

FEMALE RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS OF ISLAM IN TAJIKISTAN

SUMMARY

This paper analyses the issue of the place of the female informal religious practitioners termed *bibi otun/bibi khalifa*¹ within the social landscape of Tajikistan. These women play the role of spiritual leaders primarily among the female part of the traditionally sedentary population of Central Asia.² *Otuns* deal with a variety of issues related to spiritual life, teaching children and women religion, and performing rituals and prayers for the female part of the community. They are trained in Arabic as well as Islamic texts. Sometimes *otuns*, apart from religious activities, assist women in various social matters. In spite of the widespread opinion about the subordinate role of women in Central Asia, *otuns* have a high social status as religious authorities, and their informal influences often go beyond just the women's domain. Dynamic and continual changes within the social and political life in Tajikistan have also left their mark on the place and role of these religious practitioners.

¹ For the reason that terminology used in this paper originated from Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, and Arabic languages, I applied the simplified transliteration into the Latin alphabet; for the Russian words, I used transliteration created for the passport system of 2013 with some modification such as the Russian: 'и' is written 'c' not 'ts'; also the names of authors which were transferred from the Cyrillic alphabet into the Latin alphabet in the papers and books, to which I referred, I left in the original version.

² This refers to the traditionally sedentary population of Central Asia, meaning those groups which led a sedentary way of life before the Communist Revolution (Tajiks and those Uzbeks who are no longer identified on the basis of former tribal divisions [to differentiate from Uzbeks who have preserved a tribal system]).

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the function of the female religious figures termed *bibi otun*³ in Tajik society. Despite the common view that the participation of women in the lives of these communities is minor, female religious authorities are important social actors. Due to the special status of spiritual and religious leaders in Tajik society, female spiritual authorities enjoy a prestigious position among the people and they wield considerable influence among the female part of the community. Their activities are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of communal life through performing life-cycle rituals and celebrations. Dynamic and continual changes within the social and political life in Tajikistan have also impacted the place and role held by these religious practitioners.

The main purpose of this paper is to present the various aspects related to the role of female religious professionals. It also analyses various theoretical issues regarding the origin and history of *otuns*, and the contemporary changes within Islam in Tajikistan.

The idea for a project regarding female religious authorities in Central Asia was developed over several years of conducting my academic research and working for the NGO sector in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. During this time, I had the opportunity to participate in religious education classes for women, various rituals, as well as to meet with female religious authorities. Altogether, the collected material resulted in a research project entitled: ‘The social role of women religious authorities in Central Asia in Fergana Valley (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan)’, which is being presently conducted in the city of Khujand and its surroundings, as well as partly in Isfara district, in Tajikistan.⁴

Since research is still underway, only some preliminary findings have been presented in this article. The research methodology is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews. Due to the specific nature of this study, many meetings were of an informal character, hence they differ from the standard form of interviews. Additionally, ethnographic material has been collected from a variety of rituals which I was able to observe. Due to the increasing tension and pressure surrounding religious issues in Tajikistan, the real names of the people with whom I conducted the interviews, as well as the exact location of the research, have not been disclosed.

³ In Farsi/Tajiki, *bibi* means grandmother/aunt/Mrs; the term is used in relation to respectable persons. Other forms include *bibi khalifa/halfa/holpa*, *oy (u) bibi mullo, otyncha*, etc.

⁴ The project is funded by the National Science Centre within the framework of the post-doctoral fellowship ‘Fuga 2’, decision number EC-2013/08/S/HS1/00205.

ISLAMIC LEADERS IN CENTRAL ASIA

First of all, in order to provide a satisfactory answer about the role of female religious leaders, the place of religious authorities in the traditionally sedentary population of Central Asia should be identified in relation to their function within the sphere of the state as well as in daily practices and traditions. Prior to the Communist Revolution, the authority of religious leaders in Central Asia was very strong on each social level, and the leaders were divided according to a specific hierarchy. The categorization of the official clergy⁵ included the high-ranked *ulama* (well-educated theologians), such as lawyers (*qadi*) and teachers (*mudarris*) in well-known *madrasas*, *muftis*, *imams*, etc. Among religious professionals of lesser importance one could list ordinary *mullas*, *sufi* (*sufis*, *muezzins*), and other clerics serving in small mosques, performing different duties connected with religious services. There were also the *ishans* (Tajik/Persian: they), spiritual leaders, and their followers who belonged to various Sufi brotherhoods and who functioned in various religious centers and mosques. Despite their different functions, religious professionals were granted a high level of prestige in society since their activities were legitimized by Islamic law originating in the Quran and the *Sunna*, i.e. indisputable sources of knowledge for every Muslim. Sufi leaders were especially considered to have a direct connection with God through performing various spiritual practices, many of which originated from the pre-Islamic period. Furthermore, there were 'spiritual professionals' who were believed to have possessed the gift of special powers that are not even available to many well-educated *ulama*. Because of their supernatural abilities, they enjoy great respect, irrespective of their age, gender or family origin. This group includes shamans, healers, and clairvoyants.

It should be noted that while formulating the principles of the *Hanafi school* (8th–9th CE) in Central Asia – the dominant school of Islamic law in the region, the state system was developed by adapting elements of *sharia* and pre-Islamic customs. In many cases, Islamic theologians sought legitimization for incorporating local practices into Islamic law absorbing various elements originating from Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Shamanism, as well as Shia Islam.

⁵ In Sunni Islam, there is no official hierarchy among various spiritual and religious practitioners so the word 'clergy' is not entirely accurate. In Arabic, the word *rijal ad-din* is used to describe a group of Islamic religious professionals. In Shi'a Islam, the clergy is described by the term *ruhoniyyat* (Persian: *ruhāniyyat*).

ORIGIN OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

The practice of separation into male and female worlds originated in the pre-Islamic period and was adapted by Islam in the first stage of its development. As a result, this developed into specific institutions and rituals in many parts of the Islamic world. It also caused the need to create a separate education system for women. In the case of the sedentary population of Central Asia, this separation applies to almost all aspects of life, including the way of constructing houses, which were traditionally divided into a family part [only for women and children (*Ichkari*)], and a front space open to guests [men (*Tashkari*)]. In most cases, women are also excluded from public life and formal decision-making in a community. Moreover, customary law prevents women from attending the mosque; they are allowed to pray at home. In consequence, women have created a separate world with their own traditions and rules, including religious institutions, rituals and practices (Sultanova 2011, pp. 122–125).⁶

It remains unresolved when exactly women began to play the role of religious authorities for the female part of the Muslim community in Central Asia. Many sources confirm that women have played the role of religious leaders since the beginnings of Islam. Narratives regarding religious matters and hadiths were transmitted by women from the family of Prophet Muhammad as well as by his female associates. The first full version of the Quran was given for safe-keeping to Caliph Umar's daughter – Hafsa bint 'Umar. Until the sixteenth century, in various parts of the Islamic world, a considerable number of female religious authorities dealt with the interpretation and transmission of hadiths, issuing *fatwas* and teaching. Women who have passed hadiths are termed *Muhaddithat*; many of them have been authorized to issue *ijazahs* (Persian: *ejāze*), (a type of certificate confirming that the person concerned is entitled to transmit certain elements of theological knowledge) (Nadwi 2013, p. 16, 18–34, 58–108, 271–272; Sayeed 2011, pp. 97–101). Accordingly, in Khorasan and Transoxania, there were many women involved in the study of hadiths and teaching (Nadwi 2013, pp. 271–272).

⁶ The Central Asian tradition of women not being able to enter a mosque is controversial from the point of view of classical Islamic thought and the Quran; however, it is customarily legitimized by some Islamic scholars. Currently, the custom has provoked vivid discussions and much controversy, not only in Tajikistan but also in the other countries of the region, and worldwide. In 2004, the Tajik Council of Ulama issued a *fatwa* prohibiting women from attending mosque, saying that there is a lack of space for men and women to pray separately, but some argued it was due to government concern that women would participate in banned Islamic groups, such as *Hizb at-Tahrir*.

Various verses of the Quran suggest that both women and men should acquire theological knowledge. Some classical scholars believe that the Holy Book encourages the study of secular subjects, such as astronomy, medicine, biology, literature, and the arts. These could be studied by selected members of a community (irrespective of gender) for the mutual benefit of all and is considered a communal obligation (*fard kifaya*), (Sayeed 2011, p. 95).

Due to gender separation, in many parts of the Islamic world, women developed their own religious institutions. Within the *Hanafi* school, female religious figures have operated in Turkey and Bulgaria (*khojas* or *khocas*), in Bosnian (*bula*) (Peshkova 2009, p. 10, see Kijewska 2012); as well as among the Chinese Muslims of the Hui minority, and amidst the Tatars in Russia. In China, there are separate mosques only for women (*qingzhen nusi*), where female religious authorities – *ahong*⁷ – lead prayers, teach religion, and provide a variety of services to women. With a history of over two hundred years, *qingzhen nusi* are unique within Islam around the world in terms of their autonomy from men's mosques (see Jingjun 2001). Among the Tatars in Russia, there are women spiritual figures – *abystai* – mostly older women who possess a sound knowledge of traditions, customs, rituals, while also teaching religion to women and children. These women are held in high esteem by their communities (see Micinski 2012). One of the most famous *abystais* was Mukhlisa Bubi, a teacher, religious authority and social activist. A few years after the revolution, she served as *qadi* (judge) in the Central Spiritual Muslim Board, which is exceptional in the Islamic world (Makhmutova 2005, pp. 156–171).

Women have also functioned as Sufi leaders, because *baraka* (blessing) can be passed equally to both sons and daughters. Since Sufi knowledge is considered to be based more on spiritual experience rather than on dogmatically-shaped rules, even if women were excluded from formal scholarship centers, they have still been able to conduct religious rituals for women (Kalmbach 2012, pp. 10, 16).

Sultanova indicates that women have always actively participated in Sufi movements in Central Asia, which is also associated with the tradition of storytelling, poetry and educational narratives performed in the courts of rulers of the past (2011: 43–59). Women were involved in the Sufi sisterhood, performing various rituals (see Troickaia 1928). There are a number of *mazars* around Central Asia where women 'saints' are buried. These places have become the destinations for women's pilgrimages.

⁷ *Ahong* is a term of Persian origin (*ākhund*) used among Muslims in China to describe women and men who are religious professionals operating within the mosque-network (Jingjun 2001, p. 118).

Kramer points out that in the past well-educated women with poetic skills were called *atun*, and the first famous poetess was Haiat-atum (*Bibi-ātum*) at the court of the Uzbek Khan Ubajd Allah. Later, in the nineteenth century, *otuns* were known for their activities related to the education of girls (schools of *ātum-bibi*). These *otuns* were often the daughters or wives of religious authorities, people from significant families. In their schools, the curriculum was similar to the program implemented in *maktabs* for boys. The traditional system of Islamic education which included separate schools for girls was strongly criticized by the Tsarist administration and by the *Jaddids* (reformers)⁸ as it was considered to be backward and not responding to the needs of the modern world (Kramer 2006, pp. 321–322). Despite doubts about the level of teaching, *otuns* were important sources of knowledge regarding *adab*⁹ for girls. Religious education was essential from the point of view of learning religious, social and ethical norms which constituted the basis of a good upbringing. It was of great importance for a woman's future marriage, the skills she needed in order to raise her children, and for her overall culture. To some extent, the situation has remained the same to this day. In the aftermath of the Communist revolution, the schools of the *atun-bibi* were closed and the activity of *otuns* banned; nevertheless, as in the case of the other religious authorities, they were still active among the population. It should, however, be remembered that the primary target of religious persecution were the official clergy, while the *otun* – whose status was unofficial – were only to a certain degree exposed to the control of the authorities (Peshkova 2009, p. 11).

Kandyoti and Azimova indicate that some of the *otuns* were the daughters of party representatives, who at the same time belonged to the families of religious authorities (2004: 331). For instance, in the village of M., not far from Khujand, where there is a famous *mazar* guarded by a big social group of *ishons* who claim to be the descendants of the saint buried there, the religious leaders (including *otuns*) were active religiously throughout the whole Soviet period since they were under the protection of those members of the group who held high-level posts in the Kolkhoz hierarchy and the Party (Cieślewska 2014, p. 14).¹⁰

Otuns played an important role in preserving Islamic tradition during communism. While men were more frequently involved in work outside

⁸ The *Jaddids* were Muslim reformers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Russian Tsarist Empire.

⁹ The Arabic term *adab* signifies a habit, hereditary norm of conduct, or a custom derived from one's ancestors and other respected people who passed it on as a model of behavior (Gabrieli 1986, pp. 175–176).

¹⁰ This information is based on the ethnographic material I gathered in 2012, not far from Khujand City.

the community and were exposed to external influences including atheization, women tended to stay at home. Hence, they led a more traditional way of life, practicing the old customs and passing this knowledge on to children. Most of the female-related religious activities were conducted by *otuns*, who were an important channel of religious knowledge and practice for the local population (see Peshkova 2009, p. 12, Kandyoti and Azimova 2004, p. 331).

FEMALE RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALS IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

Today, *otuns* still deal with religious matters and rituals, and they also teach religion to children and women. *Otuns* perform prayers and rituals for women during different community celebrations, such as *hayit* in the months of Ramadan and Muharram, *mavlud* (the birth day of Prophet Muhammad),¹¹ weddings, funerals, etc. Frequently, *otuns* duplicate the prayers carried out by the *mulla* in mosques or by men at home; but they do not lead prayers like an *imam* – standing in front of the faithful, but rather they pray together with all the women in the first row. Sometimes, they also lead pilgrimages to *mazars*.¹² Furthermore, they perform rituals, specifically for the development of women’s spiritual life (such as *Mushkil-kushod*,¹³ *Bibi-seshanbe*,¹⁴ etc.) or even provide different

¹¹ Traditionally in Islam, *mavlud* is a ritual commemorating the birth of Prophet Muhammad, and it should be performed during the Twelfth Day of *Rabi al Awwal* in the lunar calendar. Among the women of Fergana Valley, however, it is one of the largest and most important of the all-female religious rituals, and it is carried out here throughout four successive months during different occasions, (Kandyoti and Azimova 2004, pp. 339–340). Nowadays in Tajikistan, such a way of performing *mavlud* has come under harsh criticism from orthodox Muslims.

¹² For instance, during Ramadan, every evening, a night prayer (Arabic: *tarawih*) takes place in mosques for men, sometimes also, women gather at home where they are led in prayer by a *bibi otun*.

¹³ (Tajik: *Bibi Mushkil-kushod*, Persian: *Bibi Moshkel-goshā*, English: *Lady of Solution*, literally – opening a problem). *Mushkil-kushod* is a very popular ritual among women in Central Asia performed to ensure the fulfillment of someone’s wishes, to find a solution to their problems or just ‘to clean the path’ – to make life happier. It is organized exclusively for women, mostly on Wednesdays, and it is conducted by an *otun*. The ritual is based on the old legend about *Bibi Mushkil-kushod* who helped a poor woodcutter to become wealthy, and involves reading the Quran, prayers, and other rituals.

¹⁴ (Persian-Tajik: *Bibi Seshanbe/Bibi Seshanba*, English: *Lady Tuesday*). This is also a ritual exclusively for women conducted by an *otun* and performed on Tuesdays. The ritual is based on the legend about *Bibi Seshanbe*, and involves reading the Quran, prayers, and other rituals,

forms of healing. In some cases, *otuns* begin practicing as a result of a spiritual vocation which is preceded by illness or a series of visions. Some of them are trained in the Arabic language and possess a sound knowledge of Islamic texts (Kramer 2006, pp. 321–322, Kandyoti and Azimova 2004, pp. 333–335, Gorshunova 2006, pp. 258–261, Peshkova 2009, p. 8).

Sultanova defines the conditions which should be fulfilled for a person to become an *otun*, and these are: a good family origin (preferably with a religious background), required knowledge of religion and tradition, musical/poetic talent, good communication skills, a pleasant appearance, natural charm, kindness. Female leaders should also be trained by an older *otun* (2011: 127). I would also add to this list: high moral standards, honesty, a wide knowledge of different topics (not only associated with religion). An *otun* should treat her profession as a service to the community, so accepting expensive gifts or demanding substantial rewards are not acceptable behavior. She is also expected to have a harmonious and stable family life. *Otuns* should be not involved in gossip, disputes and quarrels. Due to better access to religious knowledge and education, nowadays some women who become *otuns* do not have the appropriate religious family background; yet, with time, after reaching a certain level of knowledge, they can also perform rituals and teach people. However, the status of those who come from *said/khoja* families is considerably higher. Nevertheless, some women who gain religious knowledge through taking different courses or in *madrasas* reject the traditional rituals and practices, such as the importance of ancestry or traditional ways of passing knowledge on from teacher (*ustod*) to student (*shogird*) finalized by the traditional *fotiha* blessing during the *ustod talbon* ritual (Cieślewska 2014, p. 15).¹⁵

It is difficult to make any generalizations regarding the influence of female religious leaders since it varies from community to community, as well as differing between rural and urban areas. Certainly, since gender division is applied in almost all aspects of life, it contributes to creating a homogenous women's world with its own traditions and rules, which consequently shape the life of the community. *Otuns* function within the sphere of daily practices and traditions dealing with spiritual knowledge that links them with God. Because of this special 'access to the spiritual world', they enjoy respect similarly to male religious leaders;

as well as consuming special dishes including *omoch* (a kind of noodles that cannot be eaten by men). Sometimes, in ethnography, the ritual is named 'the Central Asian version of Cinderella'. The main goal of performing this ritual is to provide a blessing for family matters, such as marriage, pregnancy, etc., or to give thanks for wishes fulfilled.

¹⁵ From that moment onwards, a *shogird* may act as an independent *otun*.

however, their status (with some exceptions) is lower since, in general, *imams* possess more religious knowledge and a better Islamic education.

Gorshunova points out that *otuns* have always received less remuneration for their services. *Imams* make a living from a fraction of the donations given by people to the mosque, while *otuns* derive their income from various gifts they receive from women (2006: 256). In the pre-revolution period, Nalivkin and Nalivkina gave an account that *otuns* were paid two times less than *mul-las* for teaching children (1886: 57). According to my own observations, at present in Tajikistan, remuneration of *otuns* depends on many factors, such as their popularity, level of authority, place of living (rural-urban area), and – finally – the *otun*'s personal preferences. In Khujand, some *otuns* are said to demand even up to 100–150 USD and expensive gifts for attending a single celebration, while others are satisfied with much more modest remuneration or work without payment. In fact, women who request a lot of money do not win the respect of the people; they are frequently treated more like artistic performers than religious figures. This is especially the case for some *otuns* with beautiful voices, who perform different types of poems during rituals. My interlocutors, including *otuns*, strongly criticize such conduct, which in their opinion is 'unworthy of religious authorities.' There are also accounts about female teachers who have requested high payment for their teaching which is also not well received, since passing on religious knowledge should be provided free of charge or remuneration should be discretionary.¹⁶

With regards to the role of *otuns*, Keller (2001) believes that religious leaders – both men and women – functioned as mediators and counselors in pre-revolutionary Central Asia. This opinion is confirmed by Peshkova who conducted research in the Uzbek part of Fergana Valley at the beginning of the millennium. According to Peshkova: 'Otincharlar [otuns] lead communities in three areas: teaching, religious practice and socio-religious advice.' They give consultations based on interpretations of Islam and regarding different social and family matters, therefore contributing to shaping a community's understanding of moral standards and ethical behavior (2009: 12). Sultanova identifies the role of *otuns* in a similar way: as a person who performs religious activities, conducts ceremonies, teaches and shapes future generations, and acts as a social authority (as a leader of the female community) (2011: 129).

The findings of my preliminary research in 2010, 2012 and 2013 confirmed that by virtue of the fact that *otuns* are religious authorities and hold a high position in their communities, they can also act as social and religious leaders.

¹⁶ Information gathered during research conducted in 2014.

My current study, however, shows that the situation is much more complex. At present, in Tajikistan, the role of *otuns* is shaped by the policy of the state, as well as by various religious circles which are attempting to gain control over the faith and religious leaders. Prior to the research conducted in 2014, I had incomplete knowledge of the extent to which such politics influence the communities, and particularly female religious professionals.

Particularly, the ban on religious education in places other than officially registered religious schools has impacted the activities of many religious professionals, including *otuns*. According to the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on ‘Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations’ (Russian: *Zakon Respubliki Tadzshikistan. O Svobode Sovesti i Religioznykh Obedineniakh*), parents are allowed to teach their own children religion at home, but organizing religious classes for groups is forbidden. Religious professionals who wish to teach religion should pass an exam which entitles them to receive a license. After this law was introduced, other legal measures were adapted which further limit religious life, particularly targeting the religious education of children. These include ‘Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children’ and an amendment to the Criminal Code against organizers of ‘extremist religious’ education. The Parental Responsibility Law bans the encouragement of children to receive education in illegal schools and educational institutions, as well as from individual persons who do not have permission for such activity. People under the age of 18 are not allowed to participate in religious activities, including a limitation on attending mosque. Parents are obliged not to send their children abroad for the purpose of getting an education without the permission of state agencies. In August 2010, President Rahmon requested students return from foreign Islamic colleges, to prevent them being trained as ‘extremists and terrorists.’ In this way, the authorities banned Tajik citizens from obtaining a religious education in foreign countries. Nevertheless, some have continued education in various Islamic centers abroad, traveling there through Russia, but in most cases they have little chance to find employment in the official, religious institutions in Tajikistan after coming home (Corley 2011; Roche 2013, p. 33).

In July 2014, in Sughd region, not even a single *madrasa* was opened.¹⁷ An interview with an official from the Department of Religious Affairs in Hukumat of Sughd region revealed that all of them failed to fulfill the formal requirements for a license. There are plans to re-open a *madrasa* in Khujand.

¹⁷ In the whole country, the authorities have only allowed one *madrasa* in Tursunzade, near Dushanbe, to be opened.

Currently, the Ministry of Education, the Committee for Religious Affairs,¹⁸ together with representatives of religious leaders are developing the curriculum for religious education. Apart from religious subjects, also other courses are planned, to provide a comprehensive education. The congregational mosques (Friday mosques) have the right to organize ‘educational groups’, but according to the same official, most *imams* do not show any initiative in this area, since the organization of such a group requires the completion of many formalities. The local *imams* have little desire to do so since they derive income from different forms of activities, such as conducting various rituals during communal ceremonies (weddings, funerals, circumcisions, and the like), and maintaining a religious school is only an additional and unnecessary burden.^{19, 20}

As a result of the imposed restrictions, most teachers of religion (including *otuns*) have ceased to teach people or they have continued their activities informally.²¹ There are reports of secret police raids on religious classes set up at private houses, with searches for illegal literature, and other forms of intimidation and repression of religious activities (Mamurzoda 2011; USCIRF 2011).²²

Until June 20, 2014, the regional office of The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) in Khujand, located next to the premises of the Nuri Islam Mosque, was the only official place in the whole Sughd region which provided knowledge regarding Islamic issues. There were gatherings for women on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during which various matters relating to Islam and also state legislation and policies were discussed. Unfortunately, in the middle of June, the authorities closed the IRP office, after which the building was

¹⁸ The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), *Kumitai Umuri Dini Tojikiston* (*Kumitai Dini*) established in 2010, it operates in all region of Tajikistan. The *Shuroi Oliy Ulamoi Tojikiston* (The High Council of Ulama, [*Shuroi Ulamoi*]) operates within CRA.

¹⁹ The state administration established a salary for *imams* who work in the Friday mosques (160–400 USD), depending on the position and the mosque. In June 2014, I was told that it was being paid out irregularly to the *imams*.

²⁰ Information confirmed later by the local representative of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

²¹ Information obtained in the years 2012 – 2014, in different places throughout the country.

²² In May 2010, the Tajik Ministry of Interior launched ‘Operation *Madrasa*’, targeted at individuals teaching Islam to children and youth without official licenses. In 2010, while conducting my research, I had the opportunity to attend informal religious classes for women. The first time, after being introduced by a friend, the *bibi otun* asked me to show documents to prove that I am a foreigner. ‘No problem,’ I answered, ‘I can show my passport.’ Finally, I was told there was no need to show my documents. The woman explained that they had been convinced that I was a Tajik from a different region and that I worked for the secret service (KGB) and would monitor them; the participants stated that representatives of the state had visited them a few times in order to search for incriminating literature, and also to force them to cease their activities. In 2014, I visited the same region, and the situation has deteriorated since 2010.

totally destroyed. Negotiations between the party members and local authorities have not brought any positive results (Ferghana News Agency 2014).

At present, there is no officially registered place which offers Islamic education in the territory of the Sughd region. As a consequence, religious people, especially the young, are exposed to different influences, including those of an illegal/extremist character. The state officials express a lot of concern over the growing threat of militant Islam, but in reality they do not address the issue in a constructive way. Most of their actions aim at undermining the political opposition represented by the IRP or other potential opponents that attempt to express dissatisfaction with the existing order.

The persons employed in the official institutions, and responsible for religious affairs are little known religious figures, while others (such as members of the IRP, and popular religious leaders) have been repressed by the state authorities (Epkenhans 2011 quoted within Roche 2013, p. 28). During my research, a number of my interlocutors confirmed that presently there is no significant religious figure employed in the official religious institutions in Tajikistan. The respected independent-minded religious leaders have been marginalized and removed from their posts.

A lack of good teachers and religious authorities has resulted in difficulties in designing adequate religious policies. Consequently, modern Islamic thought which could serve as a counterbalance to the radical Islamic approach has not managed to develop. The state administration have promoted ‘modernized traditional Islam’, ‘the correct understanding of Islam’, ‘the right interpretation of *hadiths* and *Sunna*’²³, but have failed to formulate a satisfactory concept of what this means. The general aim is to protect Tajik Islamic tradition but at the same time to change those elements which are considered to be pagan and pre-Islamic. These ‘non-Islamic elements’, however, are the distinctive characteristics of ‘traditional Islam’; their modification is a compromise between the idea of the purification of religion and Tajik tradition. The IRP also attempts to promote ‘the correct understanding of Islam.’²⁴ Most Party representatives or supporters with whom I conducted interviews support the idea of the purging of unorthodox elements from the religion. Pilgrimages to *mazars*, the traditional, central-Asian rituals associated with the life cycle, and even the Tajik female costume are being strongly criticized.

²³ Quotations from interviews with state officials (June 2014).

²⁴ Oddly enough, during the interviews with the state officials and the IRP representatives and supporters, my interlocutors often used the same phrase in Russian: (Pravilnoe ponimanie islama) – ‘the correct understanding of Islam’; nevertheless, both parties have different views concerning whose approach to Islam is ‘correct.’

Besides, such rituals as *Bibi Mushkil-kushod*, *Bibi Seshanbe* are being forbidden as *bida* (innovation) and even *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism). Despite the fact that some members of the Party come from the Sufi tradition, Sufism is also being questioned. Consequently, the traditional *otuns* are frequently shown in a negative light, and the participation of women in the rituals which the *otuns* conduct is being condemned. However, there are some modern female religious teachers, and despite their reluctance towards the social institution of *otuns*, frequently, they have replicated this pattern of a social female authority, although in a modified way.

Currently, in Tajikistan, religion and faith have become the focal point of an ideological battle between the government and the IRP or its supporters. It seems that people of faith and their beliefs are less important than the political struggle which is taking place in Tajikistan.

At this stage, Islam in Tajikistan is in a constant process of in-flux, influenced by various factors which are the by-product of the civil war and the collapse of the USSR. For the first time in history, the Muslims of Tajikistan have been cut off from the traditional centers of Islamic thought in Central Asia, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and other cities located now in Uzbekistan. During the times of the Soviet Union, despite the state's hostile attitude to religion, Islamic thoughts and ideas flowed freely across the flexible borders of the republics. The political division of the region in the early 1990s and the policy of isolation of the new state, have contributed to the separation of Muslim communities. Consequently, Islam in Tajikistan has lost its ideological base to which it could have referred in the process of building its modern identity. Other relatively new ideologies have not become well established yet.

With regard to Islamic education, many people believe that the present situation resembles the persecution of Islam during the Soviet Union. Even if the above opinion is overstated, similarly as during the Soviet era, Islamic education has been once again pushed underground. In the 1930s, as a response to the policies of the Soviet state, chains of *hujra* (literally: room) were developed which provided Islamic teaching throughout the whole Soviet period. Underground schools educated students in different regions of Central Asia. The official *madrasas* led by SADUM had a low level of education (Muminov et al. 2010, pp. 224–250). It remains an open question whether the religious leaders will continue the 'Soviet tradition' of *hujra* under the current circumstances in Tajikistan.

It should be noted that despite similarities in the main principles of the religious policies in contemporary Tajikistan and in the Soviet Union, the ideological basis is different. At present, the authorities declare themselves to be

Muslims, ostensibly acting to eradicate foreign ‘dangerous’ elements from Islam in Tajikistan. Some citizens support this approach, feeling concern about the spreading of radical Islam, and consequently about the threat of an ‘Islamic state’ being established. The reports from Afghanistan, Islamic State and other parts of the world seem to confirm this dangerous scenario, and the illegal activities of groups such as *Hizb at-Tahrir* or *Jamaat at-Tabligh* only reinforce this belief.

In reality, however, the state is attempting to establish a mechanism of close supervision of religious life through developing various means of control at every administrative and social level. Apart from Departments of Religious Affairs and branches of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in districts and cities, the religion itself and Muslims are being investigated by representatives of local administration (*jamoat*) and *mahallas*. Sometimes, there are female committees within these structures, but most of them do not play a significant role. Nevertheless, authorities attempt to use them to control *otuns* under the pretense of ‘protection against Islamic extremism.’ *Jamoat* authorities have established lists of *otuns*. Accordingly, women are called to attend gatherings in *jamoat*, where they are asked for their cooperation, especially regarding family affairs and “On Re-ordering Traditions, Celebrations and Customs in the Republic of Tajikistan”, aimed at regulating the rules for the organization of and expenditures for weddings and other ceremonies (Law [2007/2008]). Officially, *otuns* are expected to talk to women during rituals and celebrations about limiting expenses and the number of guests invited, as well as to mediate in family matters. At the same time, however, they should closely observe their communities; those who refuse cooperation with the authorities are deprecated. To what extent such policies bring benefits depends on various factors related to the power relationships within a community, the position of a specific *otun*, and also the region of the country.

In 2011, the *hukumat* of Khujand City (municipality) established the Council of Bibi Otuns (*Shuroi Bibi Otunho*). According to an official from the Religious Affairs Department in the *hukumat* of Khujand, ‘the main goal of shuro is to conduct agitation and propaganda work among the particular groups of citizens (including *otuns*) to lead state policies onto the right path by introducing the correct understanding of Islam among women.’²⁵ Presently, the *shuro* consists of about fifty-three *otuns*. Women are asked to join by their *mahalla* administration or are invited by the head of *shuro*. The *shuro* has still not been formally registered but there are plans to create a legal entity. In addition,

²⁵ Information obtained during an interview in June 2014.

authorities have planned to certify *otuns* by organizing exams regarding knowledge of Islamic issues.

In May 2014, local Khujand TV broadcasted a program entitled ‘*Shuroi Bibi Otunho on ba khotiri chist?*’ (English: What is the role of the Council of Bibi Otuns?), presenting and promoting the activities of the *shuro*. The president of the organization and a few *otuns* who are its members appeared in the program; also some citizens of Khujand (including scholars) were invited to participate. The social role of female religious leaders and their influence on society were discussed. Following the broadcast, the talk show was extensively commented on by female religious professionals as well as by other people. ‘No respectable religious leaders would have agreed to participate in such a show’, ‘It was obvious that the women appearing in the program did not say what they were really thinking and that everything was arranged in advance’ are examples of some of the things I heard during the conversations.²⁶

Regardless of how the program was perceived by its audience, the broadcasted talk show demonstrates the state policies in relation to female religious leaders. Officially, the *shuro* representatives emphasize the *otuns*’ role in resolving family conflicts and other social issues, but in fact, the most important task of this entity is to shape *otuns*’ views on religion and society. On the one hand, the government is curbing the influence of religious leaders through banning independent religious education, which is obviously leading to a lowering of the status of women religious leaders and limiting their role in the performance of rituals during various celebrations. On the other, the official religious representatives attempt to promote *otuns* as an important voice in female society. In my opinion, this inconsonant approach once again shows the inconsistency of religious policy in Tajikistan.

The majority of female religious professionals I interviewed during my research were not involved in politics, and most of their activities were concentrated on conducting rituals, and in some cases on informal teaching. The social position of a particular leader is based on her religious knowledge, life experience, her relationship with a community, and often her family origin. Notwithstanding, even *otuns* with very strong authority and a good reputation are afraid of the secret service. Many female religious figures agreed to participate in the *Shuroi Bibi Otunho* for pragmatic reasons. The recent rumors about the certification and registration of *otuns* seem to be a strong motivation.

In one of the *jamoats* located in Gafurov district (Sughd region), the authorities nominated a head of the *otuns* (Tajik: *Otun Kalon*, English: *Big Otun*).

²⁶ Personal talks with *otuns* who are not members of the *shuro* and other people who watched the show (May and June, 2014).

According to my respondents, she does not have much authority or receive a lot of respect, but she follows the orders of the local administration. In the same *jamoat*, there is a head of the *khodim* elected by a group of activists and approved by the authorities.²⁷ In this way, the social leaders are under the supervision of the local administration. Some of my interlocutors expressed their opinions: ‘Those female religious professionals who attend meetings in *jamoat* and agree to cooperate are not real *otuns*!’ However, in my opinion, the social relations between female religious leaders and the authorities are more complex.

In June 2014, I interviewed a religious figure, Fatima (42 years old), who simultaneously functioned as a *rais* of *guzar* (a part of *mahalla*). At present in Tajikistan, due to the high level of male migration to Russia, not infrequently women have taken over traditional male responsibilities, including the administration of communities. During the conversation, among other things, she openly admitted that a *rais* of *mahalla* recommended her to conduct agitational work within her community, urging young men to serve in the army. It should be remembered that Tajikistan’s army has a very bad reputation, and most parents undertake various measures, including bribing officials, to protect their children from being drafted into the military. It is worth mentioning that Fatima is a member of *Shuro Bibi Otunho*. Undoubtedly, she is strongly associated with the authorities, cooperating with them in various fields.

In 2013, in Kurgan Tube, I participated in a *Mushkil-kushod* ritual performed by *Otun Sharofat* who was also a *rais* of *guzar*. For twenty years she has acted as *otun* and community leader, which is why people selected her for the position of *rais*. For many years, Szarofat has taught religion. Presently, due to the ban on religious education, she has only a few students. Sharofat also said that through the registration of religion teachers, the authorities would like to intensify their control over them (including the taxation of teachers), and she prefers to be independent, so she would not wish to be registered even if she had such a possibility.

Both cases show how ambiguous and variable the situation of religion and religious figures is in Tajikistan. Those *otuns* who do not want to agree to all the imposed rules have to find a way to circumvent them. It should also be mentioned that most religious leaders are members of local elites. Hence, many of them are related to authorities through various informal networks which influence their relationship with the administration. A good family background

²⁷ *Khodim/Koibonu*, also other names – the traditional organizer of celebrations and enterprises among women in *mahallas*.

can also provide protection, similarly as in the case of the activities of religious leaders in Soviet times.

In 2010, I met *otun* Adolat in Isfara, a middle-aged woman who had received a secular university education in Soviet times and began to teach religion a few years after Tajikistan gained independence. She was a deputy (*vakil*) to the local *jamoat* council. In her teachings, she spreads knowledge to her followers about legal issues related to marriage and divorce, contraceptives, abortion (which she accepts by referring to *sharia* law), as well as other important matters. During the interview she indicated the importance of increasing women's awareness regarding their rights according to Islamic values and the challenges of the contemporary world. In her opinion, secular education as well as knowledge of Islam are significant in enabling women to advocate their rights. According to her, the two systems should complement each other. I did not have the opportunity to interview her in 2014, but I found out from her relatives that at present she is not a deputy to the *jamoat* since 'the local power relations' have changed.

Those female religious professionals who are associated with the IRP have the most problematic situation. I met Mohnisso (50 years old) for the first time in 2010 when I was invited during Ramadan for *Iftors* and *Tarawih* prayers in Isfara. I interviewed her also in 2014. She comes from a respectable family of religious leaders. Mohnisso prefers to be termed *Bibi mullo* rather than *Bibi otun*. A few years ago, she organized a religious circle for women who gathered regularly to pray or to debate various religious, theological and community matters. At present, due to pressure from the authorities, she has been forced to limit her activities and has stopped teaching since – as an IRP leader – she is under the close supervision of the secret service. Mohnisso follows strict Islamic rules, rejecting all traditional practices and rituals, including *Bibi Mushkil-kushod* and *Bibi Seshanbe*, pilgrimage to *mazars*, and so forth. Despite the governmental pressure, she is very influential not only in her *mahalla*, but also in the whole area of the *jamoat* where she lives.

My research shows that religious orthodoxy strongly influences people's attitudes toward Islamic practices. Especially in the bigger urban areas or religious regions such as Isfara, the generation of 25–40 year-olds who have access to the relevant religious literature often reject the *otun* traditions, considering them to be backward and non-Islamic. They believe that every person can learn how to fulfill the obligatory Muslim duties, so intermediaries between God and man are not necessary. Current trends indicate the transformation of the role of female religious leaders; nevertheless, *otuns* are still influential, especially among older and middle-aged generations of women who adhere to local tradition.

CONCLUSION

Today in Tajikistan, *otuns* are being scrutinized by the authorities as never before. Previously, due to their status as informal leaders, the authorities had limited access to them. *Shuroi Bibi Otunho*, a body created at the initiative of the authorities, is part of the strategy aimed at controlling religious leaders. Even if individual *otuns* are not involved in politics, their actions can become politicized. Those who do not agree to cooperate can be shown in a negative light and persecuted. The state attempts to define the ‘correct understanding of Islam’ within ‘Tajik culture’ but still the policy in relation to religion is inconsistent. The main approach is that all religious leaders should adapt the modified version of traditional Islam under the state’s close supervision.

The IRP and its supporters promote their own version of religion which is purified of all heterodox elements. Whatever the IRP’s motivations are as the political opposition, it acts in its own interests, and religion is one of the tools used to achieve its goals.

Both governmental policies and the influence of the IRP are contributing to changing the status of *otuns* and the perception of their role in society. The restrictions imposed on Islamic education may in the long term lead to decreasing *otuns*’ authority and to limiting their role in the performance of rituals and celebrations.

Some people even believe that *otuns* no longer hold any significance in the society and they are invited to attend ceremonies only for prestigious reasons. Proponents of the orthodox version of Islam promote the idea that traditional *otuns* and their rituals are incompatible with the Quran and should be eradicated from Islam.

Notwithstanding, many people still consider *otuns* an inseparable part of religious tradition. Rites and rituals performed by female religious figures are important from the point of view of maintaining community ties. Women who gather together during rituals have an opportunity to socialize, as well as to pray together, which releases them for a moment from the tensions of everyday life. Reading the Quran and religious parables during gatherings enriches them; the religious stories cited by *otuns* pass on moral values and teach a specific pattern of behavior in accordance with Islam and Tajik-Uzbek cultures.

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