

## 2. Features of Central Asian Folk Islam

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The revival of Islam in Central Asia cannot be analyzed without understanding the local forms of Islam prevalent in the region. Therefore, I first of all highlight the most important aspects of Central Asian Islam. One important feature is the prevalence of the Sunni Hanafi School of law and their adaptation of local customs; how this combines with pre-Islamic rituals, and the influence of Sufism.

### 2.1. GENERAL REMARKS ON ISLAM

#### 2.1.1. A Heterogeneous Religion

A special feature of Islam is that it has developed heterogeneous characteristics in different parts of the world. Moreover, these many local forms of Islam are themselves not homogenous but internally diverse, a fact which all too often goes unnoticed, as Khalid makes clear:

“Totalizing statements about Islam [...] grossly misrepresent this reality. Characterizations that present Islam simply as wicked or tolerant are equally incorrect. Muslims can draw any number of lessons from Islam. The tradition is much too rich and diverse to be reduced to a single evaluative adjective” (Khalid 2007: 24).

Alongside the development of different cultural understandings of Islam over time has been a concomitant evolution of diverse theological debates about the proper way to practice religion (Schubel 2009: 279). The catch-

words *jihad* and *sharia*, whose true meaning will be clarified in these pages, are used by Islamists as well as by those countering the ‘Islamic threat’, with both sides perceiving Islam in an essentialist way as a unified and homogenous religion (which is either totally right or totally wrong, depending on the point of view).

First of all, however, a clear distinction has to be made between ‘everyday’ Islam versus ‘scriptural’ Islam – a distinction that has gained ground in the current academic discourse on Islam in Central Asia (Epkenhans 2011: 81). As Khalid explains:

“ ‘Customary’ or ‘local’ understandings of Islam are countered by more ‘normative’ versions of Islam that draw their authority from greater adherence to injunctions or strictures elaborated by scholars who specialize in fiqh or other aspects of Islam’s normative tradition. This tension between different ways of understanding Islam creates the most characteristic inner dynamic in Muslim society” (Khalid 2007: 24).

As we will see below, in the contemporary ‘revival of Islam’ in Central Asia, different understandings of the religion are gaining influence and are partially competing against each other. Nevertheless, it should not be concluded that either the scriptural or the local interpretations of Islam themselves are homogenous or have reached the end of their development.

Contemporary research on Central Asian Islam is restricted to two main fields: anthropological research on the private practice of religion on the one hand and a securitized research discourse on Islam on the other. In the latter field (where my study is situated as well), the tendency to regard Islamists as the main threat to the existing regimes has endured from Soviet times up until the present day: “The difference is mainly that the ‘Islamic threat’ was formerly seen as an antidote to Soviet ascendancy, while now it is viewed as a danger for stability and a potential vector for international ‘Islamic terrorism’ ” (Schoeberlein 2009: 102). In order to distance ourselves from this overly simplistic view, I consider it important to embed the discussion of radical Islamist groups in the region’s religious landscape. As such, although this is a security study, I will first of all analyze Central Asian mainstream religious practices before focusing on extremist and violent groups. In this way, I first introduce the inner-Islamic debate and only then turn to the official religious policies. As I show, since Soviet times it

has been common to speak of categories such as radical versus moderate and parallel versus official Islam (Epkenhans 2011: 82). However, it is important not to oversimplify or restrict ourselves to only those theoretical terms which are problematic for understanding the facts because they imply distinctions where there are grey zones and evoke contradictions where there may be none. For example, the official Islam changed its nature over decades of Soviet rule. Representatives of both official and underground Islam often came from the same background and maintained contact with each other. Yet today terms such as ‘traditional’ or ‘foreign’ Islam prevail in Central Asian countries: it would be very simplistic to limit descriptions of Islam to only these two categories, though. As we shall see, Salafism, for example, not only came to the region by contemporary Arab influences but has its local roots in Central Asia as well.

### **2.1.2. Islam and Politics**

The Prophet Muhammad was not only the religious but also the political leader of the first Muslims. Subsequently, it is often mentioned that politics and religion are necessarily closely intertwined in Islam, however I agree with Khalid, who opposes this view:

“The earliest caliphs claimed both political and religious authority, but already by the beginning of the third Islamic century, the ulama [the learned of Islam] had supplanted the caliphs as guardians of the faith. The political might of the caliphate, in contrast, disappeared with the rise of numerous independent dynasties, whose legitimacy came primarily from military conquest” (Khalid 2007: 27).

This makes clear that throughout history, religious and political authorities were for the most part separated – a division which is also supported by appropriate theories. For this reason, I do not want to imprudently mix the history of politics and religion. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that many dynasties and emperors in Central Asia did try to legitimize their rule by religious means, as Naumkin makes clear:

“The Hanafi clergy and scholars played an important role in the administrative and political life of medieval Central Asia. The head of the Hanafites in Bukha-

ra (ra'is) even acquired hereditary power in Bukhara in the eleventh century, which his family wielded until the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century” (Naumkin 2005: 8).

Such a bond between Islam and politics can be observed today in the organizational structure of the mahalla – the Central Asian neighbourhood solidarity network. Even un-Islamic regimes took advantage of the mahalla’s organizational structure. The mahalla was a “partly self-governed unit which had a mosque and a *maktab* (an Islamic primary school)” (Salmorbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 214). It was genuinely Muslim and reserved an important role for the imam. More recently, the authorities of the USSR and the newly independent states have made use of these networks to exert control over Islam.

I am especially interested in the role of religion in contemporary Central Asia and in the legitimizing effect the reference to religion has. I therefore summarize the ancient history of Central Asia by emphasizing how the regimes legitimized their rule with reference to religion and heredity (either by tracing back their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad or employing Sufis as counsellors, as we will see in this chapter). As we can see, Islam played a role in Central Asian politics in the past to the extent that political regimes profited from the existence of religious authorities. This, however, does not mean that politics and religion have always necessarily been intertwined. On the contrary, this only serves to demonstrate that in some eras religious and political leaders were closer to each other than in other times.

Who is promoting the revival of Islam in the post-communist countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan? I will show in the next chapters that the ‘revival of Islam’ in Central Asia is not a one-dimensional development and introduce the various actors involved in this process. I first of all present general features of Central Asian Islam before I explain how folk Islam has been undergoing a revival since independence. After this I turn to political Islam and to groups which aim at transforming society.

## 2.2. SUNNI HANAFI MADHAB

The contemporary disputes among state and non-state actors in Central Asia have a lot to do with ‘traditional Islam’ and ‘foreign influences’ on Islam. The conflicts take place between folk Islam and Sufis, conservative Hanafites, fundamentalist Salafis (also called Wahhabites, but this term is not correct in this context, as I show), and other reformist movements. In order to understand the different perceptions, for example, on the role of local customary law, or of worshipping at shrines or attitudes to clothing, I will here give first of all an overview of Sunnis and Shiites as well as of the different schools of Islam.

### 2.2.1. Sunnis and Shiites

Muslims are divided into two different branches: Sunnis and Shiites. In the beginning of Islam, Muhammad, the most important Prophet, not only confessed this new religion but was also the political and military leader and Imam (the person who leads the Muslim prayer) of the Muslim community. After his death, the four caliphs who were elected as his successors were called the ‘righteous’ caliphs, because the time span of their rule was regarded as the ideal Muslim period (Elger 2002: 29).

After the death of the fourth caliph, the Sunnis accepted the leadership of the Umayyads (661 to 750, centred in Damascus) and the Abbasids (750 to 1258, centred in Baghdad), who wielded a great influence on the culture and political order of Muslim society (Elger 2002: 29). From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Muslims were no longer united as one political entity (Elger 2002: 30). From this point on, the Abbasid caliphate was ruled by several dynasties of local authorities (Sultans). At the same time, the Sunnis began to elaborate political theories which strengthened the authority of the caliphs and Sultans:

“For the early Sunni jurists, the only legitimate form of government was the Caliphate; only the descendent of the Prophet was considered as the religious and political leader of the umma. The caliphs were not regarded as theocrats with unconfined power, but as upholders of the divine commandments (shari’a) and defenders of the Muslim community” (Elger 2002: 33).

The succession of the Prophet Muhammad led to one of the most relevant divergences in the Muslim community – the one between the Shiites and the Sunnites. The Shiites regarded only Ali (the last of the four ‘righteous’ caliphs, who died in 661) as legitimate and argued that Muhammad had preferred him as his successor because of his piety and his intellectual qualities (Elger 2002: 34). The Shiites therefore declared only the descendants of Ali and his wife Fatima as legitimate caliphs and imams (Elger 2002: 34). When the first Son of Ali, Hasan, ceded from power in 661 in favour of the Umayyad caliph, and his younger brother Husain opposed the Umayyads (and was later killed), Shiites and Sunnis split. I will not go into the details of this division nor explain further distinctions among the different groups of Shiites because the great majority of Central Asians are Sunni Muslims and the current conflicts in Central Asia are only among Sunnis.

Table 1 shows the percentages of Muslims in the population of the Central Asian states as well as the percentages of Sunnis and Shiites in these countries. The biggest Shiite minority lives in Tajikistan; they are Ismailites and comprise eastern Iranian peoples and the inhabitants of Badakhshan region (Atkin 2009: 307).

*Table 1: Muslim Population in Central Asia: Sunnis and Shiites*

	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>
Sunnis	70.1 %	75.0%	94.0%	92.9%
Shiites	0.1%	< 1%	4.0%	0.1%

Source: ARDA 2013

### **2.2.2. Hanafi School of Law**

Islamic Jurists were to look for the answers to judicial subjects first of all in the Quran or in the reported deeds and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad (*hadith*) (Elger 2002: 54). Since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, jurists in Sunni Islam were commonly not supposed to interpret the written sources in their own way but rather had to refer to older authorities for seeking answers to juridical questions (Elger 2002: 55). In this way, local juristic traditions emerged and distinct dogmatic schools (*madhab*) evolved (Elger 2002: 55):

“The beginnings of the schools of law in Islam go back to the late Umayyad period, or about the beginning of the second Islamic century, when Islamic legal thought started to develop out of the administrative and popular practice as shaped by the religious and ethnical precepts of the Qur’an and the *hadith*” (Ziadeh 2009: 389).

From a total of seven, four *madhabs* have continued to this day and are generally regarded as legitimate (Ziadeh 2009: 290). They bear the name of their founders (Elger 2002: 55):

- Abu Hanifa (died in 767): Hanafi school
- Malik ibn Anas (died in 795): Maliki school
- Ash-Shafi’i (died in 820): Shafi’i school
- Ahmad ibn Hanbal (died in 855): Hanbali school

Each dogmatic school has its own principles and methods for finding justice. The concept of ‘imitation’ is called *taqlid*. It leads to different interpretations of what is permitted by the different schools of law. Elger explains such differences using the example of the right of women to divorce: Hanafites say that women are only permitted to divorce from their husband if he is impotent and therefore cannot consummate the marriage. Malikites, on the other hand, accept other grounds such as physical and mental deficits, shortcomings in maintenance obligation, bad treatment or abandonment (Elger 2002: 55).

In Central Asia, as in the Islamic world more widely,<sup>1</sup> most people follow the Hanafi dogmatic school (Schoeberlein 2009: 98). In the context of the contemporary conflicts between ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ Islam and a more ‘scriptural’ interpretation of the Quran, it is important to stress the special position of traditions and customary law in the Hanafi madhab. It is often mentioned that compared to other schools, the Hanafis are “tolerant of pre-Islamic popular customs and rites” and legitimized some of the tribal and customary norms (Salmorbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 213). Pre-Islamic traditions were incorporated into their version of Islamic law and “Hanafi jurists often referred to custom in their ruling” (Gerholm and Mubarak 2009: 492f). In rural areas both Muslim clergy and clan councils adminis-

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1 It is estimated that around one third of the Muslims worldwide follow the Hanafi madhab (Ziadeh 2009: 392).

tered justice, and under Hanafi madhab, they could incorporate their local unwritten customary law (*'adat* or *'urf*) into Muslim jurisdiction (Elger 2002: 58). An example of Islamized traditions is the (genuinely zoroastrian) spring celebration which is connected to the visitation of the graves of ancestors and saints (*Sayyil* or *Sayyil-bayram*) (Naumkin 2005: 7). Another example is the (genuinely shamanistic) tatters at trees or “the kissing of headstones and the rubbing of graveside dust over one’s face” (Naumkin 2005: 8). Indeed, the tolerance of pre-existing popular customs and rites made Hanafism successful in Central Asia (Naumkin 2005: 7).

Maturidi, an important Central Asian jurist, was the founder of the Maturidiyah school of thought (Khalid 2007: 25). As Naumkin explains, the Maturidiyah became the form in which Hanafism turned into the dominant *madhab* in Transoxiana in the tenth century. Indeed, it was Maturidi who, “legitimized the interwovenness of Hanafi Islam with traditional clan and tribal networks which remained almost unchanged through the centuries” (Salmorbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 214). (Naumkin 2005: 7). In fact, customary law played such a significant role in Islamic law that it was eventually incorporated as a material source in the latter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a Hanafi jurist (Gerholm and Mubarak 2009: 492f).

Hanafism not only “facilitated the Islamization of pre-Islamic norms and traditions,” but it also “helped to escape tensions between the new and old systems of beliefs, thus accelerating the smooth adoption of Islam” (Naumkin 2005: 7). The possibility to continue old traditions when adapting the new religion made conversion easier for the Central Asian societies. As many authors state, this madhab is more open than others: “On the whole, the legal doctrines of Abu Hanifa evidence a liberality and a respect for personal freedom that are not that pronounced among other jurists” (Ziadeh 2009: 390).

### **2.2.3. Demarcation: Hanbali School of Law and Wahhabism**

Whereas the Maliki and the Sahfi'i schools of law are not important in the Central Asian context, the following point should be made concerning the Hanbali school and Wahhabism: what today is often regarded as the foreign influence on Islam in Central Asia and what is popularly called ‘Wahhabism’ or Salafism, is a scriptural interpretation of the Quran, which is mainly based on the Hanbali School of law. Ahmad ibn Hanbal is sometimes

considered more of a traditionalist than a jurist because he never wrote about *fiqh* (Ziadeh 2009: 395).

In the eighteenth century, the school was strengthened by “Ibn’ Abd al-Wahhab and his reform movement in Arabia, which aimed at returning Islam to its simple and pristine beginnings, depending on the Qur’an and the *sunnah* instead of later scholars” (Ziadeh 2009: 395). Abd al-Wahhab, “dismissed the long tradition of Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which had accepted a much larger range of sources as authoritative” (Khalid 2007: 45). (For the disputes between Hanbalites and Hanafites during the Abbasid caliphate see section 5.1.2.) Petitionary prayer, supplication and the visitation of shrines were regarded by Abd al-Wahhab as compromising God’s unity (*shrik*) and were seen as examples of impermissible innovation (*bid’a*) (Khalid 2007: 45).

“Even poetry in praise of the Prophet or other exalted figures, a genre that had produced some of the noblest verse in the Muslim world, was for ‘abd al-Wahhab merely a form of idolatry” (Khalid 2007: 45).

Other Muslims, mainly Shiites and Sufis, were denounced as infidels (Khalid 2007: 45). As Khalid shows, Wahhabism went on to become the state religion of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

“In 1746, the two [‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Sa’ud] together declared war (*jihād*) on all Muslims who did not share their views on Islamic purity. [...] Wahhabis were fond of destroying tombs and shrines, demolishing domes over houses and palaces, burning books other than the Qur’an, forcing people to pray communally, and policing moral conduct and personal behaviour” (Khalid 2007: 46).

As we will see in the next sections, the aversion of Wahhabi Islam towards, for example, worshipping at shrines is shared by contemporary Islamists. Because of the explicitly puritanical approach of the Wahhabis and their opposition to folk Islam in Central Asia, “the term [Wahhabism] has come into indiscriminate use to denote any and all expressions of nontraditional Islam” (Khalid 2007: 46). This means it is often used inappropriately. Already during Soviet times, “‘Wahhabite’ was employed as a general term of disqualification against all the fundamentalist currents that appeal to a

literal reading of the Quran and believe that Islam can be reformed only by returning to its origins” (Peyrouse 2007: 45). It is true that those accused of being Wahhabis often share the opinion that Islam has to be cleaned from modern accreditations (Rotar 2004b). However, those accused of being Wahhabites are often influenced neither by the teachings of Abd al-Wahhab nor the Saudis directly (Peyrouse 2007: 45). As Schoeberlein explains, Wahhabiya per se has had little impact in Central Asia (Schoeberlein 2009: 106) and the Central Asian governments use the term interchangeably with fundamentalism for “[...] virtually any Islamic orientation that they deem politically unacceptable, and they treat these terms as synonymous with ‘Islamic terrorist’ ” (Schoeberlein 2009: 105). Khalid therefore suggests using the term with circumspection (Khalid 2007: 47). I agree with Khalid and Peyrouse and it seems important to me to draw a distinction between devout Muslims wishing to follow the life of the earliest Muslims (or Salafis), and those who follow the dogmatic school of Abu Hanifa and Ibn’ Abd al-Wahhab specifically (Wahhabis).

### 2.3. SUFISM

From the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, Central Asian Hanafism absorbed elements of Islamic mysticism,<sup>2</sup> called Sufism (Salmorbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 214). Indeed, all religions know their own mystic trends, which have often influenced each other (Schimmel 1985: 339). Sufism was important for incorporating pre-Islamic rituals into Central Asian Islam and for developing syncretic characteristics. Buddhism in particular had a great impact on Sufism. The Muslim faith in Central Asia also incorporated pre-Islamic behaviours. In fact, in many cases holy places, where Christians or Hindus

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2 What is mysticism? Chittick (2009: 207) criticizes this term as being vague and implying a negative value judgment. Schimmel specifies mysticism as “[in the broadest sense] the consciousness of one reality, regardless of whether one calls this ‘wisdom’, ‘light’, ‘love’ or ‘nature’. However, such definitions remain at best signposts since the goal of a mystic, that oneness which is inexpressible, cannot be understood or explained by any normal act of perception” (Schimmel 1985: 16).

used to pray, later became Sufi holy sites, and legends about older saints were applied to the new ones (Schimmel 1985: 339).

Sufism is not bound to the Shia-Sunna split but had a tremendous impact on both in Central Asia (Schoeberlein 2009: 104); neither is it bound to a specific school of law (Johansen and Talib 2009: 207). “If *kalam* and jurisprudence depended on reason to establish categories and distinctions, the Sufis depended upon another faculty of the soul to bridge gaps and make connections” (Johansen and Talib 2009: 210). Indeed, Sufis are rather ignorant of the differences and theological debates between the dogmatic schools because they prefer to focus on the immediate gnosis (Schimmel 1985: 35), as Johansen and Talib make clear:

“In general, Sufis have looked upon themselves as Muslims who take seriously God’s call to perceive his presence in the world and the self. They generally stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction” (Johansen and Talib 2009: 207).

It therefore seems no surprise then that the most elite expression of Islamic teaching has also been produced by Sufis (Johansen and Talib 2009: 207) even though Sufism is often associated with folk Islam.

Generally, Sufism is often contrasted with ‘orthodox’ Islam represented by the *ulama*,<sup>3</sup> but in Central Asia there is no broad opposition – political or religious – between the two (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). The main difference among *ulama* and Sufis is that:

“‘*Ulama*’ aspire to receive the inspiration from Allah through the perfection of everyday Islamic rituals with emphasis on the external (*zahir*) teaching of the Holy Qur’an. The pirs evolve a spiritual praxis to construct the presence of God (*nur*) in man by focusing on the inner (*batin*) teaching of the Holy Qur’an” (Ewing and Mannan 2009: 378).

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3 See as an example: “Many ‘*ulama*’ (Islamic scholars) overtly show their antagonism to the presence, modes of teaching and scholarship of the Sufis. Among the critiques are the reformist ‘*ulama*’ of highly influential Doebandi School and its networks of madrasas (Islamic religious schools)” (Ewing and Mannan 2009: 378).

Whereas the legalistic or scholarly forms of Hanafi Islam were widespread in Central Asian cities, Sufism was more prevalent in rural areas and among tribal communities (Yemelianova 2010: 19). As I demonstrate in section 5.1, nomads were primarily Islamized by Sufi orders (Schoeberlein 2009: 99).

First of all, though, I concentrate on the distinct Sufi rituals, which are very important for folk Islam in Central Asia, after which I shed light on the importance of Central Asia as a region, from where Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) originated and went on to spread across the globe (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). Finally, I take a closer look at the political involvement of the Naqshbandiyah *tariqa* – from the side of both the ruling class and the opposition.

### 2.3.1. Sheik, Silsilah, Kanaqah and Zhikr

What distinguishes a Sufi Muslim from other Muslims? Whereas an ordinary Muslim has to pray *namaz* five times a day and visit mosque at least every Friday (as well as pay *zakat* to the poor and go to Mecca for *hajj*), the Sufi has more and different obligations or involvements. The main features of Sufi practice are (Sultanova 2007: 3):

- Hierarchy within a constant number of members of the congregation (led by *shaykh*, *pir* or *imam*)
- Line of succession (*silsilah*)
- Community meetings at a *kanaqah* or other religious places
- Performance of *dhikr* (“Remembrance of God”)

Sufis follow a master (*shaykh* or *pir*) who can trace his own masters back to the founder of a *tariqa*, or even to the Prophet Muhammad. This line of succession is called *silsilah*, as Johansen and Talib explain:

“Like other branches of Islamic learning, Sufism has been passed down from master [...] to disciple, and the chain of transmission (*silsilah*) leading back to the Prophet has been considered an important part of the master’s credentials” (Johansen and Talib 2009: 209).

Establishing lineage, therefore, is an important aspect of Sufism. Usually pirs, “claim that they inherit their spiritual power from either a pious Sufi ancestor or from their connection to the shrine of a past Sufi,” but they also attain their spiritual quality through meditation and spiritual practice (Ewing and Mannan 2009: 378). “The masters’ fundamental concern [...] is to shape the character [...] of the disciple so that it conforms to the prophetic model” (Johansen and Talib 2009: 210). The pir accepts the murid as his student in a ceremony of initiation, in which the student has to pledge a vow of fidelity and receives a blessing and the clothes of the *ṭarīqah*, which often consists of a special hat (Schimmel 1985: 331). As for the “remembrance of God”, the ritual invocation called *dhikr*, each *tariqa* has its own methods and practices for this.

The pir instructs his students individually and leads the five prayers in the *khanqah*, the Sufi centre (*tekke* in Turkish, see Johansen and Talib 2009: 234). The *kanaqah* usually consists of a mosque, living quarters for the students as well as for guests, and sometimes a *madrassa* (Islamic college). The pir lives there with his family and this is usually where one can also find a shrine of a deceased pir (Schimmel 1985: 328). Life in the *kanaqah* is organized in a strongly hierarchical way, usually based on virtue; however the hierarchy could also be utilized for the accumulation of personal power or for political purposes. The most devoted murid is designated a *khalifa*, the successor or representative of the pir, to which he is bound by the spiritual chain of teachings. He leads the *kanaqah* after the death of the pir or is sent by him to other places to preach and spread the *ṭarīqah* (Schimmel 1985: 333). Sometimes outstanding successors found their own *tariqa*.

Sufism is not easy to analyze because it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and therefore I can reach very contradictory conclusions about it (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). What I can say, though, is that the visitation of shrines, which are often dedicated to deceased Sufis, is an important part of Sufism. Many Central Asians regard “the activities associated with such holy places [...] the most prominent features of their everyday observance of Islam” (Schoeberlein 2009: 105). Furthermore, “[...] Sufi rituals consist of the recitation of prayers, poems, and selections from the Qur’an and methodical repetitions of divine names (*zikr*) or Qur’anic formulas, such as *shahadah*” (Sultanova 2007: 3). Each Sufi order has its own methods for following the spiritual path by their daily devotional exercises and activities

(Sultanova 2007: 3). As Khalid points out, the diverse attitudes of Sufi orders towards society in general goes hand in hand with different attitudes towards politics and judicial Islam in particular. So whereas, for example, the prevalent Sufi order in Central Asia, the Naqshbandiyah, does practice the dhikr silently and in a ‘sober’ manner, other orders might even place the greatest emphasis on social deviance such as “going around naked, consuming narcotics and hallucinogens, renouncing work and reproductive sexuality” (Khalid 2007: 27), though such practices are not common among Central Asian Muslims.

### **2.3.2. Naqshbandiyah**

Central Asia was “one of the key regions from which Sufism spread widely in the Islamic world” (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). Several tariqa have their origin in Central Asia. For example, Abu Sa’id ibn Abi’l-Khair, born in Khorasan in 967 AD, was the first Sufi master to establish monastic rules for his students albeit without founding a tariqa himself (Schimmel 1985: 343). Najmuddin Kubra, was another pir, born in Khiva in 1145 AD; he founded the Kubrawiyah *ṭariqah*, and became important to the Naqshbandiyah tariqa (Schimmel 1985: 364). And then there was Baha’uddin Naqshband, born in 1318 in a village near Bukhara; the founder of the most important Sufi order in Central Asia, the Naqshbandiyah.

Naqshband belonged to the Central Asian spiritual tradition of Yusuf Hamadhani, who himself was the master of Ahmad Yasawi and Abdul Khaliq Ghijduwani (Schimmel 1985: 515). They spread Hamadhanis teachings in Central Asia, and Ghijduwani gave Naqshband his spiritual induction. Naqshband was first of all active in Bukhara and became the patron saint of the city (Schimmel 1985: 515). His tariqa not only enhanced its spiritual influence but also established relationships with traders, finally became heavily politicized, and gained control of the Timurid court (Schimmel 1985: 515). Especially when the tariqa was led by Khwaja ‘Ubaidullah Ahrar (1404-90) (who had followers even in the Indian Mughal Empire), the Naqshbandiyah had a strong influence on politics (Schimmel 1985: 516). It was only during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that the order’s intellectual and organizational centre moved to India, and was led by Ghulam ‘Ali (Algar 2009: 219). Schoeberlein further attests to the importance of this Sufi order:

“The Naqshbandiyah Sufi order [...] became one of the most influential Sufi orders across the Muslim world, and Bukhara remained a spiritual center of regional importance even after the Russian conquest, as Bukhara madrasas continued to attract students and scholars from many parts of the eastern Islamic world” (Schoeberlein 2009: 100).

Even now then, the Naqshbandiyah Sufi order remains the most important Sufi order not only in Central Asia (as we will see in section 2.4) but also in the wider Islamic world.

Contrary to other orders the Naqshbandiyah does not place much value on the monastic or lonely life (Schimmel 1985: 354f). A special feature of the Naqshbandiyah is that its members do not have to leave society but can (or even should) take part in the political life. For example, it was the conviction of the Khwajas (Naqshbandi order led by Khwaja ‘Ubaidullah Ahrar) that the execution of political power is a duty since they thought that only in this way would one be able to implement the Godly law in each area of life (Schimmel 1985: 516).

The Naqshbandiyah is a pragmatic order which stresses the exoteric side of Islam more than other orders. Johansen and Talib distinguish between ‘sober’ and ‘drunken’ Sufism, and in this regard the Naqshbandiyah, would probably be classified as ‘sober Sufism’ (Johansen and Talib 2009: 213). Naqshbandis practice the quiet dhikr, and thereby distinguish themselves to a great extent from dancing or howling dervishes (which are better known in the West) (Schimmel 1985: 517). The return to the prophet and to the first period of Muslim society (salafiyah) is another feature of the Naqshbandiyah tariqa which distinguishes itself from other brotherhoods (Halbach 1989: 221).

“The leading characteristics of the Naqshbandiyah are strict adherence to the *shari’ah*, a sobriety in devotional practice that results in the shunning of music and dance and a preference for silent dhikr, and a frequent (although by no means consistent) tendency to political involvement” (Algar 2009: 222).

Although I often mention that Salafis oppose Sufism, it cannot be concluded that all Sufi orders oppose Salafi ideas as well because, as we see here, the Naqshbandiyah incorporates important Salafi features. It would be very interesting to elaborate on the connection between these two on first glance

contradictory interpretations of Islamic practice, but this would go beyond the scope of this study.

### **2.3.3. The Resistance Potential of Sufism**

Sufism played an important political role in Central Asia not only on the side of the ruling élite, but also as an opposition force at different instances in history. The order, for example, gained prestige by organizing jihad against non-Islamic expansionist regimes such as the Buddhist Oirats and Kalmuks (Halbach 1989: 220). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Sufi figures led some of the major revolts against rulers, including the resistance to Russian occupation of the North Caucasus led by Imam Shamil (1797 – 1871) and the Andijan Uprising of 1898” (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). Thereby, their strength was based on the Sufi relationship between murid and pir (Halbach 1989: 213).

Because of such events Sufism was often characterized as a ‘militant motor’ of Islamic resistance against tsarist Russia and later on against the Soviet Union (Bräker 1989: 135; Halbach 1989; Bennigsen and Broxup 1983; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985). However, Schoeberlein cautions against drawing simplistic political assessments about Sufism in general because Sufism has a multi-dimensional reality (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). He therefore criticizes Bennigsen for his conclusion regarding the strength of underground Islamic organizations during Soviet times – especially Sufi brotherhoods – as a destabilizing factor in the USSR (Schoeberlein 2009: 100). Yet it cannot be denied that on several occasions Sufism was able to increase or maintain its influence in Central Asia because it escaped state repression under tsarist and communist rule. The Yasawiyah and Naqshbandiyah, for example, became widespread in the Volga-Urals region during the tsarist repression of Islam owing to the fact that for the authorities it was more difficult to control these than the legalistic Islam prevalent in the cities (Yemelianova 2010: 19). As Yemelianova further states, under tsarist rule, Sufism “could not be easily controlled and monitored by the authorities” (Yemelianova 2010: 19). Similarly, Halbach mentions that during the Soviet Union Islam was able to survive as an ‘underground Islam’ because of the important relationship between teacher and student, which was not necessarily bound to the mufti or a mosque (Halbach 1989: 213). I assume therefore that the fact that Sufism could survive the strong Soviet repres-

sion of religion might not be so much due to the ideological foundation of the Sufi orders but rather to the organizational networks of the brotherhoods. The Soviet attempts to eradicate religion (which were based on the organizational structure of their primary target – the centralized Orthodox Church) therefore failed to a great extent to reach their goals regarding Islam. Interestingly, the personal relationships between pirs and students and the private worship of holy sites that persisted during the Soviet era still retain a greater importance than institutionalized forms of religion in Central Asia today. The flexibility and inconceivability of Sufism with regards to politics might be one reason why contemporary Central Asian regimes have not yet adopted a clear stance towards this important strand of Islam which, at certain points in history part of the elite and at others part of the opposition, has demonstrated an enduring potential to mobilize the masses.

## 2.4. FOLK ISLAM: SAINTS CULTURE AND MAZAR WORSHIPPING

If the resistance potential of the Sufi brotherhoods was as great as Bennigsen supposed during the Cold War, one had to expect that the end of the Soviet rule would see a noteworthy resurgence of Naqshbandis (Algar 2009: 222). Whatever the case may be, there are authors who state that the Naqshbandiyah not only shaped politics during the Timurid and Shaibanid empires but still enjoy a considerable influence on the region today (Sal-morbekova and Yemelianova 2010: 214; Halbach 1989: 220). Sufism is still important in Central Asia in two ways: “the intellectual appeal of Islamic mysticism has remained strong, and the sense of social cohesion provided by the Sufi organizations has been important” (Johansen and Talib 2009: 219). The indirect social power which pirs still have on society is undisputed. People who stem from an important Sufi family are called *khoja*, and still play an prominent role in religion and politics today, “regardless of their own religious activity” (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). Peyrouse argues that the *khoja* families were successful, “in maintaining their positions via a patronage system and traditions of endogamy that are still in existence today [...] even during the Soviet system [...] in which favouritism and a corporatist spirit ruled” (Peyrouse 2007: 44). These families dominated in the cultural, educational, scientific and medical domains Soviet Russia and

even the *qaziyat* were led by members of these families (Peyrouse 2007: 44).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the impact on politics in Central Asia, it is interesting to note that whereas in the past, the militant factor in Sufism was stressed, today Sufism is often regarded as a mitigating factor for Central Asian Islam. Scholars and politicians are, “supporting the notion that Sufism creates a safe buffer between Muslims of this region and the more radically oriented Islam of the Middle East” (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). However, it is wrong to presume that Sufism is a more moderate form of Islam than purist interpretations simply on the basis of its incorporation of syncretistic and ‘pre-Islamic’ rituals (Schoeberlein 2009: 104). One thing, however, is certain: the practices of Sufism and the worshipping at shrines have been controversial subjects in Islam – not only in the past but also in the contemporary Central Asian states: “They are often called ‘un-Islamic innovations’, or *bid’ah*, by those who now aspire to bring Islam in the region back to its ‘true’ roots in the tradition of Middle Eastern fundamentalist movements” (Schoeberlein 2009: 105). Among the critics of saints culture today are not only ‘Wahhabis’ and Salafis but also contemporary fundamentalists and educated modernist Muslims who consider it as superstition (Voll 2009: 220; 232). For example, during my visit to the region, I met members of the modernist Gülen movement as well as women from a private conservative praying circle who both expressed disagreement with folk religious practices in the same terms (I subsume under ‘folk Islam’ both, mazar worshipping and Sufism).

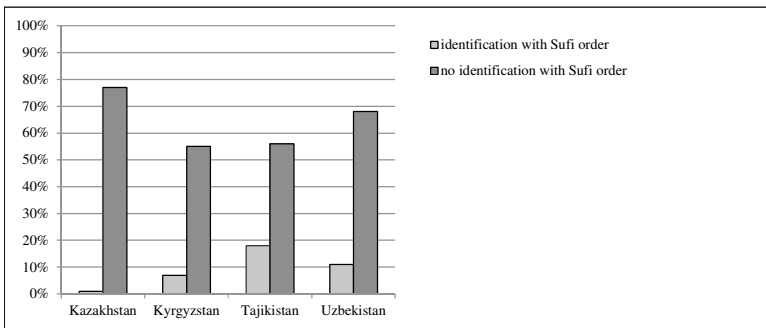
When we talk about the revival of Islam in Central Asia, we should first of all mention that after independence, folk Islam was able to regain its primary function and role in Central Asian society. Indeed, the great majority of devout Central Asian Muslims today do not belong to any of the (non-traditional) Salafi groups presented in chapter 3. The resurgence in popularity of pilgrimage sites such as the Mausoleum of Sufi leader Ahmad Yasawi in Turkestan attests to this. As Schoeberlein makes clear: “For many in Central Asia and neighboring regions, the activities associated with such holy places are the most prominent features of their everyday observance of Islam” (Schoeberlein 2009: 105). Kehl-Bodrogi, commenting

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4 Examples of such persons are: Turajonzoda (Tajikistan), Kadyrow (Uzbekistan), Yusphon Shakirov (Kyrgyzstan) (Peyrouse 2007: 44).

on the Khorezm region in Uzbekistan, reiterates this view: “[...] the most visible sign of a return to Islam in the public life is the increased popularity of local shrine pilgrimage” (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 239). In spite of this, it is difficult to ascertain how many people in Central Asia belong to the modern Sufi orders; how many are regular members (those that passed through an initiation process), and how many are mere sympathizers. The following PEW data regarding the percentage of Muslims who identify with Sufism is therefore of great interest to us – although it does not help us to distinguish between members of Sufi orders and mere sympathizers:

Figure 4: Percentages of Muslims Identifying with a Sufi Order



Source: PEW 2012

Figure 4 clearly demonstrates that notable minorities of Central Asian Muslims identify with one or another Sufi order. Furthermore, much higher percentages of Tajiks (18%) and Uzbeks (11%) identify with Sufi orders when compared with Kyrgyzs (7%) and Kazakhs (1%). The majority of Tajiks are thereby related to Naqshbandiyah (16%), a minority to Khwajagan (a Shiite branch of the Naqshbandiyah) (PEW 2012: 114; 129). Many of the interviewees do not name a specific order but some Kyrgyzs say they identify with the Kubrawiya branch of Naqshbandiya and some Uzbeks and Kazakhs identify with the Yasawiya order (PEW 2012: 129).

In contrast to clearly defined Sufism, which has a strong hierarchical organization, in Central Asia the term ‘folk Islam’ refers to the incorporation of pre-Islamic behaviours into the Muslim faith in a popular form. Besides places connected to saints, in Central Asian folk Islam every cemetery and natural phenomenon can become a *mazar*; “a sacred place where people

worship, pray and conduct different religious rituals” (Toktogulova 2007: 509). Such places often played already an important spiritual role in the pre-Islamic Shamanism that was prevalent in the region. There are two types of mazars in Kyrgyzstan (Aitpaeva 2007: 16):

- *natural mazars*: springs, mountains, forests, pits, stones, trees, lakes and so on.
- *mazars created by humans*: mausoleums of great people, ancient buildings, graves of people killed innocently.

Since independence mazar-worshipping has witnessed a real revival. According to the Aigine Research Institute in Kyrgyzstan, the growing religious consciousness of the population since independence can be seen at mazars, which are being visited and worshipped with increasing frequency (Aitpaeva 2007: 16). Baktykan, the *shaykh* who guards the holy site at Baytik Baatir’s graveyard near Bishkek, explained that during the last decade increasing numbers of visitors came to this *mazar* (interview with Baktykan). The place was abandoned during Soviet times because at that time pilgrims were imprisoned or killed (interview with Baktykan).

*Image 1: Mosque at Baytik Baatir Mazar*



Source: Lisa Harand

*Image 2: Gravestone of Baytik Baatir's Friend*



Source: Lisa Harand

*Image 3: Shaykh at Baytik Baatir Mazar*



Source: Lisa Harand

Today, Central Asians visit holy shrines for many purposes as Kehl-Bodrogi once again elaborates:

“Khorezmians share the belief common among many Muslims that saints are characterised by their closeness to God which enables them to serve as intermediaries in people’s relation to God and to communicate His grace to the ordinary faithful” (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 240).

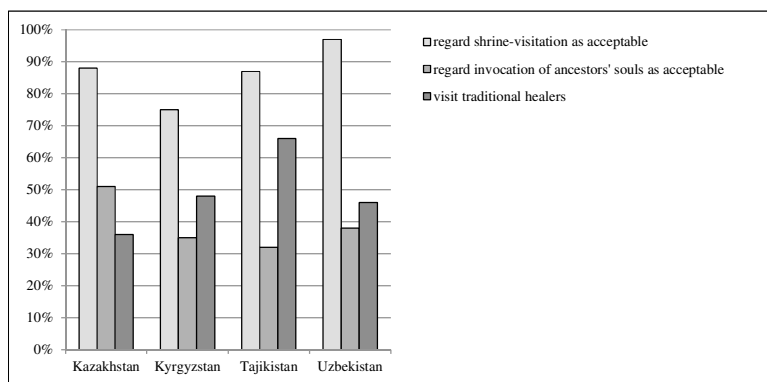
Among the visitors at Baytik Baatir’s mausoleum are those who have physical diseases or women who cannot become pregnant. They tell their problems to the *shaykh* and afterwards receive instructions from her. Often she discovers how to cure people in her dreams. The

shaykh’s assistant explained to me that she has recently cured several women of epilepsy.

Religious practices at shrines are usually handed down from generation to generation (Louw 2007: 54). People visiting the small mosque of Baytik Baatir, built during his lifetime, start by bowing down three times in front of the steps which lead up to the building. After this they pray first in front of the building, then at his burial ground and finally at the graveyard of one of his closest friends. There is also a big stone with Arabic inscriptions on which believers stand and make a wish. The touching of a horseshoe in the same place is said to help one’s wishes come true.

Apart from visitations of shrines, the invocation of ancestors’ souls in order to pray for something is an important feature of Central Asian folk Islam. The graph below depicts the percentages of those who find such practices acceptable according to the Islamic faith. Furthermore, as traditional healing is closely interwoven with religious practices (as the aforementioned examples of Baktykan’s spiritual healing power demonstrate), the percentage of Central Asian Muslims who visit traditional healers is also shown.

Figure 5: Percentage of Muslims Supporting Folk Islam



Source: PEW 2012

Whereas the vast majority of Muslims in all countries regard shrine-visitation as acceptable under Islam, the percentages of those who inter-

pret the invocation of ancestors' souls as acceptable is a great deal smaller to the extent that it is a view shared by a majority (marginally over 50% of respondents) only in Kazakhstan. The reason why traditional healers are much more visited in Tajikistan than in the other countries could lie in the country's poor health services. However, this assumption cannot be proven with these data.

In summary, it can be said that, according to the PEW data, the majority of Central Asian Muslims deem traditional forms of practising Islam as acceptable. There are more adherents to folk Islam, which is understood to mean mazar-worshipping in general, as opposed to concrete memberships in Sufi orders, although Sufism plays an important role in Central Asian Islam, even today.

However, not everyone in Central Asia believes in such stories as mentioned by Baktykan or has respect for the practices contributing to them. Although it is popular, shrine culture has many critics even today. Among them are Salafis in particular but also educated modern Muslims who consider it a superstition to visit the shrines of dead people or natural phenomena (Voll 2009: 220, 232). Indeed, despite the omnipresence of sacred sites in Kyrgyzstan, such people deny their existence or describe them either as superstition or something so uncommon that it might only be prevalent in some very isolated part of the country (interview with a sympathizer of the Gülen movement; interview with the teacher of a private religious class). For them, praying at stones, springs and mountains, even if the prayers are directed to Allah, is especially sinful, because it disrespects God's oneness.