Two of the shrine keepers are Hajj; one of them is in his 40s and a practicing Sufi who frequently visits his teachers in Uzbekistan while the other man, in his 50s, is a prominent figure in the community as he owns a large grocery store in Taraz city. When asked if any of the shrine keepers know of any female shrine keepers, none said they have known any.

Over my two weeks of observation, the director and vice-director of the State Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve of Taraz were seen visiting Aisha Bibi shrine to check up on maintenance, primarily Coronavirus signage. Unlike the previous decades when pilgrims could come and go at any time and even sleep on the premises overnight, in the past decade, Aisha Bibi shrine began to charge entrance fees of 200 Kazakh tenge or roughly 0.40 USD per adult visitor and started operating according to business hours of 9 am to 6 pm daily. According to a spokesperson from the State Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve of Taraz, Aisha Bibi shrine is a historical object and should appropriately be treated like a museum. These new changes, while standardizing the function of the shrine and introducing facility improvements, did cause inconveniences to pilgrims who were used to visiting shrines outside of working hours.

During the fieldwork, many pilgrims arrived at Aisha Bibi shrine after business hours and were left disappointed and confused to find the shrine gates closed.

Karakhan shrine in Taraz city center.
(Author’s photo, 2021)

A highway sign indicating Aisha Bibi shrine along the Taraz-Shymkent highway. (Author's photo, 2021)

The parking lot of Aisha Bibi shrine, with a tourism booth to the right and shops and the ticket booth by the shrine compound entrance to the left. (Author's photo, 2021)

Entering Aisha Bibi shrine compound. (Author's photo, 2021)

Aisha Bibi shrine on the left and Babaji Khatun shrine on the right. (Author's photo, 2021)

Aisha Bibi tomb inside the shrine. The shrine keeper usually sits by the window. (Author's photo, 2021)

Aisha Bibi

Women go to Aisha Bibi shrine more to ask for love because she is a symbol of love while champions and politicians come to Karakhan shrine and ask for blessings.

July 6 Shrine Keeper Tanat

The most famous aspect of Aisha Bibi's legend is her tragic love story with the well-known Kazakh hero and historical ruler, Karakhan. Also renowned is the shrine's distinctive Persian pre-Mongol architecture[177]. The shrine is said to date back to the 11th to 12th century, tied to the legend of Aisha Bibi. The shrine itself had been lying in ruins until a state-backed cultural heritage program massively restored the shrine from 2002 to 2005, resulting in today's shrine, which is largely new.[178] According to the aforementioned spokesperson, there are no historical records of the Aisha Bibi story and therefore the state pushes one version of the legend while allowing the shrine keepers to tell their own versions.

A local custom recommends visiting Aisha Bibi's husband, Karakhan, at his shrine in Taraz city center first to ask for 'permission' to meet his wife before visiting Aisha Bibi shrine. However, because Aisha Bibi shrine is on the highway, more people and tour busses visit Aisha Bibi shrine compared to Karakhan shrine.

The general recollection of the Aisha Bibi legend based on the versions told to me by government workers, shrine keepers, and pilgrims goes like this:

---

[177]Robert Hillenbrand "The Mausoleum of 'A'isha Bibi and the Central Asian Tradition of Funerary Architecture," *Journal of Turkish Studies* Vol. 18 (1994): 120

[178] «Monuments of ancient Taraz» State historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve "«Айша бибі» «Бабаджа Хатун кесенесі» бойынша виртуалды 3D экскурсия/ "Aisha Bibi" "Babadzhi Khatun shrines" through 3D Virtual Excursion," Site link:exhelgi-taraz.kz Site Host: Zhofil.kz, April 2022: http://form.zhofil.kz/Auwa-Babadji/Auwa%20i%20Babadji.html

Aisha Bibi was the daughter of a holy and wealthy man, Aikozha, also known as Zengi Baba of Samarkand. The hero and ruler, Karakhan, one day came to visit Aisha's father and Karakhan and Aisha fell in love. However, at the time, there was an attack on his homeland so Karakhan had to leave before being able to wed the beautiful Aisha Bibi. Aisha, missing her lover, went against the advice of her father and left to go see Karakhan, with her faithful nanny Babaji Khatun following her. As she crossed the seventh river, Aisha Bibi was bit by a venomous snake and passed away but not before Karakhan managed to come to her. On her deathbed, Karakhan wed her. After her death, he ordered for a mausoleum to be built, and the faithful Babaji Khatun stayed behind to take care of Aisha Bibi's mausoleum until she herself died there and a mausoleum dedicated to Babaji Khatun was erected right beside Aisha Bibi's. The sacredness of Aisha Bibi is at times attributed to her saintly, even prophetic, lineage; others attribute it to her love and sense of self-sacrifice and tragedy; others connect her sainthood to Karakhan's saintly stature as his wife.

Many Taraz residents said they were aware of Aisha Bibi's legend "*from the cradle*", while pilgrims from farther afield first came to know of Aisha Bibi through the history and literature component of national textbooks. Pilgrims and religious tour groups tended to emphasize Aisha Bibi's tragic love story and sainthood and Karakhan's defiance of Islamic tradition in marrying a sick person, with one pilgrim even comparing the shrine to the Taj Mahal, while heritage tour groups and government

plaques tend to emphasize the architectural and historical significance of the structure, paying little mind as to whether there even is a body in the tomb.[179]

Female Shrine Pilgrims

It is individual […] Not all people come here with problems; some come crying, some come laughing.

July 6 Shrine Keeper Tanat

Who were the people who visited Aisha Bibi shrine in summer 2021 and why? Over the course of my fieldwork, I would count the number of adult men and women based on observable gender characteristics such as dress and hair. Across ten days of counting, I ended up with a final average of 52% women, 30% men, and 18% observably adolescent or younger children; each of those 10 days presented with a modest but sustained female majority. What kind of women made up these numbers and what did they ask for?

Caravans

In the case of Aisha Bibi shrine, the observed female majority can be explained through the distinct category of pilgrims colloquially labelled by shrine workers and themselves as 'caravan' tours, or *keruen* in Kazakh. Of course, I had expected tour

[179] «Monuments of ancient Taraz» State historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve "«Айша бибі» «Бабаджа Хатун кесенесі» бойынша виртуалды 3D экскурсия/ "Aisha Bibi" "Babadzhi Khatun shrines" through 3D Virtual Excursion," Site link:exhelgi-taraz.kz Site Host: Zhofil.kz, April 2022: http://form.zhofil.kz/Auwa-Babadji/Auwa%20i%20Babadji.html

groups to visit Aisha Bibi shrine considering its historical and architectural prominence, and indeed I did witness stereotypical tour groups where a guide with a speaker phone stands by the building and gives a historical explanation -usually in Russian- while the evenly gender mixed group of modern dressed tourists listened. These tours, of which I observed fewer than five times over the course of the fieldwork, were visually different from caravans and even the shrine workers, shrine keepers, and government officials at Aisha Bibi shrine had made distinctions.

So, what are caravans? An excerpt from caravan tour leader, Balzhan:

Q: Where are you coming from? What is a caravan?

In every city we have our own orda and struggling people go there. Some go there by road (jol), by destiny. So, they come to this journey, and the Kazakhs say, "If aruaqs are not satisfied, the living will not flourish (аруақ ырза болмай, тірі байымайды)" So, we get the blessing of our great holy saints, get the bata, recite Quran, receive blessing and support. We dedicate Quran to our aruaqs too. After we satisfy them, our road clears. So, we visit 41 grandfathers (saints). We also visit AB ana (saint mother) and present sadaq; it's a sawap (blessing) for us.

Q: What is an orda?

Orda are small communities where we meet and recite Quran. We guide those who come to us, why are they struggling and what to do with that, if someone has a dark spell on themselves, jinx. So, when they come to such holy saints, the spell is undone.

Q: What did you ask for personally?

Happiness for our children, wellbeing, may Auliyes protect them. Both in this life and the next life, may auliyes protect us. That's why.

Q: You mentioned struggles; did you have something like that?

After I came to this journey (қасиет ұстағаннан кейін), my daughter stopped passing out (epilepsy). Now I am on this journey with the caravan. We don't go too deep, only do the most important things.

Q: I noticed that majority of caravans are women. Why?

Well, women care for the offspring; men go on keruens too, it's in our Kazakh traditions to get ancestors' blessing,

Q: Did you ask for anything specific at Aisha Bibi or female saint shrines?

There are special wishes that you specifically make at Aisha Bibi. She is a symbol of love, of youth. They came here and ask for goodness for their children. We ask aruaqs for protection, for wellbeing of our family and our children.

Q: Is it like this for every saint?

Yes, yes.

Q: What do you think about people who consider it shirik?

No, we ask only Allah and we explain it to them. We say, "ask only Allah", aruaqs are our supporters, they deliver our wishes to Allah.

Q: Is this your first time going on a caravan?

No, I've been doing it since 2004, for 17 years

Q: Do you do it every year?

Twice a month. Our history is very rich, we show it, we tell it, so people know it. And spiritually we believe in God. If they have sins, Allah forgives them so they don't drown in their sins and heighten our humanly qualities. We explain all this to people.

Q: So, you're not just a caravan visitor, you're a mentor of a caravan?

Yes, now we are going to pass Taraz and go to Almaty. There are some holy men there and we will see them and sleep there.

Q: How many days do these trips usually take?

5 days

Q: So, 41 shrines in 5 days?

Yes.

July 13 Balzhan, Caravan Leader

Caravans tended to arrive at Aisha Bibi shrine usually later in the day, from 3pm onwards because they are scheduled to visit 41 shrines from Turkistan to Almaty over a few days and so are constantly on the move from one shrine to another. Caravans usually hire vans or busses to make the trip and every night, at least one caravan group would sleep in the accommodations provided by the house neighboring Aisha Bibi shrine, including availing of their animal sacrifice services. Aisha Bibi shrine attracted at least three or four caravan busses a day, with Friday, Saturday and Sunday particularly busy; caravan pilgrims often made up the bulk of daily visitors to Aisha Bibi shrine, and unlike heritage tours whose participants are often couples and families, caravans are overwhelmingly female.

Caravans are usually led by a female leader and often have a male surah reader to read prayers on demand for when shrine keepers are not available. According to one caravan leader who arrived in the afternoon of *Eid al-Adha* 20 July 2021, her caravan consisted of "*54; 10 children, 10 pensioners and the rest are adults*". By visual confirmation and casual conversation, most participants of caravans were usually middle-aged Kazakh women, although Kazakh women in their teens and 20s were not infrequent and neither were women in their 70s and 80s. There were some male family members who followed but I did not witness any caravan tour that was reached gender parity, let alone a male majority caravan tour. There were also Slavic, non-Muslim, and non-Kazakh women who joined caravan tours but in far fewer numbers compared to Kazakh women.

Shrine workers and locals distinguish caravan tours from heritage tours and other pilgrims by their dress and behavior at the shrine and their overall aim. Caravan pilgrims

tended to be modestly dressed; they usually wore long dresses and would leave the bus already wearing a veil, whereas lay pilgrim women often did not even realize they needed a veil in order to enter Aisha Bibi's tomb shrine. The caravan leader often led the pilgrims with flags or via color coordinated veils or bags, like any other tour group, however, caravan tours rarely stopped to explain or admire the scenery or the historical and architectural value of Aisha Bibi shrine. Caravan busses would arrive, pilgrims would first head to the water pipes and bathrooms for ablution and toilet, everyone would squeeze into Aisha Bibi's shrine for a reading from the shrine keeper while those who could not fit sat on the ground outside the shrine, then they head to Babaji Khatun where their own sura reader recites a sura as that shrine is unmanned, then purchase souvenirs and rush to the next shrine.

Caravans are also distinguishable because they are formed for the explicit purpose of visiting many shrines, usually 41, in a short span of time. The spiritual nature of caravans implies a strong motivation, and while those do exist and pilgrim motivations at Aisha Bibi will be further analyzed below, it is important to note that the sheer number of shrines visited actually dilutes any sense of specialness for each shrine, including Aisha Bibi. Furthermore, many caravan pilgrims have general well wishes, similar to that of Balzhan's, which run contrary to my initial assumption that only people who have urgently desires would participate in a relatively tiring tour such as a caravan. On the contrary, while a few caravan participants did have pressing desires or had pressing desires on their first caravan, most caravan participants asked for nothing specific and frequently joined caravans, often with other female family members. Even when it comes to explicitly spiritual women such as caravan pilgrims, while it is true that

shrine pilgrimage attracts women, evidently it is not necessarily or entire a religious context which drives women to visit shrines.

I only learned about caravan tours during the fieldwork and even my young Kazakh research assistant was not aware of it. However, touring a series of shrines is not uncommon in Kazakhstan. American anthropologist Bruce Privratsky, who lived and worked in Turkistan for a decade in the 1990s shortly following the fall of the USSR, documented how at least one in four pilgrims he interviewed at Khoja Ahmad Yassawi shrine in June 1995 were pilgrims on a tour of a series of shrines.[180] With development in accessibility and technology, it is no surprise that shrine tours developed its own cottage industry in Kazakhstan but the overwhelming prevalence of women cannot so easily be explained away by advancing modernization.

Families

Aside from caravans, the other most prominent category of pilgrims at Aisha Bibi shrine were family units. A common form of family unit consisted of a matriarch grandmother, her son and her daughter in law, and their children. There were also larger families, with multiple people from each generation, and there were also nuclear families, just a couple and a young child. It is hard to say whether shrine pilgrimage would still be female majority if we were to discount the caravan pilgrims, which is not to say that the caravan pilgrims are not valid pilgrims, but questioning the gender ratio of family units led me to observe an interesting pattern, which is that grandfathers are not

[180] Bruce Privratsky, "*Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*," (Surrey:Curzon, 2001), 167

as present as grandmothers, and middle-aged and older men tended to wait in the parking lot even when the rest of the family has entered.

The latter phenomenon could possibly be explained by the new ticket charges for entering the shrine; more husbands, sons, and grandfathers enter Aisha Bibi with their family than not, so these particular men perhaps felt it wasn't worth the entrance fee especially when their families planned for a short visit. Regardless, men lingering outside the shrine was a prominent enough scenario to mention here. For the former phenomenon, while I am sure there may are many other issues outside of clear disinterest in shrine pilgrimage which prevents a grandfather from coming along, I am more leaning towards attributing it to the important and often difficult bond between a mother and her daughter-in-law in Kazakh society. For example, a matriarch and daughter-in-law pair revealed that they were visiting Aisha Bibi because the daughter in law had recently finished her *mushel zhas,* a Kazakh tradition celebrating every 12 years of a person's life. It is possible that matriarchs, who are most concerned with traditional life cycle events, are the ones who initiate a shrine pilgrimage trip most likely to be accompanied by her daughter-in-law. Recently married women by tradition should wear a white veil and quite a number of women maintained this, including those in the matriarch *kelin* groups. More analysis on their motivations will follow below.

Outside of these slightly female-dominant groups, there are also whole families coming for a regular day out, taking pictures and having snacks. Most family pilgrims dress in their regular wear, some women bring their own veil and some have to buy them at the shrine. Occasionally, families in formal evening and traditional wear, replete with sequined veils and velvet caps, would come visit, presumably to celebrate a

traditional ceremony. There were also family, friends, and business groups receiving a tour of Taraz by a native which includes Aisha Bibi; a group of Turkish business associates also visited Aisha Bibi as part of their tour of Taraz and told Auyez that they knew who Karakhan was. The women in these groups, as opposed to caravan pilgrims, wear regular dresses or fashionable clothes and there was a higher proportion of women who were not allowed into the Aisha Bibi's tomb shrine without a veil and either bought one at the shops outside or simply did not enter; shrine admission policy on veiling for women, wearing shorts for men and women, and gender segregation when seated in Aisha Bibi's tomb shrine differed according to the strictness of the particular shrine keeper in charge that week.

In smaller numbers are men who visit solo or in pairs, usually long-haul drivers looking to stop and pray, take a break, or ask for safety on the road. Formal heritage tours, as mentioned above, are not very common, and foreign tourists were also very few, largely due to the Coronavirus epidemic.

Pilgrim Motivation at Aisha Bibi Shrine

He 'bridenapped' me (consensual) and I told him that I am childless, that I cannot get pregnant, I cannot have a child only God knows if I will ever have one. But nevertheless, he married me. Back then, I was hopeless, I went to some medium (korpkel) knowing that it was shirik. Even though I knew it was shirik, I still went because I was desperate and that person told me to do shrine pilgrimage. And then I went to Aisha Bibi for myself and asked Allah for a child. I went to Karakhan and Tekturmas, as well

[…]

I have a sister-in-law who couldn't find a job for a year and a half. The intention to come to Aisha Bibi, give sadaka, make a circle, Allah blessed her and then in 2 or 3 days she got a job. But Allah still didn't bless me. It's been a long time.

July 9 Rana (30s)

Woman part of a group who bowed a lot and wiped her face in namaz before entering the gates of AB. She wore a red bandana and some others were wearing it too, and she also talked to the other people who were rubbing themselves against the wall.

Q: Why are you here (how your road leads to here)?

We are here with purpose, with niyet.

Q: Is it okay to ask what purpose?

To make wishes, to clear our road, to find happiness and so on.

Q: Why Aisha Bibi in particular?

We've been to other places and Aisha Bibi is the last place.

-Is it a tour?

Yes.

Q: If it's not a secret, what did you ask for particularly at AB?

To get married. I am over 30. To clear my road.

July 13 Ainur

Q: What about desire? Have you asked Aisha-Bibi for something?

M: Since this place is considered a symbol of eternal love, this is what I asked for. Long love and happy marriage.

[…]

Q: Would you make a different wish if you went to Karakhan?

M: Oh, I don't even know. If we were at Karakhan, perhaps we could say.

A: Yes, I didn't even think about making a wish, I found out about it only after, as you said. But, thank God, we already have everything.

July 13 Maksat and Alima (20s)

Q: Is this your first time?

I have been going to Arystan Bab in Turkistan but this is my first time going to Taraz.

You have your touristic trips, right? This is like that.

Q: Is this a touristic trip or a spiritual trip?

It's both. I got old and decided to try. The trip is long, Turkistan is so far away from Shymkent. Now Turkistan is the center of our region and now Shymkent is the cultural city. And tourists go to Shymkent and Turkistan to see. They started renovations only now, before that it was not like this. Now, (quality of) knowledge is stronger, technology is stronger. I'm travelling with my daughter and kelin (daughter in law) and granddaughter. I have grandchildren and grand-grandchildren.

Q: What do you wish for when you go to these places? For example, women who ask for children.

Yes, women ask for children, you ask for happiness, you ask for knowledge, you ask for health.

Q: What about you?

I asked for my children and grandchildren to be healthy, and asked for them to continue making more offspring.

Q: May your wish come true, may you come to see your shepshek (third generation grandchildren).

I already have them.

July 9 Fatima (83 years old)

Local resident pilgrim Rana and caravan pilgrim Ainur, visiting couple Maksat and Alima and caravan grandmother pilgrim Fatima, are two categories of shrine pilgrimage motivations I have observed through my fieldwork.

As highlighted by the contrast between these three types of answers in regards to pilgrim motivation for shrine pilgrimage at Aisha Bibi, there is no simple consensus as to why people make shrine pilgrimage. Rana and Ainur both have a not uncommon background story of hardship, specifically in regards to female issues such as fertility and marriage. Rana, who spent more time talking with us, told in detail how she dealt with infertility by visiting doctors first (not mentioned in this excerpt) then visiting a traditional practitioner who then encouraged her to make shrine pilgrimage. She also has a story of success related to shrine pilgrimage, specifically at Aisha Bibi though

interestingly not related to fertility, which legitimizes the efficacy of shrine pilgrimage while also individualizing her struggles.

Ainur and a few other interviewees have given a similar story to Rana's, and in fact, a similar case was studied by Danish anthropologist Maria Louw of an Uzbekistani mother in her 60's whose son was unemployed and later small calamities befell her family, which would lead her to visit a traditional practitioner who blamed the evil eye and recommended her to make shrine pilgrimage.[181] Shrine pilgrimage with a specific motivation and offered as a traditional solution exemplifies the fundamental typology of *baraka*-rooted belief and motivation that is most commonly analyzed in literature on shrine pilgrimage[182].

Making shrine pilgrimage due to a specific personal problem as a way of gaining hope or solution from God is a form of shrine pilgrimage which, with enough effort and rapport, can provide rich contextualization to explain the sociological factors at work in creating the individual problem and the underlying Islamic approach of *baraka* which is used in hopes of solving it. On the other hand, shrine pilgrimage with no specific motivation and just a general desire to imbibe goodness, as in the case of the couple Maksat and Alima and grandmother Fatima, is also common and is also mentioned in the literature on shrine pilgrimage but attracts less attention and analysis than shrine pilgrimage with a specific motivation.

Maksat, Alima, and Fatima's motivations are cases of shrine pilgrimage wherein the pilgrims are satisfied in life but still visit shrines out of admiration or general hope. In

---

[181] Maria Elisabeth Louw, "*Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*," (London:Routledge, 2007) 84-93
[182] Ibid.; Bruce Privratsky, "*Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*," (Surrey:Curzon, 2001), 173; Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, "Who Owns the Shrine? Competing Meanings and Authorities at a Pilgrimage Site in Khorezm," in *Central Asian Surver* (2996) 25:3, 235-250, 245

addition, shrine pilgrimage to mark life cycle ceremonies, such as the *mushel zhas* matriarch daughter-in-law pair mentioned above, are also similar to this type of shrine pilgrimage as both are premised on pilgrims who seek a non-urgent *baraka* for overall wellness, a guarantee on a better future, or even for the afterlife.[183] Shrine pilgrimages of this type are more difficult to analyze as they have no specific problem or motivation, yet at the same time, they are a driver for a significant number of pilgrims such as Maksat and Alima and Fatima. A type of shrine pilgrimage that is non-urgent yet is still frequently carried out necessitates a change in conceptualization of shrines. In the case of shrine pilgrimage with specific motivations, shrines are a sacred site which attracts desperate pilgrims based on grand potentiality and speedy *baraka*. In the case of non-urgent *baraka*, shrines are a sacred site which hosts *baraka, as* one avenue of *baraka* dispensation among other alternatives, but also one which is accessible, pleasant to engage in, and socialized as an acceptable and honorable form of recreation.

I argue that it is in this external socialization, separate from shrines as a *baraka* dispensation site whether urgent or non-urgent, where the female majority is created. Common family issues and desires, whether urgent and non-urgent, are individualized and pilgrims such as Rana, Ainur, Maksat, Alima, and Fatima take their desires to the shrine for immediate or long-term solutions, if any are called for at all. The shrine does not create the problems, nor does it offer specifically tailored solutions; shrines offer a roughly similar space and promise to both women and men. It is in the socialization of

[183] Maria Elisabeth Louw, "*Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*," (London:Routledge, 2007) 93; Sergey Abashin, "Mazar of Boboi-ob: Typical and Untypical Features of Holy Places in Central Asia," in *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*. Edited by Shinmen Yasushi, Sawada Minoru & Edmund White (2013), 102; Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, "Who Owns the Shrine? Competing Meanings and Authorities at a Pilgrimage Site in Khorezm," in *Central Asian Surver* (2996) 25:3, 235-250, 245

women to bear the responsibility of seeking solutions for the family, even though fertility is a common issue for everyone.

Hence, shrines here function as spaces which recreate what Louw calls an ‘illusio’; a force for meaning-making in one’s life. To achieve an ‘illusio’, Louw argues that a person must feel a balance between active and passive modes of being;[184] in Rana’s case, for example, her fertility issues put her in a passive mode while shrine pilgrimage places her into an active mode of seeking a solution for her problem, a problem which she feels she bears. Presumably, a man with similar fertility issues as Rana could enter into an ‘illusio’ balance and seek the shrine for a potential solution as well, but men not typically having to worry about fertility negates his ability to experience the passive mode of being which Rana feels and thus not as many men as women end up at shrines.

And so, if shrines are an ‘illusio’, and ‘illusio’ is a plane which reflects back to pilgrims meaning making based on norms and symbolism created in larger Kazakh society and relies on balanced passive and active modes of being, how does this explain the second, non-urgent type of shrine pilgrimage? I would argue that pilgrims such as Maksat, Alima, and Fatima do not quality for an ‘illusio’ as they do not meet the criteria, at least none which they had admitted to, in order to balance passive and active modes of being. All three people are satisfied in their life and have small hopes for the future; no doubt, there are also Kazakh men who feel this way and yet why is there more of a female majority at shrines?

---

[184] Maria Elisabeth Louw, “*Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*,” (London:Routledge, 2007) 95-97

I argue that women and men who do not have specific motivations are pulled into shrine pilgrimage due to the influence of the function of ‘illusio’ on women who do have specific motivation for shrine pilgrimage. Women are socialized to feel they bear the burdens of the family and for some women, one of the ways they attempt to alleviate that is through shrine pilgrimage. As described in Chapter 1, shrines are becoming more welcoming and accessible for women as men are formally taught to turn away from it, and as described in Chapter 2, encouraging and charismatic female spiritual authorities also facilitate more female participation, and these factors go together to attract women with specific motivations to make shrine pilgrimage.

The demography of pilgrims with specific motivations will skew female because shrine pilgrimage is an already legitimized practice amongst women, for example through the success story as repeated by Rana. Meanwhile, men are taught more directly to consider shrine pilgrimage as superstitious, unislamic or ineffective, and as such, even if they bear problems which are socialized as male and they meet the criteria for ‘illusio’, men will typically not think to turn to shrine pilgrimage for solution. This propagates further non-participation by men as they become more likely not to bother with shrine pilgrimage while women receive the opposite effect; they become more likely to take a chance on shrine pilgrimage even if they have nothing they particularly need.

Women will become more inclined to accompany their friend, who desperately seeks to make shrine pilgrimage, on a caravan tour. Their inclination is encouraged by Islamicizing mechanisms mentioned in previous chapters, such as the traditional history of shrine pilgrimage as a popularly accepted Islamic practice, as seen in Chapter 1,

which confers familiarity with the practice and facilitates tolerance of shrine pilgrimage even amongst men who find it superstitions. Another mechanism is the appropriation of Islamic values propagated by female religious authorities as seen in Chapter 2, which are facilitated by modern Kazakhstani counterparts such as caravan leader Balzhan, who reaffirms that shrine pilgrimage is supposed to be for God, not the saints, and also it is an exceedingly effective treatment, which even cured her daughter of epilepsy.

The threshold for believing in shrines is not very much different from believing directly in the power of God; that is to say, both men and women are capable of believing in greater powers, whether they think shrines superstitious or not. Both men and women are also bearers of their own burdens, socialized according to gender, and can achieve ‘illusio’, but how they choose to deal with it is more likely to involve shrine pilgrimage for women and less likely so for men. Both men and women may have lives of sufficiency yet are still capable of accompanying their friends and family to shrine pilgrimage, but women will have more acquaintances who are prone to visiting shrines and they themselves will feel inclined to visit shrines more than men.

The question of accessibility and mobility, of superstition and Islamicness, of women’s position in Islam and in post-Soviet society are all important factors which go into determining what are shrines and who visits, however, I do not think there can be one determining factor. The prevalence of women as shrine pilgrims at Aisha Bibi shrines depicts a consistent but modest majority; whatever effects attracting women to shrines are also attracting men, but just a few more women are attracted and they manifest it in unique ways such as caravans. To understand why women visit shrines in the majority, it is important to understand the history which has led to the popular yet

debated status of Islamic shrines today; it is important to understand how female religious authorities and shrine pilgrims justify their presence in shrine pilgrimage; and it is important to understand the differences in motivations of women who make shrine pilgrimage.

Conclusion

As population needs are increasingly met by modern social development, could the appeal of shrine pilgrimage soon wear off? Though air-conditioned buses and cars make the journey to Aisha Bibi shrine easier and more comfortable than ever, trains and planes may end up bringing passengers past Aisha Bibi to bigger and better shrines such as Khoja Ahmad Yassawi or even to Hajj itself. Modern technology, too, must have reduced foot traffic, as people who could receive effective medical attention presumably saved themselves a trip to the shrine. Indeed, the interviewees who came with urgent desires reported visiting shrines for the purposes of fertility only after visiting medical and traditional doctors had failed them. And while some pilgrims saw the importance of visiting shrines to uphold tradition, others visited Aisha Bibi because of its historical value or simply because it was a pleasant place to visit and they bore no particular wish.

But as we have seen, Islamic shrine pilgrimage has been around nearly as long as Islam itself, and shrines as a sacred space have been excavated all over the world from pre-history; it is a practice which has withstood the test of time. Islamic shrines began as a physical manifestation of Islam for proselytizing Sufis, becoming a seat of wealth and political power because they attracted the strong and the weak who came to

pay respects to their gods. Shrines were points of communal Muslim memory and resistance during the destructive reign of the Soviets, and they are now sites of tourism and the actively reconstructing heritage of a reviving nation. The power in shrines lies in its liminality and potentiality; the promise of grace attracts the dispossessed and the spiritual to shrines, and with all that shored up communal energy, shrines naturally become the *axis mundi* of even lay society.

The functionality of a shrine requires many hands, all the more so in the modern landscape of shrine pilgrimage. Shrine caretakers, who in Central Asia used to be descendants of the saint or of sacred lineage who also stayed inside the shrine to provide readings and lived in the premises to maintain the shrine, are increasingly having their roles usurped by the state. With the changing aim of shrines as now becoming a projector of national, ethnic, religious, and historical importance, shrines, especially nationally and architecturally significant ones such as Aisha Bibi, are expected to pull in more and more visitors. Shrine keepers now consist of meritocratically appointed sura readers, ticket counters, security guards, gardeners, and shopkeepers, all of whom work together with state officials to beautify the shrine and facilitate increasing number of guests of diverse backgrounds. Women often play a prominent role behind the scenes of Islamic shrines, not just in Central Asia but in the wider Muslims world. Though rare, female Muslim shrine keepers have existed, appropriating traditional Islamic gender ideals of seclusion and sacred lineage to overcome the restrictions women typically face in occupying roles of political and spiritual power in Islam. Female ritual masters, healers, and tour organizers also play important auxiliary roles in facilitating shrine pilgrimage, increasing the female presence.

And of course, the major universal commonality under discussion in this thesis are female pilgrims of Islamic shrine pilgrimage. This paper finds that female shrine pilgrims appear to be a widespread trend in modern Muslims countries, and yet the explanation for women's participation in shrine pilgrimage is found to be part of the larger context of women's place in society. The socialization of women's behaviors and responsibilities, usually in the realm of burdening them with caring for the spiritual and physical health of her family, is what contributes to the precipitation of female majorities at shrines. Shrines, as a site of liminality which enables 'illusio,' attracts women who are already predisposed to turning to shrines in order to carry out their specifically feminine burdens of domesticity. Other factors unique to shrines, such as religious and spiritual authorities who operate out of shrines and are often women, passed around stories of female visitations to shrines, and imposition of traditional rites such as shrine visitation upon younger women by older female family members result in a mass of women who do not necessarily possess urgent desires yet visit shrines nevertheless. Altogether, this unintentionally creates a sacred space which is female predominated.

Even as Islamic shrines have lost some shades of their reputation of Islamic orthodoxy, and indeed it was the losing of some prestige of the practice which is what this paper argues made way for women in the first place, this paper still finds that shrine have maintained their traditional and communal religious significance. Shrines allow a space for women to gather without needing overt male supervision while still receiving male approval. Shrines are a pleasant and respectable place to visit where women can perform their obligatory obligations to their family and it is also where women can meet others on a similar journey to them.

The shrine pilgrimage network in Kazakhstan is a quickly growing commercialized and nationalized practice. The effects of the Soviet experience are clear on shrine pilgrimage on Central Asia, as the state has occupied a position of power in controlling Islam while the loss of Soviet identity has quickly necessitated the promotion of a new identity rooted in re-traditionalization, which shrines as a centerpiece. And yet, as other ethnographies have noted, women form the majorities in Islamic shrine pilgrimages in other locales, and indeed women are likely to form the majority in non-Muslim shrine pilgrimage, as well. The male Sufi dominated past of Islamic shrines evidence how the shrines are structurally stationary but meaningfully dynamic, as it reinvents itself in attracting different subsections of Muslim society which need the shrine the most at different points in time. At this current juncture, where shrines are across the world not nearly as powerful and politically prestigious now as they used to be yet are still largely respected and widely visited, it becomes clear that shrines fulfill a larger social purpose and that women's attraction to the shrine is not due to anything innate within the practice, but to many social factors orienting women towards shrines.

The question of women in shrine pilgrimage goes deeper than just shrines, but to the heart of what religion can provide to society and how women's place in society is at once shaped by religion yet also given a release by it. The movement of women to shrines has much to say of the familial and societal roles women believe themselves responsible for, of how women tend to socially mobilize in ways men do not, and of the importance of sacred spaces in keeping society functioning.

Bibliography

· «Monuments of ancient Taraz» State historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve. “«Айша бибі» «Бабаджа Хатун кесенесі» бойынша виртуалды 3D экскурсия (“Aisha Bibi” ”Babadzhi Khatun shrines” through 3D Virtual Excursion) Accessed April 8, 2022. http://form.zhofil.kz/Auwa-Babadji/Auwa%20i%20Babadji.html

· Abashin, Sergey. “Mazar of Boboi-ob: Typical and Untypical Features of Holy Places in Central Asia” in *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*, Edited by Shinmen Yasushi, Sawada Minoru & Edmund White, 91-105. Paris: Librairie D’Amerique et D’Orient, 2014.

· Alexander, Catherine. “The Culture and Properties of Decaying Buildings.” *Focaal* No. 44 (Winter 2004): 48-60.

· Azim Malikov, “Central Asia,” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Edited by Suad Joseph, 325-326. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

· Bigozhin, Ulan. “Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan” in *Central Asian Affairs* Vol. 5 (2018): 233-252.

· Bigozhin, Ulan. “Sacred Geographies in the Eurasian Steppe: The Aqkol Shrine as a Symbol of Kazakh Ethnicity and Religiosity,” *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* Vol.3 No. 3 (2019): 131-133.

· Boissevain, Katia. "*Sainte Parmi les Saints: Sayyda Mannûbiya ou les Recompositions Culturelles dans la Tunisie Contemporaine*," New Edition [online]. Tunis: Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2005. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.irmc.497

· Boissevain, Katia. "Studying religious mobility: pilgrimage, shrine visits and religious tourism from the Maghreb to the Middle East" in *New Itineraries and Pathways in Pilgrimage studies* (2017): 1-24.

· Brinca, Tone. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995.

· Bruzzi, Silvia and Meron Zeleke. "Contested Religious Authority: Sufi Women in Ethiopia and Eritrea", *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 45, No.1 (2015): 37-67.

· DeWeese, Devin. "Chapter 6: Encountering Saints in the Hallowed Ground of a Regional Landscape: The "Description of Khwārazm" and the Experience of Pilgrimage in Nineteenth-Century Central Asia" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Edited by Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, Vol. 147, 183-220. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

· DeWeese, Devin. "Introduction" in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries*. Edited by Devin DeWeese & Jo-Ann Gross, 1-20. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

· DeWeese, Devin. "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufis in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia" in *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*. Edited by A.C.S. Peacock, 336-352. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

· DeWeese, Devin. "Sacred Places and 'Public' Narratives: The Shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavi Sufi Order, 16th - 17th Centuries," in *The Muslim World* Vol. 90 (Fall 2000): 353-376.

· DeWeese, Devin. "Shamanization in Central Asia" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 57 (2014): 326-363

· Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harvest, 1963.

· Ephrat, Daphna, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. "Introduction" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Edited by Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, Vol. 147, 1-34. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

· Fox, James J. "Chapter 11: Interpreting the Historical Significance of Tombs and Chronicles in Contemporary Java," in *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*. Edited by Henri Chambert-Loir & Anthony Reid, 160-172. Australia: University of Hawai'i Press Honolulu, 2002.

· Geaves, Ron. “Continuity and Transformation in a Naqshbandi Tariqa in Britain: The Changing Relationship Between Mazar (Shrine) and Dar-al-Ulum (Seminary) Revisited,” in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*. Edited by Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg, 65-82. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

· Gemmeke, Amber B. “Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge” in *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 79 No. 1 (2009): 128-147.

· Green, Nile. *Sufism: A Global History*. West Sussex:John Wiley and Sons, 2012.

· Hillenbrand, Robert. “The Mausoleum of ‘A’isha Bibi and the Central Asian Tradition of Funerary Architecture,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* Vol. 18 (1994): 111-120.

· Kamp, Marianne. “Where Did the Mullahs Go? Oral Histories from Rural Uzbekistan” in *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 50 (2010): 503-531.

· Kehl-Bodrogi, Krisztina. “Who Owns the Shrine? Competing Meanings and Authorities at a Pilgrimage Site in Khorezm”, *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 25 No. 3 (2006): 235-250.

· Kendirbai, Gulnar. “Challenging Colonial Power: Kazak Cadres and Native Strategies,” *Inner Asia* Vol. 10 No.1 (2008): 65-85.

· Khalid, Adeeb. *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021.

· Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History.* Leiden: Brill, 2000.

· Laruelle, Marlene. *Central Peripheries: Nationhood in Central Asia*. London: University College London Press, 2021.

· Louw, Maria Elisabeth. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. London: Routledge, 2007.

· Lucking, Mirjam "Chapter 5: Israeli Dead Sea Cosmetics and Charity for Palestinian Children Indonesian Women's Shopping Activities While on Pilgrimage to Jerusalem" in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond.* Edited by Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm, 91-110. London: Routledge, 2020.

· Maddrell, Avril. "Mobilizing the Landscape and the Body in Search of the Spiritual: Journeying, Performance and Community" in *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage: Journeying to the Sacred.* Edited by Avril Maddrell, Veronica della Dora, Alessandro Scafi, Heather Walton, 150-170. New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 2015.

· Malikov, Azim. "Sacred Lineages in Central Asia: Translocality and Identity," in *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus.* Edited by Manja Stephan-Emmerich and Philipp Shcroder, 121-150. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018.

· Malikov, Azim. "Shrines and Pilgrimage in Southern Kazakhstan," *Muslim Pilgrimage in the Modern World*. Edited by Babak Rahimi, Peyman Eshagi, 149-171. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

· Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative action empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1933*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001.

· McChesney, Robert. *Central Asia: Foundations of Change*. New Jersey: Darwin Press, 1997.

· Meuleman, Johan Hendrik. “Religious Practices: Pilgrimage” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Edited by Suad Joseph, 318-324. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

· Michelle A. Rein, “North Africa,” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Edited by Suad Joseph, 326-329. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

· Miettunen, Paivi. “Agency and the Roles of Southern Jordanian Bedouin Women on Pilgrimage and Visiting Holy Sites” in *Approaching Religion* Vol. 8 No. 2 Dec (2018): 40-53.

· Moin, A. Azfar. “Chapter 4: The Politics of Saint Shrine in the Persianate Empires,” in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* Edited by Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf, 105-124. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

· Morrison, Alexander. *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868-1910: A Comparison with British India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

· Muminov, Ashirbek. “Chapter 9: Sufi Groups in Contemporary Kazakhstan: Competition and Connections with Kazakh Islamic Society” in *Sufism in Central Asia:*

New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th-21st Centuries. Edited by Devin DeWeese & Jo-Ann Gross, 284-298. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

· Pemberton, Kelly. *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.

· Penati, Beatrice. "On the Local Origins of the Soviet Attack on "Religious" Waqf in the Uzbek SSR (1927)" in *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 36 (2015): 39-72.

· Pfluger-Schindlebeck, Ingrid. "The Caucasus," in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Vol. 5: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*. Edited by Suad Joseph, 324. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

· Pinto, Paulo G. "Chapter 17: Territories of Memory: Ritual and Dreams in the Making of a Contemporary Syrian Saint" in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*. Edited by Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto. Handbook of Oriental Studies: Section One, the Near and Middle East, Vol. 147, 487-510. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

· Privratsky, Bruce. *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*. Surrey:Curzon, 2001.

· Rahbari, Ladan. "Chapter 4: Shi'i Muslim Women's Pilgrimage Rituals to Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh's Shrine in Qom," in *Muslim Women's Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond: Reconfiguring Gender, Religion, and Mobility*. Edited by Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich, Viola Thimm, 75-90. London: Routledge, 2020.

· Rasanayagam, Johan. "*Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

· Safi, Omid. "Bargaining with Baraka: Persian Sufism, Mysticism, and Pre-modern Politics" in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 90, (Fall 2000): 259-288.

· Sartori, Paolo. "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia" in *Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 3, No. 30 (Sep 2019): 1-40.

· Satubaldina, Assel. "Turkistan International Airport Increases Flights to Istanbul." *The Astana Times*, December 28, 2021. https://astanatimes.com/2021/04/turkistan-international-airport-increases-flights-to-istanbul/

· Tapper, Nancy "Chapter 12: Ziyaret: Gender, Movement, and Exchange in a Turkish Community," in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination.* Edited by Dale F. Eickleman and James Piscatori, 396-425. California:University of California Press, 1990.

· Tasar, Eren. *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991*.New York: University of Oxford Press, 2017.

· Torab, Azam. *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran.* Leiden:Brill, 2006.

· Turner, Victor and Turner, Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. Columbia University Press, 1978.

· Turner, Victor. "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," in *History of Religions* Vol.12 No.3 (Feb 1973): 191-230.

· Zarcone, Thierry. "Pilgrimage to the "Second Meccas" and "Ka'bas" of Central Asia" in *Central Asian Pilgrims: Hajj Routes and Pious Visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz*. Edited by Alexandre Papas, Thierry Zarcone & Thomas Welsford, 251-277. Berlin:De Gruyter, 2020.