



Issue 1, August 2022

Autoethnographies of Spiritual Practices in Central Asia: Introduction

Emil Nasritdinov

Associate Professor, American University of Central Asia, nasritdinov_e@auca.kg

Sofya du Boulay

PhD Candidate, Oxford Brookes University, 15058899@brookes.ac.uk

This special issue brings together a collection of unique autoethnographic papers, which we perceive to be novel and innovative in the context of what has been published on religion in Central Asia previously. Most of the academic literature on religion in Central Asia today is published by Western scholars,¹ and the available policy reports (mostly on the topics of radicalization and extremism) which are often written in collaboration with local scholars, are sponsored by Western institutions.² While the local Central Asian scholarship on religion is gradually gaining weight,³ its voice is still relatively muted and it is written primarily from traditional scholarly perspectives. In the concert of scholarly voices on religion in Central Asia, one choral section is missing – that of scholars who have their own personal accounts of engagement with spiritual practices and questions around the intersection of religious and scholarly identity.

Exceptional in this regard is the wonderful book "From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia" by Razia Sultanova who herself is a musician and performer of Central Asian Sufi music. Sultanova's very picturesque ethnography of Shamanism and Sufism is a beautiful journey into the world of Central Asian female poetry

¹ Almost all book manuscripts are published by Western scholars (Khalid, 2007, Radford, 2015, Montgomery, 2016, Pelkmans, 2017, McBrien, 2017). The first 40 results of a search on "Islam" in the *Central Asian Survey* journal reveals that all 40 papers were written by scholars from outside the region. Only two bear Central Asian names, and only as co-authors.

² SFCG (2014), ICG (2015, 2016), IOM (2016)

³ Particularly in journals and publications series, which are more open to authors from the region, such as Central Asian Affairs and Lexington Books Contemporary Central Asia series (Bissenova (2016), Nozimova (2016), Nasritdinov & Esenamanova (2017), Bekmurzaev (2018), Kudaibergenova (2019), Doolotkeldieva (2020))

and music. Her style of writing is quite unique. It is academic, but it is also in many ways very Sufi-like: there is no rigid structure and the author freely mixes history, ethnography, poetry, analytical insights, and her own feelings. The text alternates between different modes, but remains very smooth, connected – very much like a piece of Uzbek traditional performance.

This is the type of scholarship that inspired our special issue. This collection of seven papers is an attempt to take a more innovative approach to the topic, to establish a more local view and, in whatever small way, provide an alternative perspective to the dominating Western and traditional scholarly discourse on religion in Central Asia. We chose autoethnography as a method to enable the authors to write about Central Asian spiritual experiences with these goals in mind.

Autoethnography is a provocative qualitative approach in social sciences aimed at revising the existing binaries between the subject and the object of research. The disenchantment with objectivity and neutrality inspired by the postmodernism of 1980s provided opportunities for the recognition of new forms of social science inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011). Initially, autoethnography was formulated as an evocative and emotional writing method, acknowledging the freedoms of the post-positivist era. Addressing a missing element of reflexivity in sociological work, autoethnography embraces personal experiences and epistemic subjectivities as an integral part of the research process, where individual memories, spaces and meanings collide (Bordieu and Wacquant, 1992; Gannon, 2006). While related to ethnography, autoethnography's distinctive feature is that the researcher becomes the subject of their own investigation. Examining and revealing the self is at the heart of critical autoethnographic work. The power of lived experience and participatory insider observation helps to build understanding and explain the nuanced layers of social contexts. Autoethnography allows for the exploration of the evolution of the social through the lenses of the individual.

This special issue on autoethnographies of spiritual practices illuminates the complexity and variations of subjective perceptions ascribed to religion and spirituality in Central Asia. It provides an intimate look into religious practices by scholars who are also religious practitioners, analyzing their connection with religion or focusing on how they study religion. The reader should consider these reflexive writings in tandem as they provide an alternative platform for previously marginalized voices, producing local knowledge on Central Asia.

This is a pioneering study on religiosity and spirituality narrated by authors who are full members of the practices and cultural contexts they describe. The sustained participation in or long-term research of spiritual activities has enabled the authors to uncover hidden rules and trajectories in religious engagement which would have been impossible to recognize without the persistence of insider positionality. We hope to overcome the isolation of individual spiritual-scholarly experiences by connecting them to these to a unified thread of autoethnographic writing. Autoethnography allows for engagement with the fabric of organized activities of everyday life. We envision that this

method could travel beyond accounts of religion to political practices, cultural norms, and media consumption in Central Asia and beyond.

We chose autoethnography as a genre for this special issue for a number of reasons. Firstly, the method allows authors to provide a deeply local perspective as they are writing about their own experiences with religion. This allows them to combine the practitioner and ethnographer positions and, in many paragraphs, write in the first person. Several papers describe the evolution of authors' relation to religion over a lengthy period of their life, thus connecting these narratives to the various periods of transformation that have taken place since the independence of the Central Asian countries and contextualizing the events they describe.

Secondly, considering that authors describe and analyze their own feelings and emotions as affected by or leading to certain engagement with religious practices, an autoethnographic style of writing can be much more evocative and resonate more strongly with how readers, particularly readers from the region, relate to similar experiences. If we borrow terms from painting, we can suggest that autoethnography makes papers more realistic (providing a wealth of minute details) yet, at the same time, more impressionistic (better grasping and conveying moods and feelings) and less abstract (as often happens with papers where empirical material serves only a secondary role – to illustrate theories).

Thirdly, while it has been around for quite some time now, autoethnography is still considered an experimental and innovative genre in social sciences, and has not been explored at all in Central Asian scholarship. This is important because, if Central Asian scholars want to find their own path and establish their own unique Central Asian academic tradition, we must experiment and innovate. While autoethnography as a method was formulated in the West, it does offer many more possibilities for local expression outside of the Western context than do other more traditional genres of academic writing.

The method comes with its own challenges of course. First of all, it is often difficult for any of us to combine two identities, in this case, those of a religious practitioner and a scholar. For example, when we participate in certain religious rituals or observe interactions within the religious community, can the researcher fully stop analyzing the interaction or thinking about what to make of it for publication and immerse themselves in becoming a true participant? It is not easy.

Another challenge faced relates to how others perceive us: both within the religious communities and outside of them. Members of religious groups can become suspicious of the duality of the researcher-participant roles and come to think of us as spies (see Taalaibekova, this issue). This is particularly important for religious communities under state pressure. Representatives of secular institutions likewise may also harbor suspicions towards participant-researchers: they might see us as biased and defensive of the interests of our own religious communities. Our own experience with such challenges shows that building trust with both sides (religious and secular) takes time. As years go by and our religious communities see that our publications do not harm them, the members become more open

and ready to share. At the same time, when secular readers understand that they can gain many deep insights from us about religious groups they know very little about, they also become more appreciative. As a colleague-scholar recently pointed to one of the co-authors: “You have become a bridge between the secular and religious communities: both of them trust you.”

While this sounds encouraging, the third challenge, that of the high degree of responsibility we bear for our writing, creates a lot of additional pressure – especially as state policies and public opinion towards our own communities of belonging might be shaped by our texts. This pressure contrasts with the second pressure as to remain good scholars we must discuss not only the positive aspects of religious practices but also the negative ones. The solution, in our experience, is to be as honest with ourselves and with our readers as possible and, instead of using a reductionist approach, to depict the entire complexity of religious settings, historical scenarios, and individual actor trajectories (see Maksutova and Janoff, this issue). This is what the authors in this special issue have tried to do.



Figure 1: Doves flying off the mosque dome, Kemin, Kyrgyzstan, photo by the author

The idea for this special issue was posted on the pages of CAAWSC Facebook group.⁴ The initial call for contributions brought close to 20 interested authors to the online

⁴ Central Asian Analytical and Academic Writing Support Community - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/314007086390071>

discussion. However, as often happens, only seven eventually wrote papers. Five of these papers engage with Islam, one with a New Age spiritual movement in India, and one with Protestant Christianity. Four papers are from scholars who have been involved with their religious communities for lengthy periods of time, one paper describes its author's complex relation to her own religious identity, and two papers explore the authors' positionality as long-term researchers of religion.

Sofya du Boulay describes her own life experience growing up in a family following the new age spiritual movement of the Indian guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba. She describes how her family became interested in the movement and how she matured into its spiritual practice, travelling regularly between her home in Kazakhstan and the Sai Baba Ashram in India. Many years of travel experience helped her to distinguish between four types of visitors traveling from Central Asia to this ashram; she labels these spiritual seekers, enlightenment tourists, miracle hunters, and true pilgrims. Du Boulay discusses the ways in which individuals representing these four categories internalize their spiritual journeys and how two distant spaces, Central Asia and India, become connected through the stories of these spiritual travelers.

Ulan Bigozhin describes his personal spiritual journey in three distinct periods of his life as related to four different places he and his family lived in: Tselinograd, Stepnogorsk, Chu and Almaty. Bigozhin describes the experience of being born into the lineage of *Sayeds* – descendants of the family of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and how this had a strong effect on his identity. He describes the first period as that which his Muslim identity was born. The second period, immediately after independence, covers his family's life in the town of Chu in Southern Kazakhstan, a context in which his sense of Islam was developing alongside a growing sense of Kazakh nationalism. In Chu, according to Bigozhin, his identity was constructed. Finally, Bigozhin tells readers about his short experience of becoming an active Salafi when he came to study in the large metropolis of Almaty, and how that came into contradiction with his family's perception of Islam. This period for him is the period of transformation of his religious identity.

Galina Avdar-Kolodzinskaia shares with the readers her story of becoming a Protestant Christian. Avdar-Kolodzinskaia starts by telling the history of the Protestant community in Central Asia from pre-Soviet times through the different periods of the Soviet Union and into the era of independence. She then shares the story of her family and how her mother converted to Protestantism. This is followed by the story of author's own conversion to Protestantism in her high-school years and how this affected her choice of education and career. Avdar-Kolodzinskaia then analyzes her active engagement with various institutions, including state agencies, security forces, NGO workers, and representatives of various faiths and denominations, in her position as Head of Interfaith Council of Kyrgyzstan.

Emil Nasritdinov is the oldest of the seven authors. In his story, he remembers how his worldviews were shaped by the strong anti-religious propaganda of the late Soviet period, from kindergarten to school, and by the post-Soviet chaos of 1990s when he became a

university student. He then tells the story of his marriage in the year 2000, followed by his conversion to Islam in 2002. The drama evolves from there onwards as his new religious views come into conflict with those of his spouse. In his paper, Nasritdinov describes his family dynamics as falling into one of the five possible scenarios common for Central Asian families established when neither of the spouses were religious but in which one of them later found God. By delving into his own life and depicting these five scenarios, the author describes the unique post-Soviet Central Asian phenomenon of families in transition.

Hikoyat Salimova's rendering of her own relationship with Islam differs from those in the previous four papers. Salimova indicates that, while she might not fit into the profile of a practicing Muslim woman by some standards, she must still contend with important questions such as: "What does it mean to be a Muslim?" and "What makes Muslim a Muslim?" The author shares how her own Islamic identity was shaped. She begins from her childhood in Soviet Uzbekistan, where she was affected by her grandparents, parents, and siblings, and then by the strong changes and revival of Islam in the post-Soviet period. Salimova traces her shaping through the impacts of her education in Uzbekistan, and finally, her travels to obtain further education abroad, when her Muslimness was questioned because she did not dress according to expectations. Salimova concludes with interesting insights into the diversity of Islamic identities in contemporary Uzbekistan and into the complex ways in which religious identity overlaps with cultural practices and community belonging.

The final two papers engage with questions of researcher positionality as they study religious phenomena, particularly in their native communities. Gulniza Taalaibekova studies religious speech as a form of community resource in Kyrgyzstan. In doing her ethnographic research, the author faces the dilemma of whether she, as a native anthropologist, represents the interests of the Western institution that sponsors her and frames her theoretical approach to understanding the local religious speeches in Kyrgyzstan, or whether she represents the interests of the local religious community. She concludes that the answer lies beyond the dichotomy and ends up criticizing both the local religious community and the Western scholarly world.

Aikokul Maksutova and Aybek Janoff similarly reflect on their experience of conducting research that involves religious themes. They explore the role of such identity markers of a researcher's insider-outsider positionality as language, gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity and geographic origin. They describe these markers as either enabling easier and more productive collection of data or becoming an obstacle. The authors conclude with three insights: the insider-outsider position is never static but rather changes depending on circumstances; to be an insider one doesn't have to be native; and one has to be extremely careful with handling and storing data because the information a researcher collects can be very sensitive. They also propose that insider-outsider positionality should be viewed as an interplay of contested and fluid identities that requires constant reflexivity on the part of the researchers.

While each paper is unique, there are several themes which can be traced through several, if not all, of the papers. Firstly, there is the theme of **identity**, explored in relation to the authors' religious identities and the complex ways these intersect with their ethnic, cultural and gender identities. Identity is also explored in relation to the authors' identities as native anthropologists and as insiders-outsiders in the field. The next big theme is that of **family**, first in regards to the family histories of the authors and how the spiritual practices of their parents and grandparents affected their own attitudes toward religion, and second in how their spiritual practices shaped their own family relations with their spouses and other family members. **Geography** is the third cross-cutting theme. As the authors reveal, many changes in their spiritual lives are associated with changes to their places of residence: from Northern to Southern Kazakhstan, from home country to overseas and back, and through regular mobility as in the case of the Tablighis or spiritual travelers to India. Finally, another persistent theme across many of the papers is that of **conflict of values** with regards to religion: between generations or family members, between secular and religious communities, between different faiths or movements within faiths, and between state and religion. We invite readers to explore and reflect on these cross-cutting themes in the following chapters of this, the first special issue of a new Central Asian journal.

References

- Bekmurzaev, N. (2018) *Mediatization of Religion in Kyrgyzstan: Diffusion of Religious Authority and Changing Perceptions of Religion*, Central Asian Affairs, 5(3), 253-273
- Bissenova, A. (2016) *Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque of Astana*, in Laruelle (ed) *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, Lexington Books
- Bordieu, P. and L. Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, University of Chicago Press
- Doolotkeldieva, A. (2020) *Madrassa-based Religious Learning: Between Secular State and Competing Fellowships in Kyrgyzstan*, Central Asian Affairs, 7(3), 211-235
- Ellis, C, T. Adams, A. Bochner (2011) *Autoethnography: an overview*, Forum Qualitative Social Research, Vol. 12: 1
- ICG (2015) *Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation*, Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°83, Bishkek/Brussels
- ICG (2016) *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, Bishkek/Brussels
- IOM (2016) *Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia: Root Causes, Social and Economic Impact of Return Migration*, International Organization for Migration, Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek
- Gannon, S. (2006) *The (Im)Possibilities of writing the self-writing: French Poststructuralist Theory and Autoethnography*, Critical Methodologies, Vol. 6(4), 474-495

- Khalid, A. (2007) *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Kudaibergenova, D. (2019) *Religion, Power, and Contemporary Art in Central Asia: Visualizing and Performing Islam*, *Central Asian Affairs*, 6(2-3), 224-252
- McBrien, J. (2017) *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan*, University of Pittsburgh Press
- Montgomery, D. (2016) *Practicing Islam: Knowledge, Experience, and Social Navigation in Kyrgyzstan*, University of Pittsburgh Press
- Nasritdinov, E. & N. Esenamanova (2017) *The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek*, *Central Asian Affairs*, 4(2), 217-242
- Nozimova, S. (2016) *Hijab in a Changing Tajik Society*, *Central Asian Affairs*, , 3(2), 95-116
- Pelkmans, M. (2017) *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*, Cornell Univeristy Press
- Radford, D. (2015) *Religious Identity and Social Change: Explaining Christian conversion in a Muslim world*, Routledge
- SFCG (2014) *Strengthening Capacity to Prevent Violent Extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic*, Search for Common Ground, Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek
- Sultanova, R. (2014) *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*, I.B. Tauris