

**ISLAM AND THE INTERNATIONAL SECTOR: NEGOTIATIONS OF  
FAITH IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC**

**Noor Borbieva**

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**Noor Borbieva** is assistant professor of anthropology at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Previously, she was a visiting fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame. Her work, which examines the impact of international development projects on communities in the Kyrgyz Republic, has been supported by grants from, among others, the Social Sciences Research Council, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the IIE Fulbright, and Harvard University. Borbieva holds a BA from Princeton University and a PhD in anthropology from Harvard University.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the impact of globalization on local religious life in the Kyrgyz Republic, a formerly Soviet republic of Central Asia. The central argument of the paper is that transnational Islamic discourses alter the way Kyrgyz Muslims think about identity and religious authority. The paper draws on the work of Talal Asad, acknowledging important contributions he has made to the anthropology of Islam, as well as exploring the limitations of his approach. The paper follows Asad in viewing Islam as a tradition of competing discourses, none of which are more authentic than any other, but challenges Asad when he limits the study of Islam to competing discourses about belief and practice. Ethnographic material reveals that not only do Kyrgyz Muslims champion an astounding variety of competing discourses about Islam, but with the entrance of transnational Islamic discourses in these contests, they increasingly encompass issues of identity and religious authority.

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo examina el impacto de la globalización en la vida religiosa local en la República Kirguistán, una ex república soviética de Asia Central. El argumento central de este trabajo es que los discursos islámicos transnacionales alteran la forma en que los musulmanes kirguistaníes piensan acerca de la identidad y de la autoridad religiosa. El artículo se basa en el trabajo de Talal Asad, reconoce las importantes contribuciones que él ha hecho a la antropología del Islam y asimismo explora las limitaciones de su abordaje. El artículo coincide con Asad en observar al Islam como una tradición de discursos en competencia, ninguno de los cuales es más auténtico que los otros, pero cuestiona a Asad cuando limita el estudio del Islam a los discursos alternativos sobre las creencias y las prácticas. El material etnográfico revela que los musulmanes kirguistaníes no solamente abrazan una sorprendente variedad de discursos diferentes acerca del Islam sino que, a partir de la entrada de los discursos islámicos transnacionales en estas disputas, las diferencias se extienden a cuestiones asociadas con la identidad y la autoridad religiosa.



## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines a standard text on Islam, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam” (1986), written by Talal Asad, a British-trained anthropologist who has become a leading theorist on secularism and Islam.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on reformulated notions of “tradition” and “discourse,” Asad creates an analytic framework in which Islam is both a “unified tradition” and a collection of varied and competing “discourses.” Asad offers this framework without ethnographic elaboration, but many scholars have used it to explicate ethnographic material from the Muslim world (e.g., Hirschkind 1995; Hirschkind 2001; McBrien 2006; Silverstein 2008; Rasanayagam 2006). In this paper, I apply Asad’s analysis to ethnographic material I collected during the four years I lived in the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, a predominantly Muslim nation formerly a part of the Soviet Union. Initially confounded by the diversity of Islam in my field site, I discovered in Asad’s account a useful way to think about Central Asian Islam. Asad’s ideas suggested that the conversations I had observed could be understood as discursive contests that actively constructed and reconstructed a unified Islamic faith.

Although I argue for the continued relevance of Asad’s framework, I suggest the framework needs to be updated. His framework assumes vibrant and varied differences of opinion as expressed in local speech, and is therefore helpful for understanding discursive contests about Islamic belief and practice at the local level. His framework is less helpful when local Islam has been influenced by global contests comprising a tradition I call “transnational Islam.” This paper analyzes the discursive contest between transnational and local Islam, calling for a rethinking of our analytical accounts of the Islamic tradition.

## CENTRAL ASIA IN THE WORLD

The formerly Soviet nations of Central Asia include five republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These republics became independent (mostly against the will of local populations) in 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. Since independence, the Central Asian nations have experienced rapid economic change and political dislocation. The challenges facing these republics include

falling gross domestic products (GDP), high unemployment, emigration, the collapse of industry, the near absence of foreign investment, and the saturation of corruption into every sector of public life. Literacy is still close to universal, and education and health systems retain some of the strength of the Soviet era, but even those advantages are fading quickly (Sievers 2003).

Kyrgyzstan lies on the eastern edge of the region, sharing a border with China. It has a population of 5.3 million people, with Kyrgyz the largest ethnic group. Uzbeks are second, with 13.8% of the population, and Russians are third, with 12.5% of the population (CIA 2009, 1999 figures). Other ethnicities include Dungans, Uygurs, Ukrainians, Germans, Koreans, Kazakhs, and Tajiks. The country is 198.3 thousand square kilometers (about the size of North Dakota), of which 94 percent is 1,000 meters or more above sea level. With a per capita GDP of \$2,200 (CIA 2009, 2008 estimate), it is the second poorest of the republics, after Tajikistan.

Kyrgyzstan is known for its breathtaking mountain landscapes. For several years in the late 1990s, its struggling tourist sector tried to popularize the nickname, “the Switzerland of Central Asia.” Kyrgyzstan is also known for its government’s uneven attempts at democratization and economic liberalization. Despite the conspicuous corruption in his regime, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akayev, was a darling of the western development sector. In 2005, Kyrgyzstan was the site of the last in a series of “colored” revolutions in formerly Soviet nations. Akayev was deposed by a coalition of opposition leaders led by Kurmanbek Bakiyev. As president, Bakiyev continues to court liberal donors and the western development sector, but his administration exhibits unmistakable authoritarian tendencies (Levy 2009).

Islam is the dominant faith in the republic, with 75% of Kyrgyz citizens professing Islam (CIA 2009). (Orthodox Christianity is second, with 20%.) Islam was first brought to Central Asia in the ninth century by Arab armies, who were followed, in later centuries, by Sufi missionaries. Central Asia was already host to a variety of other professions, including Buddhism, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and tribal practices and beliefs which Soviet scientists called shamanism, animism, and ancestor worship (Beckwith 2009; Foltz 1999; Snesev 1970–1971). Although socialist propaganda dampened religious fervor among many classes, religious sentiment and

sources of knowledge survived in enervated but determined form (Saroyan 1997). Official attacks on Islam weakened its institutional infrastructure, but a number of underground movements survived, and citizens maintained a collective sense of Islamic identity and an appreciation for Islam's core doctrines (Fathi 1997; Privratsky 2001; Shahrani 1991; Tett 1994).

Today, Central Asia is experiencing a faith revival. Interest in the dominant indigenous professions of Islam and Orthodox Christianity has grown, and the presence of missionaries from the world's many converting faiths adds variety. If Islamic practice was privatized during the socialist era (Privratsky 2001; Saroyan 1997; Tett 1994), its vitality and diversity are increasingly on display (Khalid 2007; Montgomery 2007; Roberts 2007; Tett 1994). Islamic practice differs from one city to the next, one neighborhood to the next, even one household to the next. Central Asians maintain an eclectic array of rituals, from weekly household observances to prayers at tombs and holy springs. This diversity, grounded in local collective memory and geography, is often described as the reason Islam was able to survive the Soviet era and return with such vitality (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004; Privratsky 2001).

### **THE STUDY CIRCLE**

While doing fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, I wanted to learn more about this Islamic revival, so I often talked to Kyrgyz citizens about how they learned about Islam. I discovered that many Kyrgyz citizens gather in small groups to talk about Islam and study scripture. These "study circles," include individuals, generally of the same sex and around the same age, who are guided in their studies by an elder who has studied Islamic theology and the Qur'an.

When I was living in Jalalabat, a resort town in southern Kyrgyzstan located on the eastern edge of the Ferghana Valley, Central Asia's breadbasket and a hotbed of Islamic radicalism, I attended a religious study group comprising ten to fifteen Uzbek women who gathered to pray, study the Qur'an, and talk about Islam. These women had much in common. They lived in the same neighborhood and they were all middle aged, married, and with children of various ages. They were all devout: they prayed five times

a day, veiled, observed the yearly month of fasting (health permitting), and abstained from alcohol and pork. Their levels of commitment and experience, however, differed. Some women had been studying for many years, had memorized large sections of the Qur'an, and observed much stricter and more elaborate practices. Others were new, were still learning to read Arabic, and observed fewer and less strict practices.

Meetings focused on reading, reciting, and understanding the basic texts of Islam, the Qur'an and Hadith (words and deeds of the Prophet). Aside from time spent studying texts, the women also discussed relevant themes or listened as one of the more experienced women lectured on a topic of relevance, such as giving alms, the appropriateness of different forms of popular entertainment, or Islamic dress. If formal periods of textual study presented a picture of studious and united deference to authority in the form of texts and the women who knew them best, the discussion and lecture periods often gave rise to disagreement. For example, when one of the more experienced women lectured on an aspect of behavior that she thought the other women needed to improve, the other women did not simply accept her recommendations and correct their behavior. Instead, they often objected, offering elaborate excuses for why they could not change their behavior, at least not immediately.

One recurring disagreement I observed concerned how appropriate it was for women from the group to attend neighborhood parties, called *tўllar*<sup>2</sup> (singular: *tўї*). These parties are given by Uzbek households to celebrate a happy occasion such as a wedding or birth, or to mark the anniversary of a death. As such, these gatherings are more than casual celebrations. They mark important moments in the life of an Uzbek Muslim, namely circumcision (*sunnat tўї*), marriage (*nikyoh tўї*), and death (*janoza*), and include religious observances such as Qur'anic recitation. Despite the important role these parties play in the religious consciousness of Uzbek Muslims, the leaders of the prayer circle did not approve of the parties for several reasons. First, the hosting families usually went to great expense to prepare a large amount of food, often accommodating hundreds of guests. Islam proscribes the hardship this causes, the leaders maintained. Furthermore, the parties often included loud pop music, dancing, and alcohol, which are *haram* (forbidden).

The first time I heard the issue discussed, Lola-*opa*,<sup>3</sup> one of the leaders, gave an



impassioned speech to the women, begging them, for the sake of their own souls, not to go to *tūīs*. The other women listened impassively, some of them muttering dissent quietly. They wanted another opinion. Rabiya-*aya*, the eldest and most respected member of the group, agreed with Lola. “Yes, you can go to *tūīs*—if they are Islamic [*Islamiī*] *tūīs*,” meaning no alcohol, loud music, or dancing. The women looked unhappier still. This was a near impossibility in their neighborhood.

One woman from the group protested, “But we have debts in the neighborhood. We have to go!” Others expressed agreement. The *tūīs* were part of long-term, even multigenerational, exchanges of gifts and hospitality that created patterns of debt in the neighborhood. These exchanges and patterns of debt organized social relations and formed a basis of group solidarity (Kandiyoti 1998). I am not sure this was the only reason the women did not want to stop attending the parties, but it was a reasonable concern; even the most devout could appreciate not wanting to suffer the loss of face and social isolation which would result when a woman removed herself from these networks. “We will keep going, even if it is a sin, until our debts are seen through, and *then* stop,” one of the women said. She addressed Lola, “You pray, you practice. Don’t worry about us. Allah sees everything.”

### ISLAM AS TRADITION

One of the main arguments in “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam” is that orientalist scholars have been so confounded by the vibrant diversity of Islam that they have been unable to develop a theoretical account of what Islam is, preferring to account for this diversity in a number of ultimately unsatisfactory ways (Asad 1986, 16). Some scholars reject the notion that “Islam” could function as a unified category and attend to a variety of local “Islams.” Others assume a unified Islamic tradition, based on scripture or the abstract notion of a shared “Islamic spirituality,” and account for variety by connecting variation to differences in social structure or by characterizing local diversity using essentializing schema such as “high” and “low” or “mystical” and “scriptural.” According to Asad, the former approach is flawed because it does not do justice to the conviction, conspicuously shared by most Muslims, that Islam is a unified tradition. The

position can lead a scholar to mistake for Islam anything a self-professed Muslim says it is, resulting in problematic contradictions. The latter approach gives rise to orientalist simplifications, such as the assumption of ontological connections between Islam and certain social structures, or the contention that some forms of Islam are more authentic than others.

Asad notes that both approaches study Islam (and religion for that matter) as a collection of beliefs and customs. A better way to begin, Asad suggests, is by studying Islam as a “tradition.” By “tradition” he means a collection of “discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice” (1986, 14). Asad’s notion of discourse is drawn from Michel Foucault, who understood discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall 1997, 44). A discourse relates particular practices and beliefs to the tradition’s past and future, to the tradition’s foundational texts (in Islam, the Qur’an and the Hadith), and to the forms of reasoning and interpretation people within the tradition commonly use to discuss it. Although Asad’s argument invokes scripture, it is far from a reformulation of the scripture-based arguments he rejects. It acknowledges the role foundational texts play in dynamic religious traditions but recognizes that they are never the final authority for correct practice and belief. By including both foundational texts and discursive contests about them, Asad’s framework accommodates, in a theoretically rigorous way, the practical diversity that had proven so intractable to the generation of scholars before him.

The disagreement among the Uzbek women I described above is an example of the negotiations (what I call “discursive contests”) that Asad believes allows for diversity within the unified tradition of Islam. The dialogue can be analyzed as comprising two competing discourses. One discourse emphasizes proper comportment, understood as the avoidance of sin and anything *haram* according to authoritative sources of Islamic knowledge. The second discourse balances these concerns with concern for the cohesion of the Muslim community and the importance of communally recognizing important moments in the life cycle of a Muslim. Neither discourse represents “true” Islam. Islam is not located in the individual discourses themselves, but emerges out of the contestation

between them. These discursive contests are dynamic moments of cultural production, moments during which a living tradition is reshaped and reformed.

### KYRGYZ ISLAM

Islam among Kyrgyz is arguably more diverse than Islam among Uzbeks, but this diversity, again, can largely be understood with the help of Asad's framework, as competing discourses within a unified tradition. To give a sense of this diversity, I draw from ethnographic material I collected concerning Kyrgyz Muslims' attitudes about two central ritual observances of Islam: prayer (the "obligatory" five daily prayers, called *namaz*), and fasting (the yearly thirty-day fast during the month of *Orozo*). Kyrgyz Muslims represented to me a staggering number of ways to observe these rituals. The observant emphasized the importance of following the prescribed forms of ritual ablution and prostration, but the exact form of these actions, as represented to me, often differed. Differences of opinion also emerged regarding the number of prostrations (*rekets*) necessary at the different prayer times. Ideas about missed prayers and extra prayers varied. Some of the more devout individuals prayed more than five times or added extra recitations after the required *rekets*. Others warned that excessive supererogatory observances are not God's<sup>4</sup> wish and could compromise one's correct observance of obligatory practices.

Some of the people who observed *namaz* were vehement that a good Muslim cannot miss a single prayer. Others, however, told me how to make up missed prayers. Still others merely tried to pray five times, often not reaching the full number. Several women I knew were vigilant in saying the morning prayer. Even if this falls far short of God's command to pray five times, for these women, I believe, the observance represented a "beginner's version" of *namaz*, accessible to them even if they did not yet have the will or free time to pray five times.

In many communities, especially in rural areas, popular consensus holds that prayer is best postponed until an individual is advanced in years. Although people in these communities recognize that prayer is commanded by God, they also appreciate the difficulty young and middle-aged people face in balancing careers and family life with spiritual commitments. In these communities, it is considered acceptable to put off the

observance of *namaz* until children are grown and one is nearing retirement. This practice is also linked to an idea I heard often, that it is worse to begin praying and stop then never to begin praying at all. In a few cases I heard of, devout Muslims recommended others not to pray, fearing that particular individuals were not at a place in their lives to make a commitment to prayer, and could be punished by God for expressing an intention to pray and not fulfilling it.

Some Kyrgyz Muslims I knew questioned the necessity of prayer entirely. Such a discourse was offered by those who were wary of public religiosity, believing that an emphasis on public religious expression encouraged a distorted system of values and could lead to hypocrisy and self-righteousness. This perspective, sometimes offered in the form of stories or aphorisms, was related to cynicism—common among Kyrgyz—that action is not a reliable indicator of inner goodness. One story I heard on several occasions told of two men who had died and were facing God's judgment. The first, a drunkard, had never prayed. As he awaited judgment, his heart was overcome by despair and fear. Why had he ignored his religious duties? Surely, he would never be accepted into heaven and know the glory of God's presence. The second, a pious man who had never missed a prayer, stood fearlessly as his soul was weighed on the great scale, confident that God would accept him into heaven. The judgment surprised them both: the drunkard, for his sincere humility, went to heaven; the pious man, for his hubris in thinking he could predict God's will, went to hell.

Fasting does not require the long-term dedication of prayer, and more Central Asian Muslims I knew fasted than prayed. Fasting is more strenuous than prayer, however, and its difficulty often surprises those who attempt it. Many people I observed who tried to fast quit partway through the month, pleading health considerations. Others fasted on certain days and not others, in accord with claims that fasting on certain days of the month earned the same amount of merit as fasting for the entire month. According to one version, for example, fasting the first three days, the middle three days, and the last three days gives merit equal to completing the full fast. Other individuals found alternative ways to observe the holy month, such as by giving up alcohol or other vices. According to many Muslims, extra merit could be gained by fasting on certain days in the weeks following *Orozo*, although there was no consensus about which days were most

auspicious, and those who did not fast successfully could fast on these days and hope it would offset their lax observance.

Most surprising, perhaps, is that Muslims I knew disagreed about which behaviors broke the fast. After the morning meal, for example, many people I knew rushed to brush their teeth before *azan*, the call to prayer, sounded, believing that brushing the teeth breaks the fast. Others, however, said this did not break the fast. I knew one individual, a smoker, who fasted for a few days. He did not know that smoking is widely considered incompatible with the fast. When he heard he could not smoke during the fast, he quit the fast, but maintained that the days he had fasted counted in his favor—God does not punish ignorance. Kyrgyz often explained to me that God asks of the believer only that she/he practice to the best of her/his knowledge, conscience, and ability.

Some people warned me that it was important to break the fast immediately upon hearing *azan*, or God may not accept the fast and the individual would lose the merit of that day's fast. Subjecting oneself to unnecessary hardships went against the spirit of the fast, they said, and was not pleasing to God. Others disagreed, saying God was forgiving. If I broke my fast as soon after *azan* as possible, my fast would "*Kudai buıırsa*" (God willing) be accepted. Similarly, people often said that speaking harsh words while fasting could make one's fast unacceptable—not that there seemed to be less disagreement during *Orozo* than at other times.

A common phrase heard during *Orozo* is "*Orozoŋuz kabyl bolsun*," which means, "May your fast be accepted." This phrase reflects the idea, also apparent in the parable above, that even correct practice cannot guarantee God's favor. God is the final judge; one can never know God's will. In my experience, this sentiment more than any other guides the Kyrgyz approach to Islam.

Following Asad, I resist trying to determine which of the opinions above represent "true" Islam. Central Asian Islam is a flexible tradition in which different levels of education, understanding, and commitment are tolerated and accepted as authentic. Asad maintains, however, that an Islamic discourse "relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith" (1986, 14). The discourses I describe here emerge from the competing influence of multiple sources, including scripture (the Qur'an and Hadith), popular books on religion, the sermons of *imams* (male leaders of local mosques), the

opinions of *moldos*<sup>5</sup> (male and female authorities who are reputed to have studied the Qur'an), local consensus, and family and communal practice. It is difficult to determine the exact sources of these discourses; clearly, many of them have their sources in Islamic scripture, while the etiology of others is more obscure, hidden within chains of oral transmission. The likelihood that a Kyrgyz Muslim learned what she/he knows about Islam from oral sources suggests that for most Kyrgyz Muslims, texts do not represent a preferred source for information about Islam. Although Kyrgyz Muslims revere the Qur'an and the Hadith as potent symbols of their faith, they tend to learn about Islam from their elders and from local authorities. This is not to say that the knowledge represented does not originally have some basis in scripture: it simply means that most of the faithful do not read the texts themselves.

One additional observation is one I suggested above: some discourses emphasize action, meaning the external expression of faith through the observance of obligatory rituals, while others emphasize intention, the interior and hidden will of the believer. If speakers of the former discourses are concerned about whether actions are performed correctly, speakers of the latter discourses are concerned about whether intentions are pure. It is important to note that discourses that emphasize action are not necessarily more closely linked to scripture than those that emphasize intention.

The existence of discourses that emphasize active forms of worship and counter-discourses that question the worth of active forms of worship is not surprising, considering the tension between the demands Islam places on the believer and the norms of Central Asian society, which after seventy years of communist and atheist propaganda still yields little space to religious observance. Individual Muslims negotiate the demands of their faith strategically. They do this by both adapting their lifestyles to Islam and adapting Islam to their lifestyles. Some people are willing and able to observe all the obligatory practices, i.e., the five *parz*. Others are not. Even though many Central Asian Muslims believe that strict observance of the five obligatory practices pleases God, discursive disagreement over just how necessary these observances are gives Central Asians some room to negotiate the place of religion in their lives. The result: more Central Asians can participate in Islam than would be possible otherwise. Although this interpretation sounds like a position Asad warns against in "Idea," according to which

Islam is understood to be whatever individual believers want it to be (1986, 2), I argue that because this approach relies not on individual but on collective sources of authority, it cannot be understood as the solipsistic argument Asad rejects. Central Asian Muslims I knew turn to people and texts in their environment for information about their faith; their negotiations of faith are inherently social and discursive.

### **FOREIGN RELIGIOUS WORKERS**

One of the most startling affects of independence is that Central Asia, once cut off from cultures outside of the socialist sphere, is now host to a large number of foreign tourists and professionals. A startling number of these individuals come as religious workers, and they bring every converting persuasion in the world to the region (Lewis 2000; Rotar 2004; US Department of State 2007; van Gorder 2008). Their presence is often said to produce religious diversity in the region. It is true that where religious life was once dominated by two or three world traditions, there are now multiple religious orientations available to Kyrgyz citizens. What this interpretation elides in its celebration of confessional diversity, however, is the impact of these new faiths on diversity within indigenous traditions. I have been arguing that within Central Asian Islam, numerous forms of practice and belief coexist and that the region has always been host to great spiritual diversity. The influx of religious professions does more than merely add to that variety, it also creates normalizing pressures within indigenous faiths.

Although the new Christian faiths in Central Asia attract considerable attention from western observers (e.g., Pelkmans 2005 and 2009), the influx of foreign religious workers also includes representatives of a variety of Islamic organizations, including some of the most prominent international Islamic organizations in the world. These groups often have identifiable origins, but because they move easily across the globe and attract support in many localities, I call them “transnational.” Unfortunately, scholarship on transnational Islam is limited. The available scholarship reveals that transnational and cosmopolitan Islamic groups themselves embody an astonishing diversity of opinion about Islam (Mandaville 2005; Roy 2004). The representatives of these movements in Central Asia—from the followers of the Turkish visionary Fethullah Gülen (Balcı 2003; Masood 2008; Turam 2004; Yavuz and Esposito 2003), to South Asian *da'is*

(missionaries) (Masud 2000; Racijs 2004), to Central Asian citizens returned from religious study in the Middle East (Stephan 2006)—disagree on many points of doctrine and practice and do not pursue opportunities for cooperation or discursive exploration of their differences.

As diverse as these transnational Islamic movements appear from the outside, I believe that the growing influence of transnational Islam in Central Asia contributes little to religious diversity. Compared to the diversity of Central Asian Islam, these groups preach markedly similar forms of Islamic spirituality. As I discuss further below, I believe they contribute to the normalization of Central Asian Islam.

This dynamic is not unique to Central Asia; ethnographers working in many other regions of the Muslim world have described the normalizing effect of transnational Islamic movements on local Islamic tradition. Suzanne Brenner's study of young Indonesian women who choose to veil and adopt stricter Islamic practice based on increased knowledge of scripture reveals the impact of "global Islamic movements" on Indonesian Islam (1996: 674). In Indonesia, modernist Islamic movements which grow out of contact with reformist movements in the Middle East and focus on scripture, conflict with local Islamic norms based on *adat* (customary practice) (1996, 681). Janice Boddy describes the impact of increased interest in scriptural Islam among men in a Sudanese community (1989). She notes how this interest has created new limitations to women's freedoms as well as sparked a growth in "counterhegemonic" spiritual discourses, including the Zar cult, which operates both within an Islamic cosmology and in competition with it (Boddy 1989, 5). Samuli Schielke, writing on Egypt, describes the struggle of citizens who want to preserve popular forms of religious observance and celebration in the face of interference by the Egyptian state (2008). The state interferes in these celebrations hoping to encourage Egyptian citizens to conform to international ideals of Islam and modern citizenship. In Central Asia, Manja Stephan recounts interviews with a young Tajik man named Anushehr which highlight the difference between Tajik Islam, based on the ideas of local, "ignorant" *imams*, and the Islam he learned while studying in Egypt, which is based on the Qur'an and *sunna* (the teachings and sayings of the prophet) (2006).



While it is difficult to provide a rigorous analytical account of a phenomenon as heterogeneous as transnational Islam, the international Islamic movements discussed in this ethnographic work share assumptions about what constitutes authoritative knowledge about Islam. These global Islamic discourses favor certain forms of religious authority (usually texts) over others (local consensus, *adat*, collective memory, oral traditions). Dale Eickelman has argued that global shifts in literacy, notably rising literacy rates and increased book production, affect the way Muslims approach their faith. In Oman, he discovered, these trends lead the faithful to prefer texts to other forms of religious authority (Eickelman 1992, 647). In other words, developments in the secular sphere, namely the democratization of education and increased access of the world's population to reading material, may in the sphere of religion give power to scripture and text-based interpretations of the world's dominant faiths, especially where these interpretations compete with oral and other forms of community consensus.

### NEGOTIATIONS

Today, transnational Islamic traditions are increasingly visible and influential, accessing more and more Muslim communities. The transnational Islamic discourses which find their way to Central Asia come in many forms and from a variety of places. They come as books translated from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. They come as Southasian *da'is* and Turkish educators, as degrees from Arab Islamic institutions, as leaflets with radical ideology, and of course as information off websites and discussion boards accessible at any corner internet café. In Kyrgyz communities, these ideas become discourses that influence local approaches to Islam, discourses respected for their connection to famous, global groups and trusted for their representatives' Islamic literacy.

Although Talal Asad wrote "Idea" at a time when studying Islam meant observing contestations over well-rehearsed *local* discourses, his ideas allow us to address one of the main concerns scholars of globalization have raised regarding the study of global-local encounters. These scholars warn that global-local encounters are often characterized as meetings between static, responsive local formations and dynamic, invasive global tendencies (e.g., Tsing 1994). "Local" cultures are also dynamic and aggressive, says this critique, active sites of cultural production. Asad's framework anticipated this critique,

calling on scholars of Islam to recognize local discourses as sites of dynamic contestation.

Other concerns raised by a focus on globalization are not as easily addressed by Asad's framework. One problematic issue is the status of a global Islamic "orthodoxy." Ovamir Anjum has argued that the apparent similarities among transnational Islamic movements call for a theoretical accounting of the possible existence of a global Islamic orthodoxy and its impact on local Islamic traditions (Anjum 2007). Anjum argues that Asad's neglect of this issue in "Idea" allows us to read Asad's account of Islam as a reformulation of the position he explicitly rejects: the idea that there exists "high" and "low" Islam (Anjum 2007, 668–69).

Another shortcoming of Asad's account is its focus on belief and practice. He criticizes scholars of Islam for focusing on belief and practice, then asks us to attend to the negotiations of power which determine the discursive construction of beliefs and practices! Drawing on material about Central Asian Islam, I will argue that the difference between what these earlier scholars do and what he suggests is not great enough. Encounters between Kyrgyz Muslims and representatives of transnational religious organizations reveal that issues quite beyond the narrow domains of belief and practice not only constitute discursive contests but determine the relations of power which shape their outcome. The issue of identity, comprising questions of religious authority (Who can speak for Islam?), ethnicity (Does Islam accommodate the idea of "Muslim by birth"?), and political allegiance (Does participation in political Islamic groups make one Muslim? Can one be Muslim and participate in a secular state?), shifts the balance of power among the negotiating parties. These are no longer Muslims disagreeing about Islam, but individuals vying for a privileged right to speak an Islamic discourse and to deny that right to others; in short, these are individuals who may question each others' Muslim identity. In this section, I offer two examples of dialogues that at first glance look like they conform to Asad's definition of Islam as discursive contests about practices and beliefs by which "Muslims are inducted *as* Muslims" (1986, 15). Upon closer inspection, however, these discursive contests include imputed ideas about *who* has the authority to speak as a Muslim about Islamic beliefs and practices.

## Kyrgyz Islam

The first ethnographic vignette finds the ethnographer sitting at tea with a Kyrgyz family. Salamat-*eje*<sup>6</sup> is a middle-aged Kyrgyz woman with several children, including Guljan, who is seventeen. Guljan is an observant Muslim. For many years, she studied at a private high school sponsored by an influential transnational Islamic group led by the Turkish intellectual and mystic Fethullah Gülen. Guljan prays five times a day and observes certain strictures regarding dress, among other Islamic practices. She learns about Islam from her Turkish friends, many of them former teachers, as well as from books, most of them Turkish commentaries on the Qur'an and Hadith. She is outspokenly critical of her parents' lax attitude toward Islam. I have heard her say that a person, even if Kyrgyz, cannot be Muslim (*Musulman*<sup>7</sup>) unless he/she prays and observes the other obligatory practices of Islam.

Salamat and Akilbek, Guljan's father, like most Kyrgyz citizens who came of age during socialism, consider themselves Muslim by virtue of ethnicity; anyone born Kyrgyz, they would argue, is Muslim. For many members of this generation, being Muslim implies observing popular practices such as preparing a special meal and reciting the Qur'an on Thursday night, praying at holy sites (shrines and holy springs), using certain colloquial phrases, and burying deceased relatives according to Islamic tradition (Privratsky 2001). For many Kyrgyz, being Muslim does not imply abstaining from alcohol and pork, praying, or otherwise striving for better practice.

On the afternoon in question, Salamat was talking about their years living among Uzbeks, who are known for being more observant Muslims than Kyrgyz. Salamat described her distrust of her devout Uzbek neighbors. These women prayed and veiled and avoided alcohol, but in Salamat's opinion, belied their spiritual bankruptcy in small gestures which revealed a lack of compassion and generosity. Kyrgyz people usually were not so strict in their observance, Salamat said, but their hearts were pure (*ichki düntüyösü taza*, literally, their inner world was clean). Her own father, for example, lived and died in the USSR. He never prayed or fasted, but he was the model of the generosity and morality Islam

teaches. Certainly, Salamat concluded, Guljan's belief that the human being had to follow all the strictures of Islam to be a good Muslim and achieve salvation was nonsense.

Guljan responded passionately: How could her mother know the hearts of her Uzbek neighbors or anyone? It is impossible to generalize, as her mother wanted to, that those who are observant tend to have moral defects while those who do not tend to be morally superior. Some people who are observant are good and some are not, just as some people who are not observant are bad and some are not. Second, God forgives those who live in societies that give them no access to Islam, for they cannot be held accountable for the problems of their time. If individuals, however, have the opportunity to learn about Islam and do not, if they know there are things they should do but neglect them, they commit sin and endanger their souls. The rebuke was clear: Guljan's grandfather was absolved, but her mother was not.

Guljan went on to scold her mother for practicing Kyrgyz traditions that are forbidden in Islam. Guljan told us, "When I was younger, before I started praying, when the new moon appeared, Mom made us put scarves on our heads and worship the moon. We bowed to the moon and made a wish." This practice, according to Guljan, was "*shirk*" (idolatry), one of the gravest sins in Islam.

Salamat defended her actions: the ritual was not about worshipping the moon (*bash iüüü*) but showing respect to the moon (*syïynoo*).

Guljan was not convinced. "If you bow to the moon, if you ask it for something, it becomes a god for you."

Salamat responded, "This practice is an expression of Kyrgyz respect for nature. Kyrgyz have always respected the natural world (*jaratylyshty syïlap kelgen*) as created by God (*Kudaïdan jaratylgan*)."

"Worshipping anything but Allah is *shirk*," Guljan retorted.

"What about the *Ka'aba* (the stone in Mecca, which orients Muslims when they pray)?" Salamat asked, "Don't you bow to the rock in the *Ka'aba*?" The *Ka'aba* is an exception because God commands it, Guljan suggested, seeming to realize her answer was not a convincing one.

## Official Islam and Village Islam

In Egypt, according to Samuli Schielke, the state hopes to make local Islam conform to global Islamic standards by involving the state in public Islamic observances (2008). The vignette below describes a similar dynamic in the Kyrgyz Republic, where state-backed, official Islam extends the reach of transnational Islamic discourses, furthering a project to normalize Kyrgyz Islam.

The Muftiyat, also called the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, is the official Muslim institutional leadership in Kyrgyzstan. It inherits its authority from religious boards that operated during the Soviet era (Saroyan 1997). The Muftiyat is aligned with the state, which gives it the authority to appoint all local clerics, write the curriculum for Islamic educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan, and approve books on Islam for publication. The Muftiyat also distributes visas for the hajj pilgrimage.<sup>8</sup> In return for state support, the Muftiyat participates in state efforts to counter political and radical Islam. It is illegal in Kyrgyzstan for religious groups to engage in political activity, and in their publications and broadcasts, the Muftiyat holds tightly to this line, commonly expressing its support for the state and its opposition to a variety of underground groups active in Kyrgyzstan.

The Muftiyat not only enjoys state support but seems to receive patronage from foreign Islamic nations and organizations. Hundreds of Kyrgyz citizens study in Arab religious institutions, many of them under the Muftiyat's supervision (ICG 2003), and Arabs have reportedly funded much of the huge expansion in mosque building in Kyrgyzstan. At independence, Kyrgyzstan had thirty-nine mosques. Today, there are over 1,650 mosques, forty-three *medresas* (religious high schools), six religious colleges, and one university (ICG 2003, US Department of State 2007).

The ethnographic vignette I describe comes not from my fieldwork, but from an article in the Muftiyat's newspaper, *Islam Madaniyaty (Islamic Culture)* (Abdyldaev 2003, 2). The article is written by a Muftiyat representative who together with his colleagues visits a village to attend a funerary observance. He is happy to report that they observe less drinking and drunkenness than they did during earlier visits, but other aspects of the funeral did not conform to shariah, Islamic law. For example, the grieving

family had killed several animals to provide food for a large number of guests. As the leaders of the Uzbek study group understood, this practice is considered *bidah* (innovation), and goes against the spirit of the Qur'an. Such observances create excessive hardship, and Qur'anic passages discourage putting a mourning family at such a disadvantage.

The Muftiyat visitors point out to their hosts that these excessive expenditures “do not conform to shariah” (*shariʿatta myndaʼi jokko*). The villagers are surprised and ask for clarification. The Muftiyat group explains that it is a hardship for the suffering family, especially if the family has young children. No food should be prepared in the mourning household, much less given to others. Instead, food should be brought to the mourning family by neighbors and friends.

Later, the villagers ask the visitors why in some places people recite the Qur'an once over the body of the deceased, and in other places more than once. According to Muslim Kyrgyz belief, the soul will suffer for its sins after death, but intercessions on the part of living relatives, especially in the form of recitations of the Qur'an or parts of the Qur'an, can mitigate this suffering. Thus, reciting the Qur'an for ancestors is considered one of the most important duties of living Muslims. The Muftiyat representatives respond: the Qur'an should be recited only once over the body of the deceased. “The Mufti issued a fatwa that the Qur'an should be recited only once at the grave, and the Mufti's fatwa has to be obeyed.”

An elderly man responds, “But in the past, we recited the Qur'an more times, in honor of other dead relatives. Why can we not do this?”

They responded, “Do you know how to read the Qur'an?”

“No,” he said.

“There are prescribed ways of reciting the Qur'an for relatives. Why don't you and your sons and grandsons learn to read the Qur'an for your own relatives and recite for them regularly, rather than bothering us about how you have to wait until the excuse of someone else's death to have someone read for them as well?”

## Analysis

The negotiations described in these vignettes can be understood as illustrating two discursive approaches to Islam common in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The first approach, represented by *Salamat-eje* and the villagers, depends on collective memory for information about practice and belief. Proper practices and beliefs are taught within communities and passed down between generations. The sources of this knowledge are not always identifiable, but the authority of this knowledge is established through conscious awareness of the generations of Kyrgyz Muslims who have lived and died according to its dictates.<sup>9</sup> The villagers were aware that different communities practiced in different ways, but until they met the Muftiyat representatives, they may not have been curious about it. Among Kyrgyz, ethnicity and religion have long been ontologically linked: if you are born Kyrgyz, you and what you do are Muslim. This logic accommodates diversity; different Kyrgyz communities may draw on different histories and collective memory to define Islamic practice and belief. Similarly, for generations Kyrgyz have observed rituals that embody the Kyrgyz respect for the natural world but are not explicitly prescribed by Islam. Kyrgyz maintain these practices with the understanding that Islam also teaches respect for the natural world, as *Salamat* pointed out, as well as the conviction that because Kyrgyz are Muslim, Kyrgyz spiritual practices are compatible with Islam.

The second discursive approach, represented by *Guljan* and the Muftiyat visitors, is grounded in a different understanding of religious authority, based primarily on textual expertise. *Guljan* speaks from the knowledge she has been taught by Turkish disciples of *Gülen*, while the Muftiyat representatives bring knowledge from Islamic schools in Russia or the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Asserting the authority of text over other forms of knowledge, these discourses dismiss the beliefs and practices we heard about in these vignettes as contrary to “true” Islam. Indigenous explanations, such as “that’s what we have always done” or “it is a Kyrgyz practice and Kyrgyz are Muslims,” persuasive in the local context, are silenced by discourses that question collective memory or community consensus as sources of religious knowledge, and instead affirm the authority of scripture and expertise in scripture.

It is important to note, additionally, that the representatives of these transnational discourses do not only affirm the authority of their sources of knowledge, they also emphasize the danger of not conforming to their dictates. At stake is salvation itself, these representatives warn. Theorizing these interactions merely as discursive contests about correct practice elides the seriousness of what is at stake. If we follow the logic of the transnational discourse, these interactions change the soteriological status of transnational Islam's interlocutors, turning them from ignorant Muslims who will be "saved" by their ignorance, into knowledgeable Muslims who can suffer punishment. These interactions also reveal the deeper implications of the international discourse: it challenges dominant notions of Muslim identity. Kyrgyz individuals are not Muslim by virtue of being Kyrgyz, this discourse suggests, but by publicly demonstrating their adherence to certain sources of religious knowledge (namely, individuals who possess expertise in scripture) rather than others (namely, local tradition or community consensus).

### **MUSLIM IDENTITY AND TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM**

The transnational Islamic discourses heard in Kyrgyzstan are making Kyrgyz more aware of the urgency of learning about Islam and changing what sources Kyrgyz can turn to as authoritative sources of religious knowledge. Religious authority is increasingly based on the textual expertise, wealth, and prestige of those who speak Muslim discourses, the fame of the organizations these individuals represent, and other attributes inaccessible to local Islamic representatives. These shifts have important implications for Kyrgyz Muslim identity. As the authority of Kyrgyz speakers in these discursive contests is challenged, the ontological connection between Islam and Kyrgyz ethnicity is loosening. As the Muftiyat representatives suggest, it is not enough for an individual to be born Kyrgyz for that individual to speak for Islam. It is necessary for Kyrgyz Muslims to seek out the kind of text-based knowledge offered by the Muftiyat and similar groups. Without knowledge from these sources, people who think they are Muslim may not even be Muslim at all. These shifting notions of Kyrgyz Muslim identity are reflected in Guljan's narrative. As I mentioned above, Guljan told me that only those who pray and observe other precepts of Islam can be considered Muslim. Transnational Islam challenges the notion of Muslim-by-birth, asserting that "Muslimness" is not a primordial, inborn



quality, but a state of being that is constructed (and reconstructed) through action. For Kyrgyz, this is a new and disorienting paradigm. One of its implications is that Kyrgyz citizens today find themselves struggling not only to make sense of the new demands made on them by a familiar religion, but also to reformulate their conceptions of self.<sup>11</sup>

Asad's formulation does not allow us to theorize the ways transnational discourses silence local discourses, such as by challenging local assumptions about Muslim identity and religious knowledge. According to Asad, the community understands its faith through participating in discursive contests about how practices and beliefs relate to scripture, contests that explore how the content of scripture should be embodied in practice and belief. Asad tells us that a tradition relates beliefs and practices to the tradition's authoritative texts. In this accounting, Asad's perspectives are more closely aligned with the transnational Islam I describe, than with Kyrgyz discourses. In Kyrgyz Islam, as I have discussed, scripture is one of many sources of religious knowledge. An additional point that can be added here is that more than a source of information, Islamic scripture functions as a potent symbol: it is a material object of veneration and the basis for oral performances which are useful not as communication but for their affective ability to aid deceased souls. Kyrgyz faithful have long turned to collective memory, group practice, and material objects and places for knowledge about their faith. By demanding that Kyrgyz Muslims instead study the content and meaning of scripture, transnational Islamic discourses are changing the way Kyrgyz Muslims approach faith and spirituality.

Worldwide, transnational political, social, and religious movements are shifting the ways individuals approach faith. As I discussed above, Dale Eickelman believes mass education in Arab countries has led the faithful to depend less on communal, oral forms of religious knowledge, and more on textual practices of reading, questioning, and citation (1992). More recently, Saba Mahmood (a student of Talal Asad) has described US collaboration with moderate Muslim clerics who promote forms of spiritual engagement that conform to liberal models of the ideal citizen (2006). These forms of engagement direct the faithful to prefer individual engagement with religious texts rather than reliance on clerics or communal sources, and to separate issues of religious belief from those of ethnic belonging or political affiliation. Eickelman's and Mahmood's

accounts, along with the shifts documented ethnographically here and elsewhere, illustrate dramatic cases in the relationship of individuals to faith, namely a new emphasis on literate engagement with scripture and a challenge to the way traditional notions of identity come to bear on interpretations of the tradition.

In Central Asia, as may be true in other parts of the Muslim world, the power and popularity of transnational Islam is rivaled only by the power and popularity of prominent western ideologies, such as democracy, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Even as Islam is often viewed as existing in tension with liberalism, the two traditions actually may share many common concerns, and ultimately cooperate in leading Kyrgyz citizens to approach identity, politics, faith, and many other domains of life, in radically new ways.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For an excellent tribute to Asad's work, see the edited volume by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (2006).
- <sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in the article I have anglicized this plural, as I have done with Central Asian words throughout the article.
- <sup>3</sup> *Opa*, an honorific, means "older sister" in Uzbek, and is appended to names of individuals older than the person speaking.
- <sup>4</sup> Most Kyrgyz and Uzbeks use a Persian-derived word for God, "Kudai" (Kyrgyz) or "Khudo" (Uzbek). Some devout Muslims exclusively use the Arabic "Allah."
- <sup>5</sup> Uzbeks also use the term "*otin*" for female *moldos*. See Fathi (1997).
- <sup>6</sup> *Eje*, an honorific, means "older sister" in Kyrgyz and is appended to names of individuals older than the person speaking.
- <sup>7</sup> This representation of Islamic anthropology, common in casual speech, represents one way of thinking about a human being's relationship to a faith tradition. In formal discussions such as instructional contexts, some Muslims I knew distinguished between *Musulman* and *Mu'min*, categories that relate to one's likelihood of salvation, rather than the vague, ontological condition indexed by "identity." This issue is relevant to the discussion here because it is a different way of talking about a human being's relationship to a tradition than the paradigm assumed by "identity." I hope to expand this discussion at a later time.
- <sup>8</sup> Their power to do so has led to scandal in recent years, as many officials in the Muftiyat were charged with taking advantage of their power for personal benefit. See Sagynova (2006) and Khamidov (2007).
- <sup>9</sup> See Nazif Shahrani's discussion of "popular" versus "official" Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan (1991).
- <sup>10</sup> Until recently, Kyrgyzstan did not have its own institute of higher Islamic learning. Most of the clerics who work in the Muftiyat or sit on the council of *ulama* today studied outside of Kyrgyzstan.
- <sup>11</sup> An important implication of this development, which I have discussed elsewhere (Borbieva 2007), is that it opens a space for other converting faiths among Kyrgyz. Central Asians who say, "Kyrgyz are not Muslims unless they pray," find themselves being echoed by missionaries of other faiths and their Kyrgyz converts, for whom this discourse is just as useful.

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