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Spirituality and Families in Transition in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This paper describes the phenomenon of "families in transition" in Kyrgyzstan – families that were formed when both spouses were secular, but in which one of them later became religious. The paper portrays five scenarios via which life in these families could develop. The primary empirical material for the paper is the author's own family experience and that of his close friend. The author thus uses the method of autoethnography to present and analyze his story. The author portrays "families in transition" as characteristic of the complex changes taking place in the post-Soviet society of Central Asia in regard to growing spirituality and religious involvement as it comes into conflict with the Soviet atheist legacy.

Keywords

Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, families, transition, spirituality, secularism, conflict, change

Introduction

In this paper, I look at how families were affected by the changes in the religious scene in Kyrgyzstan. The focus of this paper is on what I call "families in transition": families that were formed when both spouses were secular, but in which one of them later became religious. Such situations could evolve anywhere since religious conversion very often happens as a result of midlife crisis leading one partner to become more religious. However, such cases are more common in societies undergoing strong societal transformation, such as those of post-Soviet Central Asia. This is particularly common for couples around my age, those who were born in the late Soviet times and married without any consideration given to religion. The Soviet regime was totalitarian: it penetrated deep into all spheres of people's life, including their beliefs and family relations. That is why it is important to understand

how changes brought by new religious freedom have affected not only people's belief systems, but all aspects of life connected to it, including their families.

When two people live together as spouses, they are strongly interdependent and, if one of them significantly changes their lifestyle and belief system, this cannot but affect the life of their companion. What makes it particularly difficult is when the old and new lifestyles are very different from each other. This often requires that one spouse to change too in order to accommodate the changes in the other. This is not easy, particularly when the change affects one's larger views and religious beliefs. For both people this comes with challenge, struggle, drama and, in some cases, tragedy. Living in transition with regard to religion sometimes can make a person more prone to accepting and living with a more receptive attitude toward changes in other aspects of life, including family and social relations, lifestyle, economic practices, political views and consumption patterns.

What makes everything more complicated is that both spouses feel responsible for each other and thus, entitled to have influence on each other's lives: the more religious person feels a responsibility to save the partner from the "flames of hellfire," while a less religious person feels responsible for saving the partner from the dangers of radicalism and fanaticism. Together, these feelings of responsibility and entitlement make it possible for both parties to inflict pain on each other, all with good intentions. Once under attack, they both feel that their views and lifestyles are endangered and take defensive stands; fights take place, feelings get hurt and a cycle develops of waiting for another trigger to incite new conflicts. Such changes are not new; accounts from the early periods of Islam are full of stories of family divisions leading to two brothers or a father and son fighting on opposite sides of a battlefield or of husbands tormenting their wives for becoming Muslim. This paper traces how similar family divisions evolved and were resolved in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia using the example of families in Kyrgyzstan.

The empirical core of this paper is based on two stories: my own and my good friend's. I use the autoethnographic approach as I believe that it provides a very strong emotional context which allows for better understanding of the issue in question and for tracing the developments in minute details in order to comprehend the complexity of family situations in their entirety. After introducing two stories in detail, I will place them within my list of five different scenarios of how the lives of families in transition could develop when one of the spouses becomes religious. I start with my own story. It contains details unrelated to my family situation, but which I find important nonetheless as they help provide the context for understanding more specific questions related to the main interest of this paper.

My Story

I grew up a fairly typical Soviet young kid and teenager, exposed from childhood – from kindergarten all the way through school – to strongly atheist propaganda. One of my very first memories that was strongly imprinted in my mind was that of a day when my mother came to pick me up from the kindergarten. I was only five and had just learned how to read. I vividly remember how I was sitting on

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the bottom stair of a concrete staircase and was tying my sandals. I raised my eyes and I saw a long horizontally stretched canvas on the wall with a red background and bold white letters shouting, "WE ARE ATHEISTS!" I vocalized every letter into a sentence and then asked my mother, "What is an atheist?" "We do not believe in God" was her reply. School was also full of Soviet anti-religious propaganda, and I was a member of three Soviet ideological youth groups: *Oktyabryata*, the *Young Pioneers*, and *Komsomol*. Throughout my school years we were taught that religion was the "opiate of the masses." I became a college student the year that the Soviet Union broke up, so I didn't have to take classes on Marxism and Leninism like students before me, but we had plenty of other non-religious influences in our student life: living in the dormitory in the early 90s involved regular drinking and fighting. Thus, my childhood and youth had nothing to do with religion and everything to do with antireligious atheist Soviet propaganda, and this was followed by a post-Soviet non-religious lifestyle in the dorms.

Upon graduation, I returned to my hometown, where I started working. This is when I met my future wife and fell in love. We dated for few months before I left to the United States to do my Master's degree at the University of Hawaii. My fiancee joined a year later after completing her Bachelors and we got married. We spent a year together; she applied for her own Masters, while I did not want to stay on a dependent visa and applied for my second Master's. We both succeeded, but were admitted to different universities: she went to Eugene, Oregon, I went to Chicago. My program was only a year-long and after completing it I went to Melbourne to start my PhD, while my wife had to stay for another year for her program.

Upon arrival in a new place "down under", I felt lonely and isolated. It had been three years since I left home. In addition, my grandfather and grandmother had passed away without my having seen them. All in all, I was feeling very miserable in that period and going through what seemed to be an existential crisis. I had a good Muslim friend in my university and, on one of those miserable days, he invited me to attend the Friday prayer with him at the University prayer room. I agreed, and the moment I stepped into the prayer room, it clicked for me. There were Muslim students from all over the world there and it seemed that everyone was so happy to see me. My heart melted almost immediately on that day. I felt very much at home and, right then and there, decided to start practicing Islam. I spent the entire afternoon with my friend talking about it. He told me about the basic Islamic principles, gave a little bit of history, and explained how I should practice. This all happened on a Friday, one day before the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan when all Muslims are expected to fast. My friend explained the fasting principles to me too. I didn't think about it too much and there was no gradual transition. From the next morning I began to fast, pray five times a day, and let my beard grow.

It seemed that I had found my path to salvation and the world needed to hear about it. I started with my wife. We spoke on the phone, and I shared with her all of my excitement, telling her, of course, that she too should become a practicing Muslim, pray and wear hijab. To my surprise, she was not happy to hear about my change and all that insistent advice. She was scared by how rapidly I was changing

and how enthusiastic I was about Islam. This was 2002, only a year after the September 11 attack, at a time when the War on Terror was in full swing. She was afraid that I would become radical.

In my first months of practicing Islam, I was quite hungry for information about it and, not having any Islamic knowledge and background, I took everything almost literally. My friend was my main source of information, and we had regular discussions, but I also spoke to other brothers in the prayer room and read books from the library. My friend introduced me to his friends – students who turned to be active participants of Tablighi Jamaat,[1] and one of them invited me to go for a three-day Tablighi trip.[2] I had no idea what it involved, but just as I considered prayer and fasting to be obligatory, I thought that such traveling was also a part of regular Islamic practice. Indeed, it turned to be a very interesting experience and I really liked it. I felt very much at home. I had a very strong sense of belonging in this group and I became a regular participant.

I soon reunited with my wife. She was ok with my prayers, but she hated the idea of staying alone at home while I was on the three-day trips and during my extensive Tablighi activities in the local mosque, particularly later, when our son was born. She was also afraid that, with time, I would be more and more involved in these activities and that I would eventually start joining the 40-day and 4-month trips. Finally, she did not like my interest in the way Tablighis dressed in long *sunnah* attire.[3] Looking back, I think she perhaps had good reason to be worried, as my approach to Islam in those early days was quite fanatical and uncompromising. Almost every month, I traveled for three days, and I participated in the daily Tablighi activities taking place in my mosque. The culmination of our conflict was my first 40-day trip to India in the winter of 2011-2012. She was pregnant with our second child and didn't want me to go, but I went nonetheless. While in India, I approached one old experienced Tablighi sheikh and asked for his advice on my family matters. He told me to hold steady and not to divorce her under any circumstances. "You should practice *sabyr* (patience) even if she does not change for the rest of your life," he said. He and the other sheikhs also advised me to be more accommodating of her needs.

Upon my return, I understood that if I wanted to follow the advice of Indian sheikhs and improve relations in my family, I had to compromise and perhaps give up some of my Tablighi commitment. I started slowly reducing my participation; soon our daughter was born, which occupied me even more, and with the passing of some time, I started noticing how our relations had begun to improve. My three-day trips and my participation in the mosque became less regular and my wife's reaction to my Tablighi activities became more tolerant. In 2015, I was able to prepare and go for my second 40-day trip (this time in Kyrgyzstan) much more easily, without significant disapproval or complaint on her behalf.

[1] Tablighi Jamaat is a non-political movement for the revival of Islam that originated in India in the 1920s.

[2] Tablighi jamaat members have a practice of traveling for three days, forty days and four months, during which they stay in the mosques and devote themselves to religious and preaching activities.

[3] Sunnah is the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); Sunnah dress is a long dress, similar to how Muslims dress in the Arab world and in South Asia.

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Figure 1: Kyrgyz Tablighis studying in the mosque on their 40-day trip, Kemin, Kyrgyzstan, photos by the author

Years of experience has taught both of us to be less confrontational, and more accommodating and nuanced. At the time of writing the first draft of this paper, we both saw progress as incremental: we placed light weights on both sides of the scale to maintain balance. We both learned to be sensitive to each other's feelings and how to fine tune our own ambitions so that we have at least some form of accord. This did not come easily for either of us; it took years and two short week-long Islamic divorces followed by a new nikahs (Islamic marriages) to learn how to live together with our differences. This was a very fragile peace because the third divorce would be the last. She would have to marry someone else before she would be able to marry me again. We both knew this and we tried to be careful. I continued to be regular with my monthly three-day trips, and I was preparing for my third 40-day trip in the winter of 2021-2022.

Looking back, I see that, like many newbies in religion in the 2000s, I was highly committed, uncompromising, and edgy. Those sharp edges hurt other people, especially those who were close to me, but as time went by and I hit one corner after another, these edges got dented and smoothed out, so that it became easier for me to navigate my social spaces. This did not seem a failure of my religious engagement, nor as a victory of family commitment, but rather as an interesting stage in our complex family history.

My Friend's Story

Marat[4] was my good friend and a neighbor. A very well-educated city boy, he completed his university degree in Saint-Petersburg, Russia. When I met him, he was working as a specialist in the large well-known printing house in Bishkek. The printing house eventually went bankrupt and, after trying different things, Marat decided to open his own Halal Pizzeria. His business picked up and with time even expanded beyond Bishkek.

Figure 2: Kyrgyz Tablighi resting in the mosque on his 40-day trip, Kemin Kyrgyzstan, photo by the author

Being neighbors, we met regularly at the mosque and we often went home together, giving us much time to chat and exchange news. Just like me, he had a strong interest in Tablighi Jamaat and we often traveled together on our three-day trips. We had many things in common to talk about, and among these were similar family situations: he was married, had two little children, and his wife also had a very strong dislike of Tablighis. Just like me, he had married at a time when he was not religious at all and had a very secular lifestyle and priorities. He became religious and interested in Tablighi Jamaat much later when he already had two children. His wife had not married a Tablighi and she was very upset about his new interests and his change. She was from a fairly rich urban family and her ideal family life and husband were very far from that of a committed Tablighi with a beard. Thus, they too had conflicts on the subject of his religious engagements. Once, upon our return from a three-day trip, we found his clothing lying all across the yard of his apartment building. As it turned out, she had become very angry about his long absence and, in a moment of rage, thrown his clothes out of the window. His skin was thinner than mine, and after one of many conflicts, he had a minor stroke and was taken to a hospital.

[4] Name changed

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Marat and I used to complain to each other often about our difficult family conditions, and we both cherished a romantic image of good Muslim wives: appreciative, supportive, sharing the religious ideals of their husbands. When I returned from India with a strong resolve to improve my family relations and wanting to share with him the advice of Indian sheikhs about preserving family, I learned that I was too late: in the period of my absence, he had divorced his wife and proposed to a practicing Muslim girl in hijab who had recently graduated from the Islamic University in Bishkek. A few weeks later, I attended his wedding. It was organized in halal style: without music or alcohol; his wife was wearing a white Islamic style wedding dress with hijab. He disappeared for few days after the wedding and, when he came back to the mosque, me and some of our friends were very eager to hear what it was like to be married to a real Muslim woman. "How is it?" we asked him impatiently. "It is great!" he answered, speaking slowly like a real expert. "You wake up in bed together and she tells you, 'Assalam aleikum.'[5]" "Wow!" we were all taken back with the awe: our brother was living the dream!

It is interesting to note the degree to which perceptions of the ideal female have been changing among some groups of men Kyrgyzstan. When we were young, boys would stand in groups checking out passing girls and, if we saw a pretty girl in a mini-skirt, the group would cheer and make appreciative sounds and exclamations. Nowadays, it is common to see a very different picture: a group of "brothers" standing and chatting and, if a girl in a mini-skirt were to pass, they would all look away, make angry faces and exclaim "Astagfirullah!" (God forgive). If, on the contrary, a girl in hijab and long Islamic dress were to pass by, they would still look away, but with much more appreciative expression and exclamations, such as “Mashallah! Perishte!” (What God wills! Angel!).

Figure 3: Young Kyrgyz girls with gift certificates during the celebration of the World Hijab Day, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan[6]

[5] Islamic greeting “Peace to you”.

[6] Photo from Bolotbekova, A. (2020) *Vsemirnyi den platka v Bishkeke: Edinstvo v raznoobrazii* [World Hijab Day in Bishkek: Unity in diversity], Ummah Islamic Journal, last accessed at

Such romanticization of the image of a Muslim woman in hijab is a very interesting component of new Islamic meaning-making and life charting among practicing Muslim men. Today, both men and women hear and read about the ideal models of a Muslim wife or Muslim husband. Imams talk about this in their *hutbas* (sermons) and Islamic bookstores are full of such titles as "The Ideal Husband," "The Ideal Wife," and "The Ideal Mother," all of which describe how men and women should carry out their family responsibilities. A typical prescription for a Muslim wife would include being well-dressed and perfumed and meeting her husband with a smile and happy face; while a husband should also come home well-groomed, clean, smiling, and with kind words for his spouse. Such an ideal family does not argue, they support each other, pray together, and bring up their children according to the Islamic way of life.

These ideal images contrast sharply with people's present secular family life experiences and regular conflicts: women taking on several jobs often feeding husbands' jealousies, husbands coming home drunk and having multiple affairs, etc. The contrast makes the Muslim ideal even more romantic, and many people buy into it forgetting that a woman might have led a very secular lifestyle most of her life and clothed herself in hijab only very recently, while a Muslim man who started going to the mosque, wearing a skullcap and letting his beard grow only few months back may still struggle with various addictions and might not have stable income to provide for a family. This is the uniqueness of religious sentiments in transitional families: religious ideals often drive the change by creating new promises and incentives. They also make it difficult for some to accept the non-religious qualities of their spouses.

So, what happened to Marat after he divorced his non-religious wife and married his religious ideal? After his divorce, Marat left his apartment in our neighborhood to his first wife and children and moved to a small village not very far from Bishkek. In the same year, he went on his first four-mouth journey to India and, when we next met a few months after his return, it was difficult to recognize him. He wore a full Islamic outfit: long white dress, turban on his head and a long beard. He became a very devoted Tablighi and committed to spending four months travelling every year. He sold his Pizzeria, and he was doing less well financially, looking for money to borrow. He and his new wife had a daughter, and he was in regular contact with his children from the first marriage. In 2015, he and a group of five other brothers from the Central Mosque had the crazy idea of performing the Hajj to Mecca on foot in order to follow the steps of their ancestors. They made it to Baku, Azerbaijan, where they were arrested by the police and deported back to Kyrgyzstan. Eight years have passed since then. Marat has become less fanatical and revived his Pizzeria business. Yet, he still wears the full Sunnah dress and leads a very active Tablighi lifestyle.

http://ummamag.kg/ru/articles/interesting/2797_vsemirnyi_den_platka_v_bishkeke_edinstvo_v_raznoobrazii on 20 August, 2022

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Five Scenarios

My story and the story of my friend Marat illustrate the complexity of relationships in families which were formed at a time when neither of the partners had an interest in religion and in which this later changed. Looking at the experiences of other families who undergo such transformation, I can distinguish five main scenarios of how family life evolves when one of the spouses becomes more religious. These are very approximate schemes and there is a lot variation in detail, yet looking though them can help the reader understand what options spouses have and how family lives develop.

Scenario #1: The Religious Spouse "Wins"

In the first scenario, a person who is more religious eventually wins over a spouse who is less religious so that the latter becomes religious as well. Tablighi narratives are full of such stories. One can hear them often in regard to the effectiveness of home *taalim* (study circles). It is often recommended to start from just five minutes of reading aloud from the book of hadith with children or even by oneself. One popular story is that of a man whose wife was not religious, so he started reading from the book aloud for just five minutes every day, while his wife pretended to be busy with her own activities and not listening. One day, he made a mistake while reading a Hadith and she jumped in to correct him. Apparently, she had been listening all this time, and she eventually sat down to read with him, and becoming religious herself. "Now, mashallah, she doesn't go anywhere without hijab, she goes on *masturat jamaats*[7] and hosts local taalims and masturat jamaats in her own house." It is also often suggested that women do not take *taasir* (influence) from men, particularly from their husbands, as much as they do from other women, so it is recommended that they attend female gatherings. One way or another, in this scenario, the entire family becomes religious, and they find harmony in following the same lifestyle and sharing the same beliefs.

Scenario #2: The Religious Spouse "Looses"

In the second scenario, the non-religious family member is more influential and the person who became religious eventually gives up his/her religious practices and returns to the previous lifestyle. A lot depends on how deep the religious involvement was. If it was deep, the person who gives up might live with a feeling of regret and develop hidden resentment. If religious engagement was not too deep, they can just live well as if nothing happened. The religious person might maintain minimum religious practices, such as attending Friday prayers, and be content with that, or he/she can even go back to a completely non-religious lifestyle that includes drinking and not praying at all.

[7] Tablighi practice of family trips: men can travel with their wives, mothers, sisters or daughters. During such trips, men usually stay in the mosque, while women stay in the houses.

Scenario #3: Family Finds Compromise

My own story at the time of drafting the paper was a good illustration of the third scenario. In such cases neither of two spouses gives up their position, but they find some form of compromise: the more religious person maintains his/her religious lifestyle without trying to influence another person, while the less religious person remains secular, but respects the religious values and practices of the more religious spouse. Both have to provide some space for each other to allow for freedom in religious practices and secular activities. Preserving the family and concern for the children is the main motivation for both spouses. The more religious spouse might live with the hope that one day God will open the door of *hidayat* (guidance) for his/her spouse, and if He doesn't, then the more religious spouse might entertain themself with the hope that he/she would enjoy the company of a good spouse in the next life. The balance in such scenarios is often not very stable. The peace is quite fragile, tensions still can evolve and, from time-to-time result in conflicts, but at least the family stays together and the children have both parents.

Scenario #4: Family Breaks Up

The story of my friend Marat is an illustration of the fourth scenario: the marriage ends in divorce. The differences become seemingly irreconcilable, and the spouses prefer clinging to their own individual views without compromising and giving them up. This is more likely to happen if the couple doesn't have children, but unfortunately also happens when a family has children. Sometimes, the decision to divorce is driven by the desire of the more religious spouse to marry someone who is more religious. There is a number of Islamic marriage agencies in Bishkek which help people with common interests meet. Acquaintances can help in finding new partners too, particularly among members of particular groups. In the case of divorce, according to Islamic traditions, the children are supposed to stay with the father, but the legal system in Kyrgyzstan is more likely to leave children in the care of mother obliging the father to pay alimony. This makes it easy for men to divorce; not many people work in formal employment with fixed salaries, and it is hard to estimate the full value of alimony in informal employment. Divorce in Islam is the last measure, and any knowledgeable scholar would discourage it; however, if the situation is hopeless, particularly when women suffer from abuse either from religious or non-religious husbands or other family members, then it is better to divorce.

Scenario #5: Marrying a Second Wife

Finally, there is a fifth, less common scenario. This is when a husband who becomes religious, does not divorce his wife, but instead marries a second wife who is more religious. This is not an official legal marriage, but nikah – a religious marriage conducted by an imam. Sometimes the first wife does not even know about the second marriage, and it becomes quite difficult for a husband to live in two families and keep everything secret. In other cases, the first wife does know; most likely she is not happy about it, and it becomes a source of frequent conflicts, yet she is not ready to divorce her husband either

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because of her feelings for him or because of the fear of being left alone with children. I have met several people, including Tablighi participants, who had second wives and had to balance their lives between two families. Most of them complained that it was not easy. One of my acquaintances managed to keep his second marriage secret, yet it cost him a lot of effort, and when I spoke to him, he was on the brink of despair, not knowing how to keep handling it. My other acquaintance had a happy marriage and three children, yet he decided to take a second wife without telling the first wife about it. When she found out, she became very angry and divorced him. My third acquaintance's first wife was not religious, and he married another one who was religious and wore hijab. He did not keep his second marriage secret and, interestingly, with time the first wife became more religious in order to bring him back, even joining him in the three-day masturat Jamaat travels. While on the journey, she asked God to bring him back to her only.

Conclusion

As these last stories demonstrate, these five scenarios are only approximate models containing a lot of space for individual variation. The myriad stories of families in transition show just how complex the socio-religious landscape in Kyrgyzstan is. Such complications in marriages affected by the conversion of one of the spouses are common not only for Tablighi Jamaat participants, but for Muslims from other groups, for Muslims who do not follow any groups, and for representatives of other faiths, for example, converts to Evangelical Christianity. This complexity testifies to the uniqueness of the post-Soviet Central Asian context and the uniqueness of Kyrgyzstan's context, shaped by more liberal religious policy and diversity of religious life.

The situations described in this paper are more common for the middle-age transitional generation – born and raised in Soviet times but matured in independent Kyrgyzstan. Representatives of older generations are less likely to become religious because of their strong Soviet atheist background and, even if they do, are less likely to change their family structures because they have lived together for so long and it would not be easy for them to establish new families at their ages. The situation of the younger generations is also different. They already have the option of marrying someone who shares their religious views. The choice extends beyond simply marrying someone who is a practicing Muslim, but also to someone who follows the same Islamic group. So, when a young Tablighi chooses a future spouse, he can choose someone who is already sympathetic to his cause. Furthermore, even if a future bride might not be a practicing Tablighi, she knows what to expect from him once they get married. Over time, the practicing Muslim community has become quite familiar with various Islamic groups and their differences. Thus, each has their own reputation. In fact, many practicing Muslim women who wear hijab and lead very Islamic lifestyles do not want to marry Tablighis because of their commitment to traveling and mosque activities. They might instead prefer someone who is simply religious or follows other sects, such as the Turkish *Nurjular* of *Khizmet*. Salafis are likewise more likely to look for future

spouses among Salafis. Such kinds of families are much less likely to have conflicts over religious commitments.

Finally, as mentioned above, the situations described in this paper are characteristic of a specific period in Kyrgyzstan, and as times goes by and situations in such transitional families are resolved via one of the five described scenarios, such families will become less and less common. This makes the experiences described in this paper more valuable as they are not likely to happen again. Recording them via the autoethnographic method thus provides us with an important unique historical record giving an insight into the particularities of change in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Epilogue

The work on this special issue began almost two years ago, and the second draft of my paper was written in the Fall of 2021. In December of that year, I went on my third 40-day Tablighi trip. We travelled with a Russian-speaking jamaat in the region of Kemin, Northern Kyrgyzstan. This trip was had a very strong effect on me, my spirituality, and my commitment to the Tablighi cause. Upon my return, I made clear my intention to go on a four-month trip in the Fall of 2022. This was important both for my spirituality and for the book on Kyrgyz Tablighi Jamaat which I have been working on for some time now. I decided to inform my wife about the plan without delay. It made her both sad and angry. A series of conflicts followed during the month after my return, culminating in a major almost a day-long fight in early February. This eventually pushed me to say the words both of us were so afraid of hearing: "Talaq" (divorce). This was our third Islamic divorce and it was no longer possible for us to remarry until she had married someone else, lived with that person, and then divorced him. Our marriage ended after almost 22 years of life together, and this was a major tragedy for both of us, for our children, our parents and our relatives. The world we had built together had collapsed in one night, although it is fair to say that its foundation had long been shaky because of almost 20 years (out of 22) of living on different sides of religious worldview and practice. Thus, sadly, by the time we are publishing this paper, my story no longer fits into scenario #3, where spouses find compromise; instead, it falls into scenario #4, where the marriage ends in break-up and divorce as happened with my friend Marat as described earlier in the paper.

Also, similarly to my friend, a couple of months after our separation, I met a person who recently became a practicing Muslim, herself divorced and with two children of almost the same age as mine. We got married and started a new life and after five months of being together, I can see how it feels more comfortable to live with someone who shares my spirituality and wakes up to pray with me every morning. However, financial responsibilities have doubled overnight, and much more importantly, it is extremely hard to carry the moral responsibility for breaking my marriage and family and for leaving children. The separation left a seemingly non-healing wound on all of us and on our relations. As I write these last sentences that summarize my situation at the moment, I come to think of autoethnography as a genre that can capture life in its transiency and complexity. We write some chapters of it with

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laughter, humor and happy memories, while for other chapters we use our own blood and tears instead of ink. I believe this is what makes the genre strong and authentic.

Figure 4: Silhouette of the mosque in Ken-Bulun, Kyrgyzstan, photo by the author