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## Home and Abroad: The Fluidity of My Uzbek Muslim Identity

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### Abstract

Over the last two decades, hostile depictions in mass media and propaganda have led to the development of the image of Muslim men as terrorists and Muslim women as suppressed, backward and covered in burkas. Such images are also often applied wholesale to Muslims from Central Asia. This paper aims to denounce such stereotypes and give an insider perspective of how a modern Uzbek Muslim woman practices her spirituality and struggles to understand her religious belonging. Using autoethnography as a research method and as a genre of writing, I present my own journey of establishing my Muslim identity. I show how it has been questioned over and over in various encounters and incidents both in and outside of Uzbekistan. This paper is, in some ways, my answer to the question I have been asked so many times: “Are you really a Muslim?”

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Uzbek women, Muslim identity, generational transformation, modern Muslim

### Introduction

“Are you a Muslim?” the white male customs officer intimidatingly asked me at LAX airport in July 2003 when I first travelled to the USA. I trembled while answering, “Yes, I guess so...,” yet I too questioned myself; “Am I really?” It was the early post-9/11 period, when all Muslims were considered a potential threat, especially in the USA, and one had to be careful identifying him/herself as a Muslim. I was born and grew up in Uzbekistan, and this question had never occurred to me before as most Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Tatars, Turks and Turkmen were all perceived as Muslims by default. This was normal and widely accepted, just as Russians, Ukrainians and other European ethnic groups in Uzbekistan were by default seen as Christians. Yet, there was largely no regular visitation of places of worship among either of these groups, and individual religious practices were often non-existent. Religion was mainly

practiced as a cultural tradition at home. Nonetheless, despite strong Soviet anti-religious atheist ideology and propaganda, the majority of Uzbekistan's population does identify themselves as Muslims.<sup>1</sup> They consider Islam to be the religion of their ancestors, and it is hereditary practice for a child born into a Muslim family to automatically become a Muslim. I always assumed that, since my parents are Muslims, then I must be Muslim too, even though I, like so many of my friends, never prayed formally and learned information about Islam only from secular schooling and my surroundings.

The newly independent state of Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian states, is considered a predominantly Muslim country, and the West classifies it in the same category as Afghanistan, Iran, or Pakistan (CIA Library; US Department of State). Moreover, Uzbekistan is often mistaken for Pakistan by outsiders who have never heard of the Central Asian countries and can relate only to the “-stan” portion of the countries' names – just like that U.S. customs officer who could not comprehend the name of my home country, but immediately assumed I was Muslim while at the same time questioning my Muslim identity since I was not dressed according to his perception of a Muslim woman. At that encounter with U.S. Customs, I had my first crisis of religious identity: my whole life I had thought of myself as a Muslim, but suddenly my religious beliefs were questioned as I did not fit into the Western image of a Muslim woman. Now, I have been living in Western countries for many years as a graduate student since that first encounter and have had many other similar experiences. In this article, I want to explore the dichotomy of my Muslim identity: that between my personal beliefs and practices on the one hand, and external expectations of me as a Muslim woman on the other. This paper is a personal inquiry into my religious identity and the identity of my family, which is a typical post-Soviet Uzbek family. I believe that such an inquiry will also help me shed some light on the broader trends in the development of Islam in modern Uzbekistan.

### Autoethnography

When I was asked to write about my experiences with spirituality and religious practices in Uzbekistan, I saw this as an opportunity to look at differences in the ways Islam is practiced in various countries and to portray my family's relation with faith based on my observations and childhood memories. Autoethnography is a new method for me, as my formal education taught me to write from a neutral standpoint, as an outside observer. Yet, I see the value of this method for studying religious practice from a very personal experience. The objectivity of autoethnography as a research method has long been questioned; however, in recent years it has gained more respect and validity in the scientific world, with its subjectivity even seen as an advantage. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) give a comprehensive overview of autoethnography, and they define the following types: indigenous/native ethnographies, narrative ethnographies, reflexive dynamic interviews, reflexive ethnographies, layered accounts,

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<sup>1</sup> The official data on religious confessions in Uzbekistan shows only the number of registered religious institutions at the Ministry of Justice, based upon which the percentage of different religious confessions among the population of Uzbekistan is estimated. Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). 06.07.2020.

interactive interviews, community autoethnographies, co-constructed narratives, and personal narratives. In this article I use the community autoethnography method since I describe not only my own personal experience with Islam, but also the Muslim communities in which I happened to live and closely interact at different stages of my life. In the words of Dmitry Rogozin, “Autoethnography is performative. It not only describes, but also creates a communicative reality” (2015, p.229). This paper is my attempt to paint the “reality of *Muslimness*” of the Uzbek people using the example of my own family. I also want to describe and analyze the unspoken side of Muslim identity in Uzbekistan, specifically, of young Uzbek people who identify themselves as Muslims yet live a lifestyle that does not fit into the traditional image of Muslimness often imagined in the non-Muslim world.

In discussing the subject of religion, which is a highly sensitive and personal matter, I ask myself, “Who could be a better expert on Uzbek people’s lives than the Uzbeks themselves?” A number of excellent books and articles on Islam in Uzbekistan had been already been published by Uzbek scholars (Bukharbayeva, 2019; Dadabaev, 2014; Sultanova, 2011; Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008). The authors focus mainly on different issues surrounding Islam in Uzbekistan based on in-depth interviews with practicing Muslims, yet only in certain paragraphs of their books do they include their own experiences with Islam and how it was practiced in their respective families. None of these authors explicitly focus on their personal stories or relations with Islam, with discussions of their perception of its role as religion versus cultural tradition particularly lacking. Being from this region, I will try to fill that gap and draw a portrait of modern Muslims in Uzbekistan through my personal journey of inquiry into the meaning of my Muslim identity. Using autoethnography as a method, I will reflect on the fluidity of my Muslim identity and on the practices that we use in Uzbekistan and abroad. Perchance some Uzbekistani people, bound by similar experience of ethnicity, gender, class or education level, have found themselves in similar position to mine, having grown up in a part-Muslim/part-atheist environment with some later experience abroad, and now facing serious religious confusion.

### **Islamic revival in independent Uzbekistan**

Islam was established on the territories of Uzbekistan in the 8th century with the conquest of the region by Arabs. Islam’s reach in the area overlapped with many pre-Islamic Zoroastrian and shamanist traditions, the celebrations of which today are often mistaken as Muslim, e.g. Navruz celebration, rituals with fire, and ancestor worship, among others (Sultanova, 2011). The pre-Islamic period is studied in school and at university, but in the daily lives of commoners there is little knowledge of which traditions come from Islam and which from other religious practices. The average citizen knows only the customs and traditions of the land where he or she grew up, and these differ slightly in each region within Uzbekistan. Lately, some vigorous religious followers of Islam have begun to claim that celebration of Navruz and other non-Islamic traditions is *haram* (forbidden) and should be prohibited (Skripunov 2018).

In the present day, Islamic studies in Uzbekistan are focused primarily on historic research into the establishment and transformation of Islam in the region, or on Islam in pre-Soviet and Soviet times. It is a rare researcher in Uzbekistan who studies modern Islam in the country, where religion is heavily shaped by the dichotomy between the authority of the state and the wishes of devoted believers, who are seen as in opposition to the ruling politicians (Babadjanov, 2004). This lack of local scholarship on contemporary Islam in Uzbekistan is compensated for by a vast scholarly body on the religion that comes from researchers outside of Uzbekistan (Hanks 2007; Khalid 2003, 2007; Louw 2007; Naumkin 2003; Peshkova 2014; Rasanayagam 2010; Zanca 2004; etc.), who often focus on the political antagonism between Islam and the state. In such studies, the focus is often on the persecution of religiously devoted citizens in Uzbekistan. What is often missing is the viewpoints of the average Muslim, those who are neither in opposition to the state, nor devoted to the mosque, but who make up a significant percentage of Uzbekistan's population. Thus, in my article, I want to focus on how average Uzbekistani people practice Islam today.

Islam is treated by the Uzbek state in a dualistic and controversial way. On the one hand, devoted Muslims are prosecuted for their public religious practices. The state's rigorous control of devoted religious followers became particularly noticeable after the terrorist attacks in Tashkent in 1999 and 2004, as well as during the pro-Islamic confrontation in Andijan in 2005, where the state openly demonstrated that it would not tolerate any Islamic opposition.<sup>2</sup> As a native of Bukhara, one of the holy Muslim cities in Uzbekistan, I and my peers had very mixed feelings: everyone sympathized with the innocent victims of Andijan, but our fear that radical Islamists in Uzbekistan would follow the path of those in Afghanistan and Iran also led us to support the government's tough measures. The Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, in which Andijan is located, is known for its overly religious zealots, and the majority of the people from the other regions of Uzbekistan are not overly fond of such extreme practices of Islam. On the other hand, the government also appeals to the Muslim rituals and symbols and perceives them to be the roots of traditional Uzbek culture. In public appearances, the local politicians and statesmen often make appeals to the Islamic ancestors of Uzbek people and even bring imams to support and give legitimacy to state policies.

### **My childhood experiences with religion**

The story of my own Muslim identity is closely connected with the summer holidays of my middle school years, which I often spent at my Tajik grandmother's house in the small town of Konibodom in Tajikistan. Her house was located just across the Muslim graveyard from the small mosque from which we would regularly hear the *azan* (call for prayers). Hearing it, my grandmother would rush inside the house to pray. It was there I have my first memories of hearing *suras* and *ayats* from the Quran, of my grandmother offering *namaz* (prayer), and we, her grandchildren, gathered round and repeating her

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<sup>2</sup> Briefs and reports from international organizations monitoring Uzbekistan from 2000 to 2021, such as those of HRW, Freedom House, the US Embassy and the US Department of State.

actions and words without understanding any of them. She would mumble some parts and recite louder others in a language unknown to us (Arabic). She always ended her prayers in Tajik with her *duas* – supplications to God for the health and prosperity for the entire family. I found this experience of bonding with my grandmother while she was doing her midday prayers enchanting. Back then, I did not know much about Islam and its five pillars, but I observed my grandmother and other elderly adults in the family closely and intuitively followed what they were doing.



Figure 1: My grandmother and mother in 1973-1974, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, family archive

My grandmother was born in 1927, already in the Soviet times, but she would always wear a scarf as a symbol that she was a Muslim woman. No man was supposed to see her hair as it was *ayb* (the Tajik word for “shame”, or *uyat* in Uzbek), but she would wear it more in the manner of a secularized Central Asian Muslim woman: binding both her hair and headscarf behind her neck, which technically left the neck open and went against the traditional Islamic outfit from the pre-Soviet period before *hujum*.<sup>3</sup> It also contradicted the more conservative Islamic styles of the post-Soviet period, when Islam was revived in a stricter form in some of the regions of Central Asia, i.e. the Ferghana Valley.

Unlike my grandmother, my parents, who grew up under the fully established communist society and atheist ideology, were not keen on teaching their children the Muslim way of life. They themselves would also follow only certain customs which were dictated by Uzbek society and culture and were common in their local community. Such customs varied from one region to another, and even the locals were not confident which customs had come from the traditions of their ancestors and which were purely Islamic. As my mother would often note, some customs in her hometown were quite similar to those in the Tashkent region, which was closer in distance than Bukhara.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hujum* is the Soviet movement of “liberating” women from their strict Muslim outfits, namely from the *parandja*, or complete closed outfit consisting of robe and veil which are both worn on the head, and thus cover a woman's entire figure from head to toe. This program was launched in on March 8, 1927.

### **My immediate and extended families' religious practices**

My family has controversial views on Islam. In my immediate family, all members are skeptical about religion to various degrees. On the one hand, my parents grew up in the Soviet Union in the 1960-70s and were on the frontlines of promoting the Soviet ideology in their local communities. On the other, when, in the post-Soviet period, many Uzbeks began to revive Muslim practices, my parents expressed feelings of desire to get back to their Muslim roots, but not entirely, wishing to remain half-way here, half-way there. At times, when they wanted to join the believers, they saw too many fallacies in their behavior. They made note of such hypocrisy and this made them distrust Muslims who liked to show off their religious piety. Not liking to look into others' "dirty laundry," they preferred to turn a blind eye to these discrepancies and just mark in their minds that some devotees of Islam are not as saintly as they like to portray themselves.

As a Soviet *docent* (PhD) with a scientific background, my father was always distrustful of religions, mainly due to his doubts in God's existence. He could not but question why the "merciful Allah" allowed so much injustice to happen in this world. This prevented him from fully believing in Him, but he also never denied God. My father's mother died of cancer after several years of suffering when he was only 16, and his father was constantly on business trips in order to provide for their large extended family during my father's adolescent period when his first worldviews were being established. Not having proper parental guidance, my father and his three other siblings grew up on their own. The only ideology provided by the school and university was that of atheism, and he followed it throughout his studies, though without totally giving up his Muslim background. For my father, it was very important to be a part of the community, so he would adjust to the commonly accepted norms and behaviors of his surroundings. In the early independence period, he tried to learn more about true Islam and checked out some newly emerging Islamic organizations, but very quickly became disappointed in their activities as he witnessed hypocritical behavior. For instance, my father noticed that, although alcohol was *haram*, many Uzbek men still drank it heavily; he also noticed that it was common for people to cheat in the bazaar even though Islam does not permit this. Some of his relatives would brag about these actions and my father could not comprehend how such behavior and talk fit into Islamic teaching. He also heard about mosque clergymen who were often caught with drugs. Witnessing such behavior prevented him from becoming closely involved with religion; however, my father created his own way of practicing Islam: he does not consume alcohol, fasts during Ramazon,<sup>4</sup> and occasionally offers prayers. Thus, my father also represents a case of dichotomy between belief and disbelief in Islam; he does what he feels is right, but cannot accept fully a faith in which too many people break even the most basic rules.

My mother, unlike my father, was very active in her school's social life. She was from the generation of Soviet youngsters who would chase down the deeply religious members of their

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<sup>4</sup> In Uzbekistan, the holy month during which Muslims fast is known as Ramazon, not by the Arabic term Ramadan.

community. They would try to take off the headscarves of Muslim women in their hometown, childishly mocking the women for covering their hair. They would tell them, “Nobody cares to see your hair, take off your headscarves!” She recalls how in response the women would say, “Yes, maybe you do not care, but Allah sees everything, and he will disapprove of us!” My mother in her youth represented that radical Soviet generation of mini-skirt wearers whose grandmothers wore *paranji* (Islamic female dress that covers the body and face). Clothing, especially for females, is very symbolic: society rules women’s lives strictly and it is not appropriate to stand out from everybody else. Not surprisingly, during the initial stages of the *hujum* movement, many women who took off and burned their burkas were stoned to death, while in the later Soviet period the opposite was true, and women who covered themselves were heavily criticized. The Central Asian communities have always been very reluctant to change, and, for individuals, it has always been very important to belong to your community, or *mahalla*,<sup>5</sup> with its strict rules and societal regulations.

Later on, my mother went to study in the Textile Institute in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and returned from there very much Russified and Europeanized. She never felt the desire or inclination to wear a headscarf, unlike many of her peers. The only exceptions she made were during funerals and when in mourning for close family members – my grandfathers and grandmother. However, it was not typical Muslim hijab that she wore, but an outfit that Uzbek women are expected to wear at funerals of close family members and at the 40-day and one-year commemorations as a sign of their deep mourning for the lost beloved person.



Figure 2: My mother wearing her headscarf in a more secular way, Tashkent, 1982, family archive

<sup>5</sup> Mahalla is a traditional Uzbek neighborhood, a self-governing community.

In recent years, once she was in her 60s, my mother began to try practicing Islam in a more traditional way and has become a devoted believer, offering more *duo* (supplications) and occasionally *namaz* (prayer). Still, she maintains an internal barrier which keeps her balancing approximately 50% belief with 50% disbelief. She has the same questions as my father as to why Allah allows so much injustice in the world and why good people suffer more while bad people live luxurious lifestyles. Being a product of the Soviet generation, my mother still feels great nostalgia for that period during which she saw much more fairness in society than in today's.

Nonetheless, my mother tries to constantly remind herself of the basic concept of Islam that she absorbed from her mother: "*Hudova shukur!*" (Thanks be to God!). The phrase encodes the idea that we should be grateful to Allah for all the blessings in life and not to complain too much. This is her major daily practice as she does not offer any of the five daily prayers except for the occasional morning prayers (*Bomdod*).<sup>6</sup>

My sister has a somewhat different trajectory. In the early 90s, she started learning Arabic in order to understand Quran. She later got a grant to study in the USA, and there decided that she was an atheist in her heart. Even so, she also identifies herself as a "cultural Muslim" or a person with Muslim background. She happily joins Muslim community events and tries to engage in charity but, similarly to my parents, questions why there is so much unfairness in the world and cannot believe that Allah would allow this. Nowadays, she is more inclined towards agnostic views.

My brother, due to the environment he lives in, believes he is a Muslim, but does not observe the main tenants of Islam. This is also true of most of his friends. He does, however, attend and follow significant Muslim events, rites and rituals, such as funeral *janoza*, wedding ceremonies – including his own *nikoh*<sup>7</sup> – and other Muslim events organized by our relatives. He prefers to live like everybody else in his community, without strong devotion to Islam. He drinks alcohol during festivities and does not go to mosque regularly, pray five times a day, fast during Ramazon, or pay *zakot*<sup>8</sup> in addition to state taxes. His main concern is to be a good father to his children, a good husband to his wife, and a good son to our parents, and he sees his role as a provider, which requires that most of his time be devoted to his job.

I know only of two of my extended family members who became devoted Muslims, and all the women and girls in their immediate families wear hijab (in Uzbek: *hijobga qirdilar*). They are known for being a bit distant from the larger family, especially when they had just begun to follow the ways of practicing Islam. Unlike others in our extended family, these two have successful businesses and have on average twice as many children as my other cousins' families. Some correlation between their

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<sup>6</sup> Bomdod in Uzbekistan is the term given to the morning prayer before beginning fasting during Ramazon.

<sup>7</sup> Nikoh, a Muslim marriage agreement, is conducted between newlyweds in mosques by imams after the couple obtains an official marriage certificate issued by the state civic organization (ZAGS).

<sup>8</sup> Zakot in Uzbekistan is a Muslim tax in the amount of 2.5% of annual income paid by the rich to the people in need once a year during Ramazon or on Kurban Hayit (Eid Al Adha) (accessed at <https://kun.uz/uz/99937797> on 31 August 2021).



conversion to new practices of Islam and their family prosperity is noticeable when compared to other families in the extended branch as they are more financially successful. Yet, they are also criticized for their lifestyle and for forcing their children to pray and wear hijab. I personally do not believe they force their children; I see the young ones learning from their parents, and maybe that is how their internal family relationships operate.

My own Muslim identity construction began, as I have already mentioned, with my grandmother's prayers and folk proverbs containing references to Islam. Later, however, under the influence of formal education in high school and university, my interest shifted to the historic development of religions, starting from early religious beliefs to the first gods of ancient Greece and Egypt, then to the four major religions, and finally, to Islam in Uzbekistan. The religious classes were based on a purely scientific approach, i.e. the historical perspective, but unlike in Soviet times, they did not contain ant-religious atheist propaganda. In general, the government of independent Uzbekistan offered more religious freedom to the citizens, and, as a result, a number of religious groups representing various confessions started popping up in the 1990s, trying to lure in the locals who suddenly felt the need for spirituality. Out of curiosity I educated myself on some of their proclamations distributed via brochures, but none felt as attractive to me as the bonding with my grandmother during her prayers. I felt satisfied with my own spiritual way in which I held an internal dialog with *Hudo*<sup>9</sup> (*Allah*, *God* or *Bog*, all by my reckoning different names for the same higher power or deity).

### **Traveling abroad: new faces of Islam**

In 2007 I traveled to the USA for a second time. This was when I began questioning my own identity and religious views more thoroughly using the academic approach. "What makes a 'Muslim' a true Muslim?" is a question that I asked myself frequently. On the first orientation day in my typical American university environment, I met other international students from different parts of the world. During introductions, many started forming bounds based on common language, region, and, surprisingly for me, religion. Growing up in a subtle and tolerant religious environment, it never occurred to me that groups could be formed around religion because as children we would team up based on age or interests only, and division by religion was the last thing on our minds. In the USA, however, religious identity was more prevalent. Christian students easily navigated between the several churches located on campus and in the vicinity. My American neighbor, trying to be friendly, invited me to the church he visited on Sundays. When I asked him why he wanted to hang out at church on Sunday, he was confused; this was a normal thing to do in rural Midwest America, he said. Church for him was equivalent to a community center. "But I am Muslim..." was my first response, because previously I visited churches only as icons of architecture. Besides, to me both churches and mosques were usually associated with graveyards, and I could not imagine myself having fun at such sad place.

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<sup>9</sup> In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan *Allah* is often called "*Hudo*" or "*Olloh*" depending on the region.

The breakthrough in my mind happened when I started hanging out with other international students who also invited me to a church on the university campus. The great side of this church was that they welcomed all people from any religious background; they even offered their large hall up to Muslim students for their regular prayers, saving them from going back to the dorms in the middle of classes.

Back in 2007, this small college town had no mosque for Muslims, maybe because there was no need for one before. However, I later discovered it had an Islamic Center. As more Muslim students and professors began to arrive in this university from Arab countries, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, we began to gather for major Muslim holidays (Eids) at this Center. Feeling the need to connect with my Muslim peers, I organized several Eid meals at my student apartment to which non-Muslims were also invited. During these gatherings we learned how Islam was practiced differently in different Muslim countries: some practices were similar, but some were different. In such informal interactions we often found more similarities among the different faiths in terms of the basic values of our religious views, and thus, felt more respectful of each other's beliefs. I thus re-confirmed the religious tolerance which I had grown up with from my childhood.

Still, it took me by surprise to see the level of importance given to religion in this small American college town. For a population of nearly 70,000 residents, Muncie (IN) had 20 churches and one Islamic center when I studied there. As international students arrived on campus, the local Christians actively campaigned to encourage them to join their churches. I was invited several times by different Bible study groups, and twice I was given the Bible to read. This felt very sensitive for me, and I wanted to defend my right to personal choice in what I believed and how I practiced my beliefs. Eventually, I started telling other students about Uzbekistan and our religious tolerance and the non-intrusive co-existence among different religions. Remembering that in Uzbekistan women would rarely go to mosques, I also did not feel the need to go somewhere to be connected with God, as I believed I would be heard from any place as long as I had pure intentions in my heart. I therefore continued to live in the same way as I used to in Uzbekistan, just with more consciousness that Muslim people were closely observed in the USA, and that as a representative of my country I should always remember that by looking at me Americans might form an image of all Uzbek Muslims. Nobody there controlled me, but my internal censorship and my parents' *nasihat* (precepts) were the control mechanisms that churches and mosques usually provide for their congregations.

Still, my American friends would question me: how could I call myself a Muslim if I dressed up in Western clothes? Why did I not pray five times per day? Was it okay for me to eat pork? How had my parents allowed me to come to the USA alone, without a male guardian (husband, brother, father)? Thus, in the Midwest I was breaking their stereotypes of what a Muslim woman should look like. Seeing me without hijab and in clothes similar to theirs, Americans were confused by my appearance. "You must be from Mexico or China," was what I often heard and, since these countries were not Muslim, in their minds, I was not a Muslim either.

Unlike my Midwestern USA experience, my life in Germany was drastically different. I went there ten years later, in 2019, to do my PhD when I was older and more experienced with living and traveling abroad. In a way Germany reminded me Uzbekistan: there were more atheists or agnostics there, bureaucracy was very complicated, and social hierarchy was strongly present in most spheres of public life. Surprisingly, unlike in any other places I have lived, the churches could impose taxes in Germany. My bank automatically charged me for these without asking if I was a Christian. Although I have no negative feelings towards Christianity or churches, at that moment I thought that at least my money should have gone to mosques. That was not possible, I was told; mosques exist only on donations and *zakot* paid by Muslims voluntarily.

Nevertheless, Germany seemed to me more accepting of Muslims than other Christian countries. Its largest minority group, Turks, is predominantly Muslim and, in recent years, after the escalation of Syrian conflict, the refugees who arrived in Germany have sharply increased the number of Muslims. Only in Germany have I seen so many women wearing hijab openly without being discriminated against or mocked. My close friends who wear hijab have also noted that they feel more tolerance toward their appearance in Germany.

In 2021, I was able to participate in a workshop on fashion in Islam at the University of Hamburg where several female Muslim researchers were invited to present their studies from different Muslim-majority countries. None of these Muslim presenters, except for one of the moderators, was in hijab. This brought me back to the question: is hijab an obligatory attribute for a Muslim woman? How would I, then, fit into this category?

My experience of living with two Indonesian female students in hijab in a shared apartment revealed to me some insights on how women in hijab behave in their home environment. It was not at all that different from how other women behave, except that no men were allowed to stay in the apartment, and if a male entered the space, my roommates would immediately cover up. In the case of these two women, they wore not only a simple headscarf, but an overall dress that covered their entire body. Living with them, I also tried to dress more modestly and rarely would wear short skirts or shorts, which had not been a problem at all before. Signs about not forgetting to pray were on every door and on the wall of our common space. But, as it appeared to me, only one of these girls offered all five prayers regularly. This was another aspect that reminded me of how often the average Uzbek citizen prays; among my friends and colleagues in Uzbekistan very few would take a break for prayer. Yet, if asked, they all would respond without any hesitation that they were Muslims.

### **Returning to home: “Alhamdulillah!”**

In May 2021, after two years of being absent, I returned to Tashkent. The signs of higher Islamization in Uzbekistan were immediately noticeable at the airport: a room for prayers had been constructed in the main hall. Such rooms were now in all major transportation hubs – including train stations and intercity bus stations. I view it as a positive sign of consideration toward devoted Muslim citizens who wished to

pray in quiet. In many public places, such as bus stops and supermarket entrances, there are now green donation boxes - *ehson kutisi*. Previously, one could see these only in mosques. The *azon* – call for prayer is heard now in every neighborhood, which reminded me of Istanbul. Out on the streets, I began to note in my mind that more and more young girls were wearing *hijab*, and even *nikab* in the manner of the Arab style of dress. When I arranged an appointment with a hair stylist and cosmetologist, I was quite surprised to see these young women in *hijabs*, but at the time with so much make-up on their faces. This made me question again: is such hijab supposed to help avoid attention or on the contrary draw it to a woman? Where was the logic in so-called “modest” appearance?

“You should say *Alhamdulillah*,” my hair stylist told me in an instructive tone when I sneezed. At the silent question in my eyes, she started explaining that it meant “All praise be to Allah,” and that it was a Sunnah to say this upon sneezing and to protect us from *shaytans* (devils) who can enter our bodies. The skeptic in me only smirked at this statement, but I thanked my hair stylist politely for this information. My cosmetologist also says “*Alhamdulillah*!” after sneezing. It is a new trend that I observed in Uzbekistan only after this most recent arrival. Inside, however, I felt that it would be quite fake for me to do this.

My skepticism comes from the fact that this phrase is used by everybody who thinks they are true Muslims. For example, at a local diner for Korean *kuksi* (a type of cold soup) I had an unpleasant encounter with a drunken Uzbek man who touched my back inappropriately but tried to play off the situation as if he had “accidentally” brushed against me and I was falsely accusing him of sexual harassment. In fact, he repeated his action when I was at the cashier, following me when I stood up to leave. For the entire time I had been at the diner, this drunken man had been very loudly repeating “*Alhamdulillah! Hudoga shukur! Shukur! Shukur!*” (Praises to Allah), yet he behaved totally against the Muslim code of behavior. Such demonstrations of devotion to Allah in combination with amoral acts, make me question the authenticity of some Muslims in Uzbekistan. They pretend to live by the laws of Allah, but in reality, their actions speak much more loudly than their words.

### **Conclusion: Questioning my own faith**

These experiences abroad and at home have pushed me to ask a number of questions: What kind of Muslims are the people of Uzbekistan? How should we be categorized? Are we Practicing Muslims? Non-practicing Muslims? Cultural Muslims? Who am I from a religious standpoint: a Muslim, secular Muslim or quasi-Muslim? Is the outfit a definitive indicator of religious belonging for Muslim women or not? What constitutes a modern Muslim Uzbek woman? What pressures does she face? Why are certain rules and scriptures followed, and some not? Who decides which way is the right way of practicing Islam?

Going back to my native roots, Bukhara, which earned the name of a historically “holy city” and was labeled with the epithet “*Buhoro-i-Sharif*” (Sacred Bukhara), now seems to me the most religiously tolerant place I had lived in. The topic of religion was a very personal matter there; nobody asked, “What

is your religion?” – a question which is so common in the West. It was commonly accepted that ethnic Uzbeks were usually Muslims, Jews were *Yohudiy* and Russians were Christians. All respected each other and congratulated each other on religious holidays. Our Russian neighbors would bring us “*kulich*” (Slavic Easter bread) and colored eggs for their Easter, and we would give them *palov* and *is* or *bo’y* (fried bread) for *Hayit*.<sup>10</sup> There was no need for competition about whose religion was better. Elders from each confession taught the younger generations how to behave in accordance with their religion.

The renowned medieval Islamic scholar from Bukhara Bakhaudhin Nakhshbandi proclaimed, “*Dil ba Yoru, Dast ba kor*,”<sup>11</sup> meaning one should devote one’s heart to Allah and hands to work. People in Bukhara, as per my childhood memories, have tried to follow his teachings. Nowadays, some Muslims have forgotten this principle. They chase the superficial symbols of Islam, checking on who is wearing what, how often they offer prayers, or who went on *Hajj* or *Umrah* (pilgrimages to Mecca). I often get the impression that Uzbeks try to impress each other with their level of devotion to Allah.

When asked what kind of Muslim I am today, I would say that I am one who believes in the main principles of all religions: respect for life, respect for dignity, respect for freedom of religion and conscience, respect for freedom of thought and expression, and respect for others. The rest is human interpretation of old scriptures which are still being researched by numerous Islamic scholars around the world. Each country with a Muslim majority has gone through its own historic transformation; consequently, their practices, such as FGM, bride-kidnapping, mandatory wearing of headscarves or burka, are often determined by local contexts and might not be accepted in other Muslim communities. My experience with Muslim identity so far has shown that there is no single confirmed image of a Muslim believer. We as Muslims are quite a diverse and vibrant group of different ethnicities, ages, genders and statuses. I believe that the question of faith should remain personal, between oneself and Allah or God, or whichever name one prefers. Living in a predominantly Muslim country, people in Uzbekistan acknowledge and participate in practices that came from previous generations, even if they do not fit with the mainstream image of Muslims promoted by mass media around the world. Nonetheless, Uzbek Muslims are also Muslims, many of whom are modernized and have adapted their practices to the present times. They keep certain customs and traditions and ignore others, but as a larger community, Uzbek people try to be good Muslims according to their understanding and local norms. Conformity is an important part of belonging to the community, and I feel that it is more important to people in Uzbekistan than is strictly following the Islamic scriptures.

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<sup>10</sup> In Uzbekistan *Eid* is known as *Hayit* (the Turkic word used in Uzbek), or *Id* in Tajik. In Bukhara it is commonly called *Hayit*.

<sup>11</sup> This saying is in Tajik, a widely used language in the city of Bukhara and its surroundings, which means “Heart to God, and hands to work”.

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