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Autoethnography: on the Question of Whose Interests a Native Anthropologist Represents

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Abstract

The question of what and whose interests a native anthropologist represents is important for building rapport with interlocutors, yet it often goes undiscussed during fieldwork. In an academic milieu, this question is embedded in post-colonial and post-modernist critique of Western knowledge production that subjugates non-Western societies to the Western gaze and legibility. In this paper, I deal with the question of whether a native anthropologist helps subjugate the local population to the Western gaze or whether a native anthropologist represents the interests of the locals by articulating these in language understood in international and academic circles. Drawing on my experience of conducting anthropological research on religious speech events in Kyrgyzstan, I use autoethnography to explore and reflect on alternative positions that “native” anthropologists can adopt without facing the false dilemma of needing to choose between either subjugating the locals to the Western gaze or identifying with and representing their interests.

Keywords

Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Islam, autoethnography, speech, postmodernism, postcolonialism, native anthropologist

Autoethnography and post-colonial and post-modernist critique of anthropology

Following my arrival in a small village in southern Kyrgyzstan in April of 2018 to conduct my research on various forms of religious, and more specifically Islamic, speech events, many of the local imams and religious figures were suspicious of me and avoided talking to me, sending me instead from one person to another or not picking up their phones after the first phone call. In order to gain their trust and to have some kind of leverage, I travelled to Bishkek in May and, with the help of a former professor who had instructed me during my BA studies, arranged a meeting with the

head of the *fatwa*¹ department of the *muftiyat*.² At the meeting, I requested that the head of the department provide me with a letter of support to ease my access to mosques in my field area and to vouch that I had no malicious intent in conducting my fieldwork. The head of the *fatwa* department kindly agreed to meet and to talk to me but refused to write such a letter, explaining that he could not demand local imams' cooperation in conducting my fieldwork. Instead, he offered to call up the *kazy* of Osh oblast, with whom I was already acquainted by that time, tell him about me, and ask him to help me if he deemed it appropriate.

As we continued our conversation, the head of the *fatwa* department expressed his frustration with all the scholars and NGO workers who had conducted studies on various Islamic topics which criticized the work done by the *muftiyat* in their publications while not lifting a finger to help them improve their situation. Seen from that perspective, it made sense why the *muftiyat* unofficially urged imams in the country not to cooperate with researchers without its explicit approval. While it might be illuminating to explore and elaborate on the frustrations of the *muftiyat* employees that feel studied, criticized, tamed, and controlled either by the state, NGOs, or international researchers, it might be equally illuminating to turn our gaze to those who study Islam in the country under various premises. Such scholars might pursue various goals in studying and reporting on Islam in the country, such as to fight religious extremism and terrorism, to satisfy the goals of a specific grant funded by an international donor and deliver a product in the form of a report, or to collect data for a research project and advance one's academic career.

Often, those who get to write about different Islamic movements in the country and to label their adherents and practices as extremist, conservative, moderate, progressive or liberal, do this in a language that is spoken by neither the local religious officials nor the local population. In doing so, they exercise power over those whom they study by making them, their practices, and their beliefs legible to the outer world. While such exercise of power by the state over religious subjects comes with a history of anti-religious campaigns by the Soviet Union, the exercise of power by employees of international NGOs and Western academic institutions might be comfortably couched in the post-colonial debates on the Western gaze and the Western subjection of non-Western societies to increased legibility.

Talal Asad, writing in the field of anthropology of Islam, argues that in analyzing the production of knowledge about others one should consider the institutional conditions that made

¹ For transliteration of Russian and Kyrgyz words, I use the "US Board on Geographic Names" system for its simplicity. I use the letter "j" to denote the letter "ж" which in the Kyrgyz language is pronounced more harshly in comparison to the Russian "ж". For instance, the letter "ж" in the words "жизнь" (a Russian word for life) and "жашоо" (a Kyrgyz word for life) is pronounced differently. Moreover, to denote the letters "ө" and "ү" in the Kyrgyz language I use umlauts "ö" and "ü" respectively. For the transcription of Arabic terms, I use the same system as for Russian and Kyrgyz terms with the exception of ayn (') in the word *wa'z*. In quoting other authors I stay true to their transcription of Arabic terms.

² The *muftiyat* is an NGO also known as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK). The head of the SAMK is the *mufti*. Regional representatives on an oblast level are known as *kazys* and are in charge of regional offices, the *kazyiat*, which are located in oblast centres. Regional representatives on a *rayon* level are known as *imam-khatibs* and administer regional offices, or *khatibiyat*, in *rayon* centres. The *fatwa* department within the *muftiyat* issues positions based on Islamic law (*fiqh*) on various questions that people might have pertaining to their religious practices.

its production possible and ask: “What was regarded as worth recording about ‘other’ beliefs and customs? By whom it was recorded? In which social project were the records used?” (2012, p.96) To demonstrate the importance of asking such questions, Asad remarks that precise and comprehensive accounts of the heretical beliefs and practices of the non-Christian Other were catalogued in manuals for inquisitors in medieval Europe. Similarly, Edward Said writes that “there is never interpretation, understanding, and then knowledge where there is no *interest*. This may seem like the most pedestrian truism, but it is exactly this fairly obvious truth that is usually ignored or denied.” (2012, p.318) Criticizing orientalist studies of the Middle East, he claims that knowledge produced about the Orient and Islam in particular is not “...above petty squabbles, being preoccupied only with ideas, eternal values, and high principles” (ibid., p. 311). Instead, he argues that this knowledge production is couched in power relations and that scholars should be deliberate and be explicit about how and why they study Islam and what structures of power made their study of Islam possible in the first place. Asad’s and Said’s accounts are examples of post-colonial critiques of West studying the East, the North studying the South, and the colonizer studying the colonized. They challenge the assumption that anthropological and ethnographic studies of the Other are the result of pure academic curiosity, above the political interests and void of consequential power relations.

While post-colonial critiques of anthropology such as those of Asad and Said view anthropological knowledge production as embedded in power relations, highlighting that the endeavor is not value-free and not “above petty squabbles,” post-modernist critiques of anthropology also question modernist presuppositions that anthropological knowledge and representation are objective, undistorted and universally applicable. In rejecting the “universalizing tendencies of modernism, including modernist understanding of science” (2017, p.8), which presuppose that anthropological labels and descriptions are indisputable facts, Lavenda and Schulz write that “postmodern criticism prompted anthropologists to engage in a reappraisal of their discipline and, in particular, to rethink what was involved in fieldwork and the writing of ethnography” (2017, p.8). In other words, the authors point out that anthropological research involves human beings and that a researcher’s identity and social position induce and influence reactions and interactions with their interlocutors which then became part of the ethnography. “That is, rather than assuming that they were, for all intents and purposes, invisible to the people they were studying, anthropologists began to consider the effect that they had on people with whom they were living. They began to recognize that who they were as individuals and as socially situated actors had an effect on their research” (2017, p.8). This questioning of the modernist understanding of anthropological description and representation as providing objective, universal, and scientific facts about the Other fostered reflexivity and autoethnography as methods that allow for scrutiny and reflection on the role of the researcher in contributing to and influencing the production of anthropological knowledge.

Tied with post-colonial and post-modernist critiques, autoethnography, with its concomitant adoption of reflexivity and personal narratives, places research within the social context of the

fieldwork, explores researchers' influence and contributions to their ethnographic research and writing, and engages with the questions of power, interests and social inequality Rapport (2017). In her historical overview of the literature on autoethnography, Deborah Reed-Danahay, however, writes that there is no single agreed-upon understanding of autoethnography:

Autoethnography is an umbrella term that can refer to autobiographical narratives about the doing of ethnography or being an ethnographer, to the work of anthropologist doing ethnography in their own society (the so-called "native anthropologist"), and to genres of fiction and memoir that incorporates an ethnographic (or "counter-ethnographic"—see Watson, 2013) sensibility about the author's own cultural milieu (2017, p.151).

Moreover, Reed-Danahay also highlights that autoethnography is closely linked to questions of power relations:

Critical autoethnography, when viewed as a genre of research and writing that both takes into account personal experience and becomes an "anthropology as cultural critique" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), can contribute to our knowledge of power and social inequality. [...] They [the authors Burdell & Swadener (1999) of a review article that discusses critical theory and autoethnography] argued that it was crucial to acknowledge the contested nature of concepts such as the self or identity and that any personal narrative should be subject to the question, "Whose interests are being served?" (p. 25). The main point of that article, which continues to resonate for me, was that personal narratives (including autoethnographies) should not be taken at face value but, instead, interrogated for the social positionings they entail. (2017, p.144)

In other words, although understanding of autoethnography might be broad, encompassing native anthropology, or research within one's own society (Hayano, 2001); autobiographical ethnography incorporating personal experiences into ethnographic writing; and ethnic autobiography reporting personal narratives of ethnic minority group members, one should not take these narratives and representations at face value, but question whose interests are being served and represented.

In the spirit of critical assessment of the production of anthropological knowledge as embedded in power relations and not being interest-free, in this autoethnographic work I first focus on how the question of what and whose interests I represent as a Kyrgyz anthropologist working at an academic institution in Germany occupied my interlocutors throughout my fieldwork and informed and influenced my research in known and unknown ways. Thus, in the section "Interlocutors: what and whose interests does a native anthropologist represent?", I place myself in the social context of the fieldwork and attempt to look at myself as a researcher through the eyes of my interlocutors as they tried to build rapport with me and to make sense of my interests (if this is at all possible is another question). In the section "Anthropologists: who is better equipped to produce anthropological knowledge and what interests does this knowledge serve?", I reflect on and

contemplate the same question on a more personal level. Specifically, I inquire whether the production of my ethnographic accounts of forms of religious speech events³ in Kyrgyzstan is couched in the interests of the West, particularly since I am writing in English, a language that is not widely spoken in Kyrgyzstan and the larger region of Central Asia, or whether I represent the views and interests of the local population by translating them into language that is understood in international and academic circles beyond the borders of the country and the Central Asian region. Tying these two questions to the labels of being an insider and an outsider, I maintain that, rather than being understood in dichotomous terms, these two labels should be understood as a continuum that changes depending on what aspect of one's identity is emphasized in a given situation. Additionally, instead of focusing on whether an insider or an outsider anthropologist is able to produce better anthropological accounts, I argue that it is more useful to reflect on what insights personal experiences of such labels engender. In a similar vein, instead of arguing whether one represents the interests of the West or the locals, I maintain that it is possible and necessary to reflect on and find alternative options that evade dichotomous framings. In my case, I adopt a third position where I use my ethnographic data as a means to critique both the current anthropological knowledge about forms of Islamic speech events in Kyrgyzstan and the claims of religious figures and movements in the country who maintain that the ideas and theologies they preach are "native" to Kyrgyzstan since the local population has "historically and traditionally" been Muslim. Finally, in terms of characterizing what kind of autoethnography this current work is, I understand it to be autoethnographic because it incorporates and discusses personal experiences of conducting fieldwork, even if the criterion of being a native anthropologist also applies to my case.

Interlocutors: what and whose interests does a native anthropologist represent?

As demonstrated at the beginning with the example of the conversation with the head of the *fatwa* department of the *muftiyat*, researchers, whether local or not, carrying out fieldwork and requesting information from the local population are not invisible and hidden from them. Rather, like me they are actively trying to build rapport and gain their interlocutors' trust to carry out their work. While the processes of building rapport and gaining trust are essential parts of fieldwork that are widely and routinely discussed as the basis of the ethnographic method, the question of what and whose interests a researcher represents is not explicitly and openly deliberated. Oftentimes it is claimed that the research is motivated by sheer academic curiosity.

However, the hybridity and liminality of being a native anthropologist, but one who is trained in English and more familiar with Western literature and the works of Western anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep than with the works of former Soviet ethnologists (whether Russian or Kyrgyzstani) and who currently works in Germany, raised both interest and suspicion in many of my interlocutors and elicited various reactions and assumptions that revolved around the

³ In my PhD thesis, I define the form of a religious speech as a configuration of different aspects—such as the space, the time, the content, the length, the language, the behavior of participants and the speaker – which are regulated and structured by constitutive rules (such as the rules of Islamic law) and which leads to the conventionalization and rigidity of these aspects and their repetition across various times and spaces. A new reconfiguration of these aspects gives rise to a novel form of speech.

underlying question of what interests I was pursuing. This question, however, was rarely explicitly discussed, and the answer to it was oftentimes assumed. Some people allowed me to participate in various activities they organized and never inquired into the reasons of why I was conducting research; some called me a “chameleon” noticing changes in my behavior and clothing in the mosque on Fridays versus outside of the mosque; some called me a *kafir* (heretic) who lived in a city of *kafirs* (referring to the city in Germany where I lived); and others viewed me as a spy. Let me elaborate on two stories of being called a spy and a chameleon as two of my main interlocutors juggled and struggled between trusting me and rejecting me, unable to locate where my interests lied.

In April of 2018, in order to conduct my fieldwork in southern Kyrgyzstan, I arranged to stay with the grandmother of an acquaintance of mine near the city of Uzgen. I arrived in the village in the afternoon and carried my bags into the room where I would sleep. Not long after my arrival, the neighbors gathered in the yard to pick up the grandmother on their way to visit another neighbor. I greeted them from a distance, and when the grandmother came back, I took my camera and decided to stroll around the village. The next morning, she asked me to show my passport and copied all the information on my passport into a little notebook that she carried in her bag. Afterwards, she also requested that I give her my parents’ full names, their phone numbers, their home address and the addresses of where they worked.



Figure 1: Village in the South of Kyrgyzstan, where I conducted my fieldwork, photo by the author

This made me feel quite uncomfortable, yet I gave everything she requested without any resistance. Later, once we got to know each other, she told me that her neighbors wondered if I could be a spy, and her suspicions grew stronger as I took out my camera and started taking pictures around her house and the village. Although it might be easier to dismiss this instance of being called a spy as a singular unpleasant occurrence—an occurrence that happens to foreign anthropologists as well—this suspicion, I believe, stems from the fact that I had no kinship or social connections to the village. People did not know who I was, who my parents and larger family were, what I had done before, or whether everything I had said about myself and my intentions was true. I was seen as a

rootless figure without any history or anchor in the village, yet who inquired into every detail and took pictures of everything she saw, perfectly fitting the archetype of a spy from the movies who could run away without any consequences at any time once her mission was accomplished.

As for the second story, it took place during my fieldwork in Bishkek in 2019. Since Bishkek is much larger than the village near Uzgen where I had carried out my earlier fieldwork, in order to make sure that I did not miss any important religious events or news, I decided to intern at the head office of Mutakallim, a local religious organization run by women. A friend of mine, with whom I had studied at the university, was working there and secured my smooth entry into the organization by talking to the head of the organization before my arrival and by offering her company and vouching for me during my time there. My association with the organization was helpful in gaining not only access to the events organized by Mutakallim and other religious organizations but also in bringing me into contact with prominent religious figures in the city. Most of the time, in introducing myself to other people I mentioned that I was interning and associated with Mutakallim, which made it easier for people to trust me even if temporarily. Furthermore, by interning at Mutakallim I met one of my main interlocutors, Nurtaajy *ajy*,⁴ a Mutakallim employee who ran a number of study groups in a sewing shop on Jibek Jolu Street, at a women's prison in Stepnoye village, at the shopping center in Osh bazar (market), in the Mutakallim office, and at the Alamedin bazar mosque on Fridays. She kindly let me accompany her and attend some of her study groups.

My encounter with Nurtaajy *ajy* was accidental in a sense. Towards the end of July, while translating a document on the Development Strategy of Mutakallim into English, I found out that the organization had been working with the inmates of women's prison in Stepnoye village for 15 years, running religious education courses. I asked my friend, who was sitting next to me, if she knew the person who gave the religious courses at the women's prison. Less than an hour later, when I was alone in the room, Nurtaajy *ajy* came to the office searching for the head of the organization. As the head was not yet there, we sat in the same room as she waited for her. We exchanged a few words, and then my friend came in and introduced Nurtaajy *ajy* as the woman who had been working with the inmates of the women's prison. Before our official introduction, I had seen Nurtaajy *ajy* a couple of times running around the office. However, I had not realized that Nurtaajy *ajy* came to the office only occasionally as she ran the study groups around Bishkek. It was thanks to Nurtaajy *ajy* that I started attending the mosque at the Alamedin *bazar* and established contact with the female mosque attendees. My initial attempt to establish contact with female mosque attendees at the Old Central Mosque located at the intersection of Gogol and Moskovskaya streets had been unsuccessful as women came there before the Friday *wa'z* (lecture) and left right after the congregational prayer and, unlike at the Alamedin *bazar* mosque, I knew no one who could introduce me to the women and vouch for me.

⁴ Nurtaajy is a pseudonym that she adopted after a dream. It translates to crown (*taajy*) of light (*nur*). Light, here also refers to religious knowledge.

Thus, it was only once I got to know Nurtaajy *ajy* that I gained insights into the Friday *wa'z* and the Friday *khutba*. On Fridays at around 9:00 or 10:00, Nurtaajy *ajy* conducted religious classes for the women that lasted until the imam of the mosque, Sadybakas *ajy* Doolov, whom Nurtaajy *ajy* considered to be her religious teacher (*ustaz*), started the Friday *wa'z*, which was then followed by the Friday *khutba* and the obligatory Friday congregational prayer. Until the second half of my fieldwork in Bishkek, I was not able to attend the Friday *khutba* since many mosques throughout the country did not have separate sections for women. At those mosques that had separate sections for women, the women's sections were oftentimes occupied by men as there was not enough space even for them. This was tolerated because for men, unlike for women, mosque attendance on Fridays was a religious obligation.



Figure 2: Women in a sewing shop in the city center listening to Nurtaajy *ajy*, photo by the author

Accordingly, from the beginning I had to find speech events that were not confined to the mosque or tied to the ritual Friday congregational prayer such as the Friday *khutba* and the Friday *wa'z*. Speech events I was able to study included those at a girls' summer camp at a madrasah, *taalim* (study) and *bayan* (speech) sessions in private houses, *sabak* (religious classes) at religious centers, concerts with religious content in drama theatres, seminars and trainings that revolved around Quranic verses and hadiths in conference halls, and online preaching on Instagram and YouTube. These sources drew my attention and made me acutely aware of the effects and requirements of and on various spaces, times, speakers, content, length, language and the demands on my behavior and bodily comportment. For instance, I knew that YouTube and Instagram videos demanded nothing of me except for my attention; at seminars and trainings I had to make sure that I sat on the

side reserved for women, but I could turn up in trousers and without a headscarf; at *taalim* and *bayan* sessions I had to wear a long dress and a headscarf tied at the back of my neck. Once I started attending the Friday *khutba*, which is an essential part of the Friday congregational prayer, I knew that besides wearing a long dress and a headscarf covering my neck, I had to make sure that no strand of hair was peeking out from underneath the scarf and I had to perform ablution. Noticing how I dressed differently in different contexts as I accompanied Nurtaajy *ajy* to her study groups—attending the mosque on Fridays in long dresses and wearing pants and short-sleeved shirts at the Mutakallim office and while attending her study groups outside of the mosque—Nurtaajy *ajy* teased me, calling me a chameleon as she introduced me to women when I accompanied her. While this inconsistency and constant change in my clothing made her laugh and tease me, another occurrence laid bare how all the effort to build rapport and to gain trust could be shaken when the often undiscussed and assumed question of what and whose interests are being served emerges and hangs in the air.

At some point, all Mutakalim employees were invited to a conference on the prevention of religious extremism. Although I was not a Mutakalim employee, I asked to be allowed to join in my position as an intern. The head of Mutakalim agreed. During the conference, I asked a couple of questions of one of the presenters who had researched how extremist groups recruit from the local population by tracking their online activities. Later in the week, when I attended the women's study at the mosque, Nurtaajy *ajy* took me to the side and asked me what I was doing at the conference and whether I was accompanying her all this time to see if her preaching contained extremist messages. Caught by surprise I told her that I had attended the conference as a Mutakalim team member, a team which she was also a part of. This seemed to settle the matter.

To conclude, while the question of building rapport with interlocutors is essential for the success of fieldwork, the background question of what and whose interest the research or a researcher serves emerges, threatening to dismantle the effort put into building rapport and trust with the interlocutors. The two stories involving two of my main interlocutors demonstrate that the question emerged and hung in the air, occupying my interlocutors' minds, however briefly, as they balanced between trusting me and rejecting me; thus, attesting to the question's importance and salience. The assumption that I was a spy or checking whether Nurtaajy *ajy*'s preaching contained extremist messages are two examples among many others. These assumptions changed from person to person, from topic to topic, and from situation to situation. To give other examples, an imam of a village mosque near Uzgen automatically assumed during our conversation that I advocate and promote LGBTQ rights because I study in Germany. At another time, at a five-day seminar conducted by Shamil Alyautdinov in Alanya, Turkey, a participant asked me over dinner how I could believe in Darwinism. She told me that she would get really angry every time she thought about the time, they were taught the topic in school when she was young. To be clear, I did not mention LGBTQ rights or Darwinism in conversation with either interlocutor. In many cases, goals and interests were assumed and ascribed to me, yet they influenced in substantial ways how my interlocutors related to me, whether they trusted me, and whether they offered me their company.

Consequently, while carrying out fieldwork, researchers should be aware that they are not invisible and hidden from their local interlocutors' gaze and that the interlocutors are tacitly yet acutely aware that the production of anthropological knowledge is not interest- and value-free as some would like to claim.

Insider and Outsider Anthropologists: who is better equipped to produce anthropological knowledge and what interests does this knowledge serve?

If I claim that the goals and interests that my interlocutors ascribed to me during my fieldwork were just assumed, where do my interests as a native anthropologist really lie? Am I rendering religious figures and their activities legible to the outer world and, therefore, subjecting these to the Western gaze, or am I there to alleviate their frustration at being misrepresented? This line of thought is of dichotomous nature as it opposes the East to the West, the Orient to the Occident, outsider to insider account and non-believer to believer account of Islam, and creates the false (in my view) dilemma of needing to choose the one or the other. In his article, Richard Tapper (2012) engages in exactly this debate, arguing against the proponents of Islamic anthropology and in favor of an anthropology of Islam. Essentially, there are two questions that Tapper tackles: (1) who is better equipped to produce an anthropological study of Islam and Muslims: an insider from a studied community, a compatriot separated by different economic, political, class and religious associations, or a complete outsider; and (2) what ideological values and interests does the anthropological production of knowledge serve? In arguing against the proponents of Islamic anthropology, he challenges their inquiry by asking whether "Islam (and the culture and society of Muslims) [can] be studied and understood by non-Muslims?" (p.295), and asks whether studies of Islam are best conducted by Muslims themselves. He contends that Islamic anthropology driven by ideological commitments "tends to be dogmatic and allows little debate, except internally" (p.302). Instead, he recommends conducting a good anthropological study of Islam that has subversive potential, is not afraid to ask awkward questions about political and economic interests of everyone, and leaves the question of whether such studies are best conducted by an insider, a compatriot, or a complete outsider, open to debate.

The question of insider vs. outsider is also pertinent to autoethnography and post-modernist critiques of anthropology as a discipline. As Reed-Danahay (2017) and David Hayano (2001) write, some of ethnographic works are understood to be autoethnographic by virtue of being written by "native" anthropologists. In post-modernist critiques of anthropology, the question of insider vs. outsider is tied to the issue of whether an anthropologist should conduct fieldwork only in exotic, foreign and faraway places where they are bound to experience culture shock and come to understand the workings of not only their own culture but the culture of the place where they conduct their fieldwork, and whether anthropologists can study their "own" culture only by being able to distance themselves from it to gain valuable anthropological insights (Rapport, 2014).

With regards to the question of being an insider or an outsider, I agree with Hayano's statement that these two concepts should not be understood to be in opposition, but rather to form a continuum of identities. One can gain or be given the status of an insider or an outsider based on

her gender, faith, ethnic belonging, education, the language she speaks or country of her birth. For instance, during my fieldwork in the south of Kyrgyzstan I was not able to attend the mosque on Friday because of my gender and because the congregational Friday prayer at the mosque was not obligatory for women; they could pray from home. Consequently, though I was Kyrgyz, I became an outsider. In contrast, I was seen as an insider by Nurtaajy *ajy* and other interlocutors in Bishkek because of my association with Mutakallim. Likewise, while doing fieldwork in Yerevan, Armenia, many of my interlocutors saw me as “their own” (Russian: *svoya*) because I was born in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet country like Armenia, and spoke Russian. Thus, instead of engaging in juxtapositions of whether an insider or an outsider is better equipped to produce anthropological knowledge of Islam and Muslims, like Hayano, I think of these not as fixed but fluid labels that might change depending on what aspect of one’s identity is emphasized in a given situation. Furthermore, instead of focusing on how such labels and their associated statuses can impede or facilitate the collection of data in the field, it might be useful to focus on what insights into the society and the larger ideological processes the hands-on experiences of these labels and concomitant statuses engender. In the following section, I focus on how my experiences of language use and expected dress code and behavior during my fieldwork made me acutely aware of larger changes in Kyrgyzstani society that might not be immediately visible and perceptible without having experienced them.

To start with, there is a general assumption that a native anthropologist in the Kyrgyz context is a Muslim, and therefore, it is easier for her to work with the Muslim population and conduct research about Islam. Although many Kyrgyzstanis do identify themselves as Muslims when asked, their answers of what it means to be a Muslim differ starkly from person to person and from family to family. Julie McBrien (2008) captures this phenomenon very well in her work when she writes that Islam during the Soviet period was reduced to a signifier of ethno-national identity, which meant that being Kyrgyz automatically entails being Muslim. Therefore, beneath a Muslim identity there are different understandings of what it means to be a Muslim. Conducting research among practicing Muslims shed light on this and made me confront my own understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. To give an example, before I started my PhD project on religious speech events in 2017, I assisted my colleague and friend during her fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in 2014. In July of 2014, I travelled to Osh to help her with the on-site translation of interviews. We had communicated via email, and I was supposed to meet her in the morning before the interview. To everyone’s surprise, I showed up in shorts and a T-shirt. Seeing me in shorts, my friend gave me her headscarf to tie around my legs. This did not entirely solve the problem as the scarf was translucent. With a translucent scarf around my waist, I accompanied her to an interview at the central mosque in Osh and at the house of a prominent religious figure in Kara-Suu. This was the first among many other ensuing encounters that challenged me and made me reflect on the question of what it means to be a Muslim and what kind of comportment and behavior are expected. Since then, I have interviewed many other religious figures and lay people and have attended many religious events ranging from madrasah summer camps to concerts and seminars organized by Adep Bashaty, and

from *taalim* sessions of the Tablighi Jamaat to Friday *khutba* (sermon) and *wa‘z* (lecture) in the mosques of Bishkek. In some circles, my identification as a Muslim was enough, in others it was expected that I dress properly by covering the *awrat* (private) parts of the body,⁵ in still others, besides identifying myself as a Muslim and dressing properly I was also expected to pray and fast. In short, there was no fixed conception of what it meant to be Muslim, and it changed from person to person, from family to family, and from religious movement to religious movement.

In connection with the behavior expected, such as fasting or dressing properly, there is also an expectation in regard to the use of language. Although, in contrast to a complete outsider, I did not have to start from scratch to understand my interlocutors, in contemporary Kyrgyzstan the language spoken by practicing Muslims is becoming more and more Arabized, and I first had to become versed in it to be accepted. For instance, in Kyrgyz culture, the greeting “*salam aleykum*” is usually used by men and very rarely by women. However, during my fieldwork, many of my female interlocutors both in the village and in Bishkek used it to greet each other. Moreover, many of my interlocutors often congratulated others on Fridays by saying “*Jumangyz maarek bolsun*” which can be translated along the lines of “have a blessed Friday” or “may your Friday be blessed.” Outside of religious circles, the use of Arabized vocabulary aroused complaints that it was not necessary to use Arabic words and that there were equivalents to these in the Kyrgyz language. For instance, a friend on Facebook shared a post in May of 2018 that stated, “Let’s speak correct and pure Kyrgyz” and juxtaposed Arabic words with their Kyrgyz translations. To make the information clearer to the reader, on the left side I transliterated the Arabic words and on the right side provided their transliteration in the Kyrgyz language with the English translation in parentheses.

Not *alhamdu lillah* — *Kudayga shukur* (thank God)

Not *astafirullah* — *Kuday sakta* (God forbid, although *astafirullah* is used to seek direct forgiveness from Allah)

Not *gyibat* — *ushak* (rumor)

Not *dua* — *bata* (blessing, although the Kyrgyz cognate of *dua* (supplication) would be *duba*)

Not *ilhom* — *ergüü* (inspiration)

Not *ibn* — *uulu, balasy* (son of, child of)

Not *imsak* — *ooz bekitüü* (the start of the fast)

Not *israfkylba* — *ysyrap kylba* (do not waste)

Not *inshallah* — *Kuday kaalasa* (if God wills)

Not *iftarlyk* — *ooz achar* (breaking the fast)

Not *kafir* — *kapyr* (non-believer)

Not *mabda* — *myizam* (law)

⁵ Men’s private parts fall between the belly button and the knees, while women’s private parts include all of the body except for the face, hands, and feet. For more details, see Almambet Osmon uulu (2011) *Islam Negizderi 2: Tazalyk Jana Namaz*, Bishkek: Dilazyk, p. 126-127.

Not *makruk*h — *maküröö* (not recommended)

Not *munafik* — *eki jüzdüü* (a hypocrite)

Not *muslim* — *musulman* (Muslim)

Not *sabr* — *sabyr* (patience)

As one can see, some of the words, like *israf* and *ysyrap*, *kafir* and *kapyr*, *muslim* and *musulman*, *sabr* and *sabyr*, are cognates and differ from each other in their pronunciation only. The fact that sometimes more Arabic sounding pronunciation of the words were used when they could be pronounced in a more Kyrgyz way aroused a sense of annoyance and even indignation in those who did not like the use of Arabic words. For instance, my friends and relatives reacted with jokes and some with annoyance to my register switch when I would pick up a phone in their presence to greet my interlocutors with “*salam aleykum*” and use Arabized vocabulary. After I completed my fieldwork, the Kyrgyzstani research assistant who helped me transcribe some of the interviews struggled with recognizing these Arabized versions and would often misunderstand some concepts in the transcription of interviews. In more religious circles, however Arabized pronunciation of such words was accepted and sometimes even expected along with the widespread use of words borrowed from Arabic. My inadvertent neglect of such expectations in relation to my clothing, behavior or language use caused not only moments of uncomfortable silence but also sometimes led to social ostracization. For instance, once I was not admitted to a *taalim* session because I had not worn a headscarf on my previous visits.

As these stories demonstrate, the status of being an insider or an outsider is not fixed but might change depending on what aspect of one’s identity is emphasized and whether one’s behavior, clothing, or language use conform to other people’s expectations. Thus, instead of questioning whether insider or outsider anthropologists are better equipped with conducting research on Islam, it is more useful to think of these concepts as fluid labels that change from situation to situation. The experiences of these labels and statuses generate insights that might not be otherwise available. Therefore, in agreement with Hayano, my position on Tapper’s first question – who is better equipped to produce an anthropological study of Islam and Muslims: an insider from a studied community, a compatriot separated by different economic, political, class and religious associations or a complete outsider? – is that I see the value of these labels for their ability to generate insights. As for his second question – what ideological values and interests does the anthropological production of knowledge serve? – I agree with Tapper’s recommendation to steer away from ideological commitments and instead ask about the political and economic interests of everyone involved in the research, including the researcher herself.

A critique of both the claims of religious figures and movements and the current anthropological knowledge about forms of Islamic speech events in Kyrgyzstan

Understanding the labels of insider or an outsider as being part of a fluid continuum of identities that might change depending on what aspects of one’s identity are emphasized in a given situation or on the fulfillment or neglect of underlying expectations related to clothing, behavior or language use, and seeing their value not in their dichotomous juxtaposition but in the insights that hands-on

experiences of such identities can generate allows us to transcend the dichotomous framing of the question in terms of “either” and “or”. In a similar manner, instead of juxtaposing and opposing anthropologists’ position as either representing the West or the East, or foreign or local interests, it might be useful to use autoethnography to explore and reflect on alternative interests that might not be visible when one engages with the false dilemma of needing to choose between the two options. As already stated at the beginning, the writing of this autoethnography was an opportunity to contemplate the question of what and whose interest my anthropological work serves on a more personal level. I have chosen to use my ethnographic work as a means to critique both the current anthropological knowledge about forms of Islamic speech events in Kyrgyzstan and the claims of religious figures and movements in the country which maintain that the ideas and theologies they preach are “native” to Kyrgyzstan since the local population has “historically and traditionally” been Muslim.

I criticize, firstly, the claims of contemporary religious figures and movements that the ideas and teachings they preach are “native” to the country and that the Kyrgyz have “historically and traditionally” been Muslim. In making such claims, they dismiss the more than 70 years of Soviet rule during which people did not actively practice Islam and avoid discussing the plurality of religious movements and teachings that poured into the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For instance, my account of my experiences of confronting my own understanding of what it means to be a Muslim and switches in language registers can be framed as evidence of social and cultural changes that have occurred since the dissolution of Soviet rule in the country.

Indeed, much has changed for Islam and Christianity in Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s. Many Protestant missionary groups came to Kyrgyzstan to evangelize and convert local residents to Christianity causing social unrest among the locals and challenging the assumption that being Kyrgyz automatically meant being Muslim. Those who adopted Christianity challenged the conception of what it meant to be Kyrgyz in already economically, politically and socially tumultuous times. As for Islamic movements, two of the most popular international Islamic movements—the Tablighi Jamaat and the Gülen movement—arrived in the country right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first cohort of students that studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, left Kyrgyzstan in 1992 (Bulan Institute, 2016). The Islamic University was established as a madrasah in 1993 and transformed into a university at a later stage. In his book, Mathijs Pelkmans challenges scholars who thought of the ideological landscape of Kyrgyzstan as an empty vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and asserts that the ideological landscape was simultaneously fragmented and was a “terrain of ideology par excellence. That is to say, Kyrgyzstan essentially developed into a laboratory for testing out ideologies” (2017, p.9). In other words, because there is not one dominant ideology in Kyrgyzstan that is naturalized and, therefore, invisible, one can describe the country as full of competing ideologies that can be convincing yet fragile at the same time.

In the meantime, these international religious movements became localized: if, in 1990s, the first members of the Tablighi Jamaat came from Pakistan, nowadays many of the prominent

members of the movement are locals, among them the former *mufti* Maksat Toktomushev. Similarly, if early on the followers of the Gülen movement came from Turkey, nowadays there are many Kyrgyzstani locals who have studied in Turkey under the auspices of the movement and have come back to the country. While these religious movements might have been localized, various religious figures' claims that their teachings and theologies are "native" to the country and their characterizations of the Kyrgyz as "historically and traditionally" Muslim dismiss the plurality of religious ideologies in the country and the historical conditions that produced it.

Secondly, I criticize the current anthropological knowledge about forms of Islamic speech events in general and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. I agree with Linda Gale Jones (2012) who criticizes Western scholars, including Patrick Gaffney (1994) who has written a monograph on Islamic preaching in Egypt, for being preoccupied with the content rather than with the form of religious speech events. Specifically, Jones writes:

There are other more crucial reasons for the relative neglect of the premodern khuṭba, the first of which lies in the modern scholarly preoccupation with content over a premodern valuation of form. [...] Patrick Gaffney expressed a similar opinion when he referred to "the deterioration of formal mosque preaching into the ossified rhetorical set piece which it became, for the most part, in the *postclassical* period," a phenomenon he attributed to "the stylistic requirements associated with this ritual idiom." The stereotype of the fossilized khuṭba burdened under the weight of ornate rhetorical and stylistic exigencies may partly explain the greater interest that the noncanonical hortatory preaching (*waʿz*) and homiletic storytelling (*qasaṣ*) have generated among Western scholars (2012, p.4-5).

In other words, Jones maintains that many Western scholars paid more attention to non-canonical forms of religious speech events such as *waʿz* or *qasas* than to theologically formal and elaborate forms such as the Friday *khutba*. Because the Friday *khutba* followed rules laid down by an Islamic school of law (*mazhab*) that regulated not only its content but also many of its aspects, it was characterized and dismissed as "ossified" or "fossilized" in comparison to the *waʿz* whose features, including the content, were not strictly regulated by the rules of Islamic law. As a result, Western scholars studying Islamic oratory, or what I call Islamic forms of speech events in my thesis, focused mostly on what was said (content) and ignored the question of how it was said (form).

Furthermore, besides bringing the form of religious speech events to the fore along with the liturgical rules underlying them, Jones (2012) urges scholars "to move the scholarly discussions beyond the 'official versus popular' dichotomy" when she writes:

These data [which she discusses chapter 6 of her book] challenge the thesis of a strict divide between the "official" *khutba* and the "popular" forms of preaching advanced by Swartz, Pedersen, and others. While not denying their observations, I argue that the salient differences between the canonical and the extracanonical sermon genres lie in their divergent ritual and rhetorical features and in the nature

of the audience responses, rather than in the “official” or “popular” pedigree of the preacher (p.10-11).

Put differently, instead of characterizing various forms of Islamic speech events as either official or unofficial, she urges that we to look into the liturgical and rhetorical rules and conventions that constitute these various forms of speech events. More generally, looking into liturgical and rhetorical rules and conventions also means taking theology more seriously in anthropological studies.

While Jones’ arguments apply to the anthropological studies of Islamic oratory the world over, her arguments also apply to studies of Islamic forms of speech events in Kyrgyzstan. Many of the anthropological studies on Islam in Kyrgyzstan do not take into account these various forms of speech events. While they might pay detailed attention to the teachings and the history of religious movements and the prominent speakers associated with these movements, they oftentimes do not include detailed discussions of forms of speech events such as the *khutba*, *wa‘z*, *taalam*, *bayan*, *sohbet* or *sabak* via which religious ideologies are disseminated and with the help of which these movements grow. Moreover, by dismissing such forms and the liturgical rules and conditions that constitute them, many of the anthropological studies do not engage with Islamic theology leaving it as the domain of theologians. Furthermore, the characterizations of activities or preachers as official, semi-official or unofficial are always done in relation to the whether they are approved, semi-approved or condemned by state and not in terms of whether they follow theologically sanctioned rules and conventions. Thus, in criticizing both anthropologists of Islam for not taking theology more seriously and religious figures and movements for making claims that ignore the plurality of the religious ideologies and the historical conditions that produced this, I take a third and alternate position, using anthropology as cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer, 2016).

To conclude, while doing fieldwork, anthropologists are not invisible and obscure to their interlocutors, and the latter are aware that the product of anthropological work is not interest- and value-free as some would like to assume. Thus, the question of what and whose interests an anthropologist, whether native or not, represents plays a crucial role in building rapport with and gaining interlocutors’ trust. Drawing on stories from my fieldwork, I demonstrate how my interlocutors struggled to trust me since the question of what and whose interests I represented lingered in the air letting them assume the answer they saw fit. Moreover, in more academic discussions, the question of what and whose interests an anthropologist represents, especially a native one, is framed in dichotomous terms of either representing the interests of the West or of the local population that one studies. Instead of framing the answer to the question in dichotomous terms or evading its discussion altogether, I argue that it necessary to address the question and reflect on answers outside of this dichotomous framing. In my case, I argue that I use my ethnographic work to critique both the religious figures and movements in Kyrgyzstan that claim that their teachings and theologies have always been “native” to the country and the anthropological works that take into account neither the various forms of speech events nor the Islamic theology, rules and conventions that govern them.

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