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# Listening to the wedding speaker: discussing religion and culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan

JULIE MCBRIEN

## Introduction

Autumn 2003 was a particularly busy wedding season in Bazaar-Korgon, Kyrgyzstan. The fresh fruits and vegetables needed for wedding parties in the small Fergana Valley town were plentiful and at the lowest prices of the year. Cash crops had just been harvested, the sale of which provided the funds needed to finance the weddings. The number of weddings was particularly high that year because Ramadan began at the end of October. No one would marry during the month of fasting, and not many wanted a winter wedding, so all the autumn weddings were crammed into September and October. It was easy to tell when there was a wedding nearby from the trumpeting of horns that marked the commencement and conclusion of various stages of the day's events. The rush to marry before Ramadan meant that the days and nights of September and October 2003 were filled with the cacophony of competing horns.

The climax of wedding celebrations in Bazaar-Korgon was the evening party. At a typical event the celebration was held outside in the courtyard of the groom's parents' home. Party lights were strung about, interwoven in the grape vines hanging overhead. The courtyard was dominated by a head table covered with chocolate, alcohol and floral arrangements. The bride and groom, with their witnesses beside them, sat at the table. The bride wore a 'European style' (*evromoda*) wedding dress, rented from a local shop. Her hair would have been carefully styled and perhaps even coloured with metallic-flecked spray, her make-up was most likely 'professionally done'. The bride's witness also wore her best dress and had done her hair and make-up in a similar fashion. The groom and his friend donned suits and Uzbek hats (*doppas*). Behind the party hung a large backboard colourfully painted with the words 'Welcome' (*kosh kelingniz*) and bedecked with blinking lights.

Evening wedding parties nearly always included a DJ who played music and orchestrated the toasts, the exchange of gifts, and dances. Several tables would line the centre of the yard. Guests, generally friends of the bride and groom, sat at the tables and ate. During the festivities, members of the opposite sex

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watched and flirted with one another, guests consumed alcohol and the occasional fight broke out. Gossip was circulated at these events. The evening wedding parties were among the most popular social events in town.

However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s some residents of Bazaar-Korgon began holding a different sort of wedding, one which either eliminated altogether the evening party described above or dramatically altered it. Organisers of these 'new weddings' explained their alteration of the ceremony as a religiously motivated act. They claimed that the environment and structure of the 'typical' wedding party, as well as the actions of guests, were inappropriate for Muslims. Thus, they sought to reform the weddings in order to make them more Islamic.

The new weddings took various forms, with the most basic version being one where the organisers excised the evening party, along with other supposed offending elements. Other organisers of the new weddings however, did not find it sufficient to simply cut the 'non-Muslim' elements out of the celebration. In addition to eliminating these practices, they revamped several portions of the wedding ceremony, most notably the evening wedding party. At these events the music, dancing and alcohol were absent. The sexes were strictly segregated, and the bride was hidden away. There were often two head tables. The groom sat at one. At the other was the wedding speaker. The wedding speaker, an Islamic preacher typically from outside the community, was invited to the wedding to deliver a religious message which called the guests to observe more closely the way of Islam. The addition of the speaker turned the celebration into a decidedly religious event directed at transforming the beliefs and practices of the wedding guests.

The altered wedding parties presented a new, and very public, forum for sharing and acquiring religious information in the town. The new evening parties became sites for learning about alternative interpretations of Islam and (possibly) exploring the lifestyle these interpretations implied. However, the evening wedding party was not universally embraced by the community. The ideas expressed in the religious message delivered at the evening party were contested by some. Moreover, the form in which the religious teachings were given was also disputed. Opponents argued that religion should be promoted during religious events and not during cultural rites of passage.

The new weddings were part of a broader trend within the community towards an increased awareness and practice of Islam. The relatively open religious environment of newly independent Kyrgyzstan meant that by the end of the 1990s, competing Islamic ideas were actively propagated and discussed in the town. Moreover, an increasing number of residents had adopted modes of religious behaviour significantly different from those publicly practised during the late-Soviet and early independence period. Thus, the new weddings were not only an actual site where alternative Islamic ideas were promulgated and where new behaviours were 'tried-out' and observed, they were part of the larger debate occurring in the community over the proper understanding of Islam and Muslimness, in short a debate over orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on the reactions of community members to the new wedding parties. It suggests that while the responses to the parties were varied, patterns of

response emerged along generational lines. Similarity of response appeared among age cohorts largely because of their shared ideas about religion and culture. The new weddings had become sites where these concepts and the boundaries between them were contested. Thus, while for the young the wedding could easily be a site of religious exploration, for the middle-aged the new weddings challenged their ideas of religion and culture. Thus, they had more reserved and sometimes outright hostile opinions of the events. As Pelkmans argued in his discussion of religious change in Georgia, religious transformation was contingent on, and shaped by, historically rooted discourses of religion and nationality.<sup>2</sup> Reactions to the new weddings in Bazaar-Korgon were likewise strongly related to internalised discourses concerning culture and religion that developed over the long Soviet period.

### **New weddings and the wider context**

The literature on post-Soviet Central Asia often locates the flowering of religious practice and expression in the early 1990s. While there is some truth to this notion, residents of Bazaar-Korgon were more likely to see the turn of the millennium as the point at which the change in religiosity in their town became palpable. Maksat, a successful trader in his thirties noted that around 2000 Bazaar-Korgon started to become a more religious place. As evidence for his assertion, he mentioned the number of women adopting forms of veiling that covered more of the head and body than the typical forms of cover practised in the town. He also cited the appearance of men at the bazaar who called on people to return to the true path of Islam, to add further weight to his claim. His comments, especially regarding the changing mode of dress among women, were common. Teachers from a school near the main Friday mosque in the region also noted the increasing number of people who, in their words, had 'gone over to religion'.<sup>3</sup> They pointed to women who 'wore their veils like this' (drawing a semi-circle along their face from their ears to their chins) and noted how many men, especially young boys were going to the mosque. Discussions of religion in town nearly always centred on highly visible forms of Islamic observance, and those who engaged in these practices were considered by town residents to be particularly 'religious' individuals. As visible manifestations of piety were being displayed by an increasing number of people, many local residents felt that Bazaar-Korgon had become a more religious place.

While not wishing to (nor being capable of) evaluating the level of religiosity within the town, it is important to note that the basic observations of my informants regarding the increase in the number of people participating in publicly observable Islamic practices was in fact largely true. I myself had lived in the community for a two-year period three years prior to conducting field work, and my personal observations confirmed their assertions. Moreover, data gathered from additional sources further supported this claim. For example a survey of 50 households I conducted in 2004 showed that of those who began praying in 1990 or later, the majority had started after 1998. Finally, and very importantly, not only was an

increase in piety observable, but a corresponding increase in discussion about religious observance was also present.

The relatively free religious environment that developed in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan created a space for public religious practice. It also constructed a venue for debate over what it meant to be a Muslim.<sup>4</sup> This situation was quite different from the one that existed in the (late) Soviet period when being publicly a-religious was the norm and when religious convictions were generally not discussed. Despite the religious persecution and restrictions on religious identification and practice in the early Soviet period, Central Asians' identity as Muslims was not eradicated. Nevertheless, it was altered. Through different but parallel processes, by the late-Soviet period Muslim identity came to be understood as an inherent part of national identity. Many of the 'markers' of national identity being promoted throughout the Union (such as rituals related to the home, life cycle rituals, and certain state-approved Muslim holidays) were also key elements which Muslims saw as inherent in their Islamic identity.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these elements were all the more important because they were among the few forms of religious expression left to Central Asians following the particularly harsh campaigns against Islam in the early Soviet period.<sup>6</sup> Thus, an unintended consequence of Soviet policy was that Muslim identity became fused with the static, primordial notion of national identity so that, tautologically, Kyrgyz and Uzbek national dress, dishes, and holidays became Muslim as well because the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were Muslims.

At the same time, the more public aspects and (according to Soviet logic) highly religious side of Muslim spiritual life had been largely divorced from local definitions of Muslimness and, moreover, reinterpreted as 'bad,' 'extreme,' and not modern. These elements, like performing *namoz*,<sup>7</sup> women wearing clothing and veils which covered the entire head and body, or possessing knowledge of the Qur'an, Hadith and other religious texts, were objectified as the religious part of Islam and seen as the realm of the elderly or a few religious specialists. At the same time, the everyday practices and domestic rituals of Muslim Central Asians were more tightly linked with Soviet notions of culture. Thus, it became possible for Central Asians to maintain a Muslim identity without engaging in many of the religiously prescribed duties such as prayer or fasting. This Muslim identity was maintained through private belief in God and the observance of certain life cycle rituals.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the Soviet 'technologies of rule' had transformed 'Muslim' largely into a cultural category.<sup>9</sup>

The relaxing of religious restrictions in the late 1980s, meant an increased ability to practice religion and to discuss religious issues. At this time interpretations of Islam which stressed regular prayer, covered forms of dress, mosque attendance and which focused on written sources for establishing religious orthodoxy, began expanding in the community. A number of people accepted these ideas and an even larger number took an interest in them. Adherents of these interpretations of Islam questioned the formerly accepted understandings of Islam and Muslimness. This meant anything from decrying as un-Islamic certain cultural practices locally understood to be inherently Islamic, to asserting

the need for observance of certain religious prescriptions in order for an individual to be worthy of the appellation 'Muslim'. In short, the post-socialist period witnessed the rise of self-conscious debate over understandings of Islam and Muslimness.

The new weddings, redefined as overtly religious events whose aim was to invite people to the 'true' path of Islam, were part of this expansion in religious consciousness and debate. Because the weddings were semi-public, the community had easy access to them through either first- or second-hand knowledge. The new weddings where the evening parties were used as a venue to teach a particular interpretation of Islam were a site as well as a symbol for the renegotiation of ideas concerning Islam and Muslimness.

### New weddings

Weddings among Uzbeks in Bazaar-Korgon were lengthy affairs, with meals, exchanging of gifts, and the performance of many rituals before, during and after the wedding day. On the wedding day elaborate meals were prepared and nearly all members of the social networks of the respective families were invited to partake. The bride and groom typically participated in a civil ceremony. During this event they signed the necessary documents at the regional registration office and toured local sites of interest with friends and relatives of their age cohort, a process referred to as 'ZAGS'.<sup>10</sup> The couple also had a religious ceremony held at the bride's parents' home officiated by an Imam or *moldo*.<sup>11</sup> In the evening, a large party, described in the introduction, was held at the groom's parents' home.

Though there was variation in the way the new weddings were held, they all aimed to eliminate the supposedly sinful elements of the 'normal' weddings held in town, such as the drinking of alcohol, dancing, the mixing of the sexes and the public display of the bride. Many organisers of the new weddings accomplished this by completely eliminating the evening wedding party, as it was the part of the wedding perceived to contain the most objectionable elements. In addition, many did away with the Western-style wedding dress as well as the ZAGS.

By eliminating the evening wedding party the organisers of these events eliminated the one aspect of the event that was most gender-integrated. One of the strongest criticisms levelled at contemporary weddings was that men and women mixed together during the party. This was not only perceived as an offence in and of itself but it was thought that such an arrangement might lead to other sins. Since the other aspects of the wedding (i.e. the meals and the *nikoh*) were already highly gender segregated, the removal of the party quickly produced a ceremony celebrated in gender segregated spheres. Moreover, the removal of the evening party eliminated the practice of displaying the bride, an aspect of the ceremony which also violated the gender norms propagated by the new wedding organisers.

Those participating in or adopting this style of wedding presented it as highly a religious event. Moreover, they portrayed the innovations as being introduced for religious reasons. A discussion of the terms used to refer to new weddings is illustrative. At the time of research, there was not a firmly established way of referring to these new weddings in Bazaar-Korgon. When it was necessary to make a distinction between different sorts of wedding, one or two main adjectives were chosen for the purpose of describing which type of wedding it was. More precisely, an 'average' wedding was never referred to as anything other than a 'wedding' (*toi*). However, when the wedding was of the new variety adjectives were applied to the word wedding. The adjectives used, *sunnati* and *ibodat*, signified the overtly religious nature of the events and thus explicitly contrasted these weddings with others that, by implication, were not religious.<sup>12</sup>

A young woman explained 'We call it a *Sunnati* Wedding (*sunnati toi*). Sunna means 'the things the Prophet did'. In this type of wedding we try to honour the things the Prophet said and did'. She went on to say that other words could also be used to denote this type of wedding such as *ibodat* (worship). She emphasised that because an *ibodat* wedding followed the ways of the Prophet, it was, by implication a 'correct' Muslim wedding. She further indicated that the bridal couple were also people who tried to live according to the prescriptions of the Prophet Mohammad. A young man, who himself had married in the new style of wedding was more forthright with his comparison. 'You've been around town, you've seen the way we have weddings? If I speak truthfully,' he said 'the weddings here in our town are not in accordance with our religion'. That is why, he explained, he decided to have a *sunnati* wedding, a wedding 'according to teachings of our Prophet'.

Because the staging of some new weddings eliminated the evening party entirely, the alterations may have been economically as well as religiously motivated. However, the alternative form of new weddings, in which the evening party was transformed rather than eliminated, cannot be explained so easily in economic terms since the savings made by omitting expenditures on alcohol and DJs were partly offset by the costs of transporting and hosting the wedding speaker. What is more significant in these cases is the wedding organisers' self-proclaimed intent to transform these parties into morally acceptable events where religious ideas could be openly propagated. The organisers played upon the semi-public nature of the typical evening wedding party in order to create a forum for the transmission of religious knowledge and for proselytisation. Whatever else may have been involved, the organisers of these weddings made it clear that there was a religious intent underlying the event.

### The wedding speaker

On a cold March evening in the outskirts of Bazaar-Korgon, guests made their way to the house where a new wedding party was to be held. They approached the courtyard surrounding the house in gender, and largely age, segregated groups. When they passed through the door the male guests entered the courtyard,

milled around and talked to friends and acquaintances. Women made their way towards the main house where they passed behind large pieces of cloth that hung near the house and in front of the porch. Once behind the cloth the women were concealed from view. However, small holes in the material enabled women to sneak a look at those gathered in the yard. Tables and benches lined the inner area of the courtyard. In front was a platform with a low table.

The table was decked with food and drinks and behind it hung colourful tapestries and carpets. A few men sat at the table. The groom, hardly distinguishable from the other guests, walked up to the centre table and greeted the men, taking more time to talk with the man in his forties who sat in the middle. After a few minutes, the groom took his seat at his table nearby. The crowd grew silent and those not already seated crowded around, filling every available space in the yard and even spilling onto the street. The man at the centre of the head table took the microphone and began to speak. He welcomed the guests and pronounced blessings for the groom and his new bride. He gave advice about how the new couple should live. He continued to talk. As time passed his voice grew louder and more impassioned, urging the listeners to follow the true path.

His voice waxed and waned, guiding the ear and the emotions of the listeners. He talked for more than 90 minutes. The wedding speaker focused his message on the primacy of prayer in a Muslim's life. He challenged the listeners by saying that all their good deeds, all their best intentions would not be counted if they did not pray:

But this [heaven] is not a daydream . . . the place is promised by Allah. Thanks to what? Thanks to performing *namoz*. If *namoz* is not performed on time . . . if you fast during Ramadan, if your wealth has increased and you give alms (*zakot*), if your way is open and you go on Hajj . . . if you help in the construction of a mosque, or if you give charity, in the end . . . the good deeds that are done by people, as Islam says, as our religion explains, as our parents show, if you do the good deeds, the benefits, the merits will not be written in your book until you perform *namoz*.

He emphasised the need to pray the full five times a day and to begin immediately. He directly challenged the notions that it was acceptable to save up the day's prayers and do them at the end of the day, or that the listeners could wait until their old-age to begin their prayers. He told them that Allah wanted the prayers of young, strong men. Again and again, he appealed to the shortness and unpredictability of life, urging the listeners to begin their duties now lest they be punished for their irresponsibility in the afterlife. He also emphasised that praying and good deeds must be augmented by the act of reminding others of their religious duties:

Whether one is knowledgeable or not, whether old or young, no matter whom the person is, the task is given to each man and woman to call one another back to the right way. Thus . . . if we intend to perform *namoz*, get ready for *namoz*, and get ready for goodness, we should call the people next to us to walk in Allah's, in God's religion. If you yourself don't smoke, don't drink, don't follow the bad way, but your fellow next to you is a drinker, or a smoker, or a thief . . . it is your obligation to call the one next to you back from that way.



There was a small break in his talk and the guests were served *osh* (rice pilaf). Afterwards, the talk began again. When he finished young men came forward to ask questions. Others, including the women who sat hidden behind the tapestries and sheets, passed small pieces of paper forward with their inquiries.

The questions varied. One asked who implements the punishment for those who do not perform *namoz*. Another wanted to know about the legal schools of Islam and why there 'had become so many'. One man asked about marriage and how many wives are allowed. This led the wedding speaker into a discussion of gender roles, female dress and behaviour, men's obligations to the women in their family, and the correct conduct and meaning of a wedding. Though he did not discuss the idea of wedding speakers, he did explicitly condemn the practice of displaying the bride, noting that when a man takes a wife, she belongs to him and should not be paraded and shown to others. Another guest inquired whether it was right or wrong to celebrate *Navruz*.<sup>13</sup> Though the wedding speaker did not expressly forbid celebration of the holiday, he strongly advised against celebrating, noting that in the Shari'a the only holidays mentioned were the two *hayits*<sup>14</sup> and Fridays. He also indicated which elements in these annual celebrations were sinful and why they should be avoided.

There were also a number of questions regarding Hizb ut-Tahrir and 'Wahhabism' which ultimately led to a heated debate between the wedding speaker and a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir who was present at the wedding. The discussion began with a debate over which legal school should be adhered to, whether a Muslim should adhere to only one school or could borrow from all, and ultimately whether the writings of the legal schools should be considered at all. A sharp disagreement on these points between the wedding speaker and the member of Hizb ut-Tahrir led to an argument over who was more knowledgeable about Islam and what type of knowledge was in fact important.

An analysis of the full message of this particular wedding speaker compared with the messages of other speakers would provide interesting and important insight into the types of Islamic ideas circulating in Bazaar-Korgon and how these (varying) ideas interact with one another.<sup>15</sup> This endeavour is, however, beyond the scope of this article. A short summary was provided in order to give an indication of the themes that are being addressed during these wedding parties. The wedding speaker's own message focused heavily on the necessity of the observance of religious duties, with the performance of *namoz* as the foundational practice for a Muslim's life. He emphasised the need for Muslims to act, through prayer and to encourage others to do the same, and not simply to assume that being born Muslim, and doing 'good deeds', qualified one as a good Muslim. He explicitly criticised the notion that religion and religious practice was for the old and encouraged the young to engage in their religious duties. His emphasis on these issues speaks to what he saw as the major shortcomings of the Muslims in the area, namely the lack of religious observance in their lives. The questions asked by the attendees show what Muslims at the event were concerned with. Several questions explicitly sought to ascertain whether or not local practices which were presumed to be part of 'Muslim life' were in fact in accordance with Islam (weddings,

*Navruz*, marriage and its responsibilities). Together, the message and the questions show a preoccupation with the examination of widespread ideas about 'proper' Muslim behaviour, the comparison of these ideas with the teachings of the Islamic texts, and the encouragement to live according to the 'true' (i.e. the scriptural) way.<sup>16</sup> This 'true' way in many cases meant that listeners should change their beliefs about Muslimness and Islam and re-align their lives to fit the 'new' ideas. What they were being asked to leave behind were the customary beliefs that proper Muslim behaviour consisted, in essence, of the marking of life cycle events, the observance of 'Muslim' holidays and religious devotion late in life.

### **Experiencing new weddings: first and second hand**

The messages delivered by wedding speakers at the new evening parties provided an innovative way for residents of Bazaar-Korgon to learn about Islam and to explore alternative ways of being a Muslim. Moreover, the forum was a highly interactive and stimulating one. Wedding guests often commented on how exciting or appealing a certain speaker had been. In fact certain wedding speakers, like a teacher from Andijan, Uzbekistan named Kadirbek, had become locally famous.

Perhaps partly for this reason, the new evening wedding parties in Bazaar-Korgon were popular events, especially among the youth. This counter-intuitive situation becomes clearer when the new weddings are viewed in a broader context. Not everyone shared the opinion of the 'new wedding' organisers that other forms of weddings were unacceptable. The majority of weddings in town were still held in the 'typical' fashion which incorporated the evening party. Thus, the popularity of the new weddings, especially among the youth, did not necessarily indicate support for replacing a party with a religious event. Rather the weddings were popular because they were an additional element, and one that provided a place where people could encounter new ideas and explore their interest in Islam. At the same time, attending a new wedding did not necessitate acceptance (to whatever degree) of either the form of the wedding or the ideas being expounded at the event.

Although for some the wedding was an exciting site for exploration, for others it was far more challenging. As the example of the wedding speech given above illustrated, the messages entailed a fundamental rethinking of the essence of Islam and Muslimness. As a result, some residents of the town experienced the wedding as a challenge to their sense of themselves as Muslim. Opponents of the religious weddings claimed that the new parties were a deformation of 'our culture' and an affront to 'our way of life'. This was especially true for middle-aged and elderly residents whose formative years were during the Soviet period and who had internalised Soviet notions of culture and religion. Whether or not these age cohorts had changed their religious practices or beliefs since the end of the socialist period, they nearly all experienced some form of negative reaction (to varying degrees) to the new weddings. A closer look at some of the residents of Bazaar-Korgon who came into contact with the new weddings, whether first or second hand, will illustrate the varied reactions the events provoked.

## Exploring

### *Delfuza*

Delfuza, a 20-year old girl, was studying *zaochnyi*<sup>17</sup> in her fourth year of University. She had been performing *namoz* for nearly two years, though with one considerable break. Several members of her immediate and extended family also prayed and were very involved in ‘learning more about Islam’. Delfuza herself had also become interested in learning more and had regularly been listening to tape recordings of local Islamic leaders that her older sister passed on to her. She had begun to consider seriously taking up the *hijab* and had been talking to young women who wore that form of veil.<sup>18</sup>

Delfuza had been invited to a new wedding party in Bazaar-Korgon by a friend. She had never been to one before, though she had heard about them quite extensively. She did not know the bride or the groom and thus was a bit nervous about going. Nevertheless she was so eager to see the wedding for herself, and especially to hear the wedding speaker, the famous Kadirbek, that she decided to join her friend. Delfuza prepared for the evening. Had she been going to any other wedding, the preparation would have come as second nature. She would have chosen her most fashionable outfit, perhaps a skirt but maybe pants, carefully coiffed her hair and perhaps even applied a bit of make-up. But Delfuza found herself in a slightly uncertain position the afternoon of the wedding. She had no idea what to wear! She guessed that a long skirt and a long sleeved shirt would be in order, but what about her head? Unmarried girls her age did not wear headscarves. But considering the company she was going with (her friend had been wearing the *hijab* for the last year) and imagining what the event would be like, Delfuza took one of her mother’s largest, and nicest scarves, draped it over her head and pinned it carefully under her chin.

A few days later when Delfuza related the events of the evening she was glowing with excitement over what she had seen and heard. She said she had learned so much from Kadirbek about ‘How we (Muslims) are supposed to live’. What was different about this event, she explained, was the variety of topics that were addressed. She said that when she listened to tapes or talked to others about Islam, there was usually one major theme discussed. But at the wedding people were allowed to ask the speaker a range of questions and thus she got to hear opinions about so many different topics. She thought that was very exciting and interesting. She also could not believe how many young people were there. ‘Before if there was some kind of religious teaching, only old people would go. But there were so many young people there [at the wedding party]’. She said she was definitely going to go to another wedding like this, and would even consider having her own wedding in that fashion when the time came.

The highly gendered space of the wedding was also a new experience for Delfuza.<sup>19</sup> She commented that on a day-to-day basis she saw young men and talked to them. She also said that when she was in the bazaar it never bothered her when she saw men, even if they ran into her in the crowded rows of the

market. At the wedding, however, she felt very different. At one point a man peeked around the curtain looking for someone. His gaze passed over Delfuza:

I bowed my head and lowered my eyes. I felt so embarrassed and ashamed to be seen by him. It was really strange. Then, after the wedding was over, we left the house, went out on the street, and men and women were mixing again. I didn't feel strange at all. But at the wedding, when that man looked at us, I did.

I asked her about her clothes, whether she had made the right decision about what to wear. She flushed, covered her mouth with her hands, and laughed a bit. 'It was so shameful', she said. Apparently many young girls her age were there wearing normal dresses with only modest head covering or none at all. Even the women veiled in only the most normal fashion – a simple scarf over the head tied at the nape of the neck and often revealing hair. Luckily Delfuza only knew one or two of the girls at the wedding. Still, she was embarrassed. She guessed they had been talking about her inconsistency in dress styles—jeans at the bazaar and *hijab* at wedding parties.

### *Sherzod*

Sherzod was a 17-year-old boy whose family had a long history of living in Bazaar-Korgon. He was a high school student and the second of four children. His elder sister attended university in the provincial capital about 45 minutes away and his younger siblings lived at home with him, his parents and his maternal aunt. His father, Ibrahim, 56, had been a foreman at a local plant in town, but had resigned in the early 1990s after disagreements with the management. The plant, like most in the town, closed down not long afterwards. His father remained unemployed. The family subsisted on the produce of their garden, money received from relatives who rented their land outside of town, assistance from Ibrahim's older brother, and a small business they ran selling candy, snacks and school items (notebooks, pens, etc). Their business was successful because of its location—their house was adjacent to a large school.

Sherzod explained that he was very interested in Islam. When he was 14 and 15 he performed *namoz*, but had stopped for a while; he said he wanted to begin again. Many of his friends were also interested in learning more about Islam and had been attending home-based study groups in town. He had been attending the mosque on Fridays for a while but had recently stopped because his father forbade him from going. In a separate discussion, his father had told me he thought prayer was fine, but his son should do it at home like he, and his father before him, had done. Ibrahim said he also wanted to protect his son from religious zealots, so-called Wahhabis, so he no longer allowed his son to attend the mosque. He was afraid of the kinds of things they would teach his son and ultimately he feared that his son would become one of them.

Sherzod had a good relationship with his father and respected him very much. He said he understood his father's reasoning as he himself was worried about

'extremists'. However, Sherzod felt confident that he could discern the difference between what was good and what was extreme. He said that some of his friends were interested in and involved with groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, but that he strongly disagreed with them. Thus, though he knew his father would object if he were aware of what Sherzod was doing, Sherzod often attended the new weddings with the express purpose of hearing the wedding speaker. For Sherzod, attending the new wedding party was a way to explore his interest in Islam while circumventing his father's injunctions against participation in religious events.

Like Delfuza, Sherzod was particularly drawn to the weddings when Kadirbek was speaking. 'Whenever Kadirbek is speaking, we always go', Sherzod remarked. 'My friends and I always listen for news about when he will be in town'. Sherzod said he knew that some people, like his father, may perceive Kadirbek as one of the 'extremists', but Sherzod thought they were wrong. Kadirbek, he said, was just teaching 'real Islam'. For Sherzod, the wedding was one of the few chances he had of hearing religious messages and participating in religious life.

## Rejecting

### *Bakit and Nurlan*

Nurlan, a school teacher in his early fifties, threw a party to celebrate his birthday. There had been a 'new wedding' not long before Nurlan's birthday party and during the evening he and one of his close friends, Bakit, began discussing the wedding. Bakit, also in his early fifties, opposed the new wedding parties. He referred to the messages being taught as 'propaganda'. From other interviews I had conducted with Bakit and his family I learned that Bakit was not opposed to all the ideas espoused by those holding or the new wedding parties or preaching at them. For example, Bakit was against veiling for women but valued prayer. He did not perform *namoz* himself, but his wife had recently begun and his daughter had prayed and studied Arabic for several years at their neighbourhood mosque. Bakit's difficulty with the ideas being taught by people like the wedding speaker was their claim that the practices were mandatory for all Muslims and that these practices were defined as 'proper' Muslim behaviour. Bakit viewed the teaching at the weddings, which again he labelled 'propaganda', as a form of coercion.

But, despite his criticism of the content of the messages delivered at the weddings, Bakit's discussion with Nurlan focused on the form of the wedding, which he said was the biggest problem with it. 'A wedding is not the proper forum for the spreading of propaganda', he said. 'He [the wedding speaker] is trying to do away with Kyrgyz and Uzbek wedding traditions. Tradition is one thing and religion another. Why should he try to do away with our tradition?' Bakit took issue with the fact that a cultural practice had been transformed into a religious event. He felt that religious propaganda should be disseminated at a

religious event, not a cultural one. In his view, the two were, and should remain, separate. At the same time, he saw the transformation as an attack on his, and Uzbek culture.

Nurlan, on the other hand, was largely concerned with the content of the wedding. He immediately accused the speaker of being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Bakit tried to correct his friend's misunderstanding by explaining that in fact the particular speaker who gave the message at the wedding in question was a Wahhabi and that the two were different things. Nurlan was not interested in such a fine distinction. He said that he was certain that in any case the man was an extremist and dangerous and thus the new wedding party was a bad idea.

## Doubting

### *Zeba*

Zeba was a 55-year-old school teacher who had been performing *namoz* and fasting during Ramadan for ten years. She began in 1994 when her husband died, though she says this was not the reason she began. She had long wanted to pray she said, 'But you know, such things were not allowed [during the Soviet period]'. She was considered a devout and religious woman by many of her neighbours and colleagues, though she would hardly label herself as such. What she did like to see herself as was a very open-minded, educated woman. She encouraged her children to be the same and gave them considerable freedom in a society dominated by the control of elders. One of her daughters had chosen to wear the *hijab*. Another routinely wore pants, make-up and a baseball cap. She found both routes valuable and acceptable. She had never been to a new wedding, though some of her children had. This is how she learned about the weddings.

When I talked to her about the evening parties, she said it was good that people had a chance to learn about Islam. She thought the forum for asking questions was particularly 'great'. She herself often had many questions and regularly read books about Islam. As a school teacher, and the daughter of a history professor, she was very supportive of the pursuit of knowledge and she found the pursuit of religious knowledge to be of even greater worth. So at first she endorsed the weddings. However, as her daughters told her more about the wedding in detail she began to wonder about the ideas being presented.

Some of the teachings of the wedding speaker seemed odd to her. When certain practices were deemed un-Islamic and the wedding guests were told not to participate in them (e.g. the discussion of *Navruz* in the wedding message presented in this article), Zeba was a bit nonplussed. She wondered why someone would consider such practices 'un-Islamic'. 'They are Uzbek traditions,' she said.

## Reflections

The new weddings organised in Bazaar Korgon were a means for transmitting alternative ideas of Islam in the community. As such, for those who were

interested they provided a site for learning about, and exploring, certain religious interpretations. But not everyone in the community found the events, or the alternative ideas, so exciting. Nor were all so willing to explore new notions of Islam and Muslimness. The weddings thus provoked a variety of reactions.

The youth saw the events as a way to learn more about Islam and as a forum in which they could seek direct advice on matters of personal conduct. The events were also exciting and stimulating. They offered a chance to interact with others who were also 'interested in religion'. In addition, the large number of youth at the event confirmed that interest and involvement in religion was no longer just for the old. If their parents disagreed with their burgeoning interests, the sight of others of a like-mind helped bolster their confidence in their belief and interests. Moreover, as the example of Sherzod demonstrated, the weddings provided a way for the young to pursue their interest in religion even when their parents disagreed.

The evening wedding party was also a way for the guests to explore certain Islamic teachings and modes of living without having to necessarily accept them. Delfuza's experiences were particularly telling. In wearing the *hijab* and experiencing more complete forms of gender segregation than what she was used to, she got a small glimpse of what 'other' Muslims' lives might be like. At the same time, her experiences did not involve any kind of commitment. This was partly because there was no face-to-face involvement between the wedding speaker and the guests. Moreover, because attendance at the event was open, some guests came to the event knowing few or none of the others present, as was the case with Delfuza. This meant there may have been little pressure to follow the teachings. This absence of pressure to commit stands in contrast to the other main forum for Islamic education in town—the small home-based study groups. Here small groups led by a teacher formed tight units. In these groups a larger amount of religious and social coercion could be placed on members to conform to the teachings of the group.

Attending an evening wedding party was largely commitment free. There was no requirement to 'come again' and the lack of membership in a specified social group gave attendees freedom from social pressure. This was not so different from the kind of learning experienced by listening to cassettes. However, as Delfuza noted, one of the attractions of the evening party was its interactive nature, where guests could ask their questions to the speaker. Attendees received guidance about matters of everyday life such as cross-gender relations, dress codes, morality, etc. Moreover, it was a 'live' event with an exciting atmosphere. It was no coincidence that Delfuza and Sherzod were both drawn not only to the new type of wedding itself, but also to the particular speaker, Kadirbek. The role of a charismatic teacher should not be underestimated in evaluating the attraction of these events for the youth.

It is interesting to note that the youth never discussed the fact that the messages were being delivered at a *wedding*. The use of this type of event to deliver a religious message seemed unimportant. What was important to them was simply the chance to hear the message and ask their questions. Only when Delfuza remarked

that she might consider having such a wedding herself when she got married, was the form of the event explicitly discussed. Even then, Delfuza did not give a good indication as to why she would like to have a 'new wedding' other than the fact that she had liked the one she had attended so much.

For other community members, largely middle-aged and elderly residents, the new evening wedding parties were more threatening than inspiring. Many, like Nurlan and Ibrahim, were against the teachings propagated at the events. In line with the general views on excessive religiosity that people held during the Soviet period, they saw the high degree of religious observance of those involved in the weddings as 'bad' and a marker of 'extremism'. Moreover they disagreed with the admonishments of the speakers, claiming that it simply was not necessary to comply with their teachings in order to be a good Muslim.

The teachings of the wedding speaker represented alternative interpretations of Islam that were gaining currency in the town and thus that threatened customary ways of living Islam. Though people like Nurlan and Ibrahim may have genuinely been frightened of some nebulous threat supposedly posed by 'extremists' and 'Wahhabis', the more salient threat they felt may have been to their sense of self and way of life. Ibrahim emphasised that his son would do well to adhere to the manner of religious piety practised by himself and his father. He attempted to shield his son from influences that may have led him down a different religious path, breaking with the custom and practice of his own family.

Bakit's reactions to the new wedding party, though at times directed at larger, abstract notions like 'culture' and 'religion', were grounded in similar premises to those of Ibrahim in that Bakit criticised a perceived attack on his 'way of life'. His criticism that the wedding organisers were mixing 'culture' and 'religion' in one respect seems odd since it has been argued that Central Asian Muslims largely saw the two notions as coterminous. However in the Central Asian context it is important to remember that Muslim culture had been folklorised and limited to those aspects of Muslim religious life related to the home and life cycle events. Creed argued that 'the socialist emphasis on folklore enhanced the affiliation between ritual and national identity'.<sup>20</sup> In Central Asia, weddings as rituals were canonised as part of national 'Muslim' identity. Thus, though they were definitely perceived as Muslim, this was nonetheless a category largely seen as 'cultural', rather than 'religious'. Other components of Muslim life, such as prayer, religious study, veiling and the propagation of religious ideas, had been objectified as the 'religious' part of Islam and had been designated as the activities of the old or the extremely, even fanatically, religious. Thus while Bakit definitely viewed weddings as part of his Muslim culture, he did not see them as explicitly 'religious' events. By contrast, he perceived the messages delivered at the new weddings as unmistakably religious and therefore out of place.

The religious life espoused by the wedding speaker was clearly threatening to Bakit, Nurlan and Ibrahim because of its attack on their way of life and their understandings of proper Muslim behaviour. The new weddings themselves, at least for Bakit and Nurlan, were direct proof of the threat; they were concrete examples of how these 'new' interpretations of Islam would undermine the most basic institutions of their culture.



A simple analysis of the reactions presented might reveal that those ‘interested’ in Islam or those who practised Islam in a way closer to the mode endorsed by the wedding speaker were the people who supported the event, while others were more sceptical or antagonistic. Yet the reaction of Zeba highlights the fact that this easy dichotomy does not completely hold. A woman esteemed for her religious piety, she endorsed the event as a legitimate means to learn about Islam. Moreover she generally supported the preaching of the wedding speakers. Nevertheless, she found some of their teachings quite odd, especially when they criticised certain cultural practices she valued as Islamic. Her ambiguous position reveals that while she belonged with those ‘interested’ in religion and who saw the weddings as a means to learn and explore, she also shared ideas with those who found the new wedding parties troubling and threatening to an established way of life.

Thus, reactions to the weddings often had as much to do with understandings of the category ‘religion’ as it did with opinions about certain interpretations of Islam and the practices prescribed by these interpretations. A pattern that emerges is that those who criticised the new weddings tended to be of the same age cohort. Zeba was intrigued by and supportive of the weddings for many of the same reasons as the young. But where she differed from them and fell more in line with her contemporaries was in her reaction to the implied renegotiation of the concepts of religion and culture. Regardless of the fact that she differed from her peers in her own religious devotion, she felt the same tension they did when it came to negotiating the boundaries of culture and religion. Zeba, like her peers, had grown up in the Soviet period and her ideas regarding these concepts were shaped by Soviet religious and cultural politics. In her work on consumption in Russia, Humphrey likewise noted that differences in attitudes and ideas were directly linked to age, and thus attachment to Soviet ideals. ‘... the extreme compression of historical changes into a few years has polarised the population; this has occurred most notably by generation, separating those people whose attitudes were formed by the Soviet regime from those who came to adulthood after ... the mid-1980s’.<sup>21</sup>

The sharing of these Soviet ideals, in essence the internalisation and appropriation of these discourses, had a profound effect on how residents in the community reacted to the new wedding parties. In addition to these shared Soviet ideals, certain age cohorts also similarly experienced the weddings as an implicit threat to their way of life and perhaps ultimately the legitimacy of their control of and authority over their children and community. That is why, despite variation in religious belief in practice, patterns of response to the new wedding parties fell (generally) along generational lines.

## Notes and references

1. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), pp 15–16.
2. Mathijs Pelkmans ‘Religion, nation and state in Georgia: Christian expansion in Muslim Ajaria’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol 22, No 2, 2002, pp 249–270, p 251.
3. *Dinge burulup getkin*.

4. This environment was not created completely willingly. It has arisen in part due to the relatively weak Kyrgyzstani state.
5. Nazif Shahrani, 'From tribe to Umma: comments on the dynamics of in Muslim Soviet Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 3, No 3, 1984, pp 27–38, p 35.
6. Bakhtiyar Babadzhonov, 'The Ferghana Valley: source or victim of Islamic fundamentalism?', Lena Jonson and Murad Esenov (eds) 'Political Islam and conflicts in Russia and Central Asia', *The Swedish Institute for International Affairs*, Conference Papers No 24, 1999.
7. *Namoz* – prayers which are to be performed five times a day.
8. Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, 'From tribe to Umma', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 3, No 3, 1984, pp 15–38. Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Late Soviet Union* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1997).
9. Cf Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005).
10. The name for this event comes from the name of the registration office—ZAGS which stands for 'The department for the registration of civil status'.
11. *Moldo* – a religiously knowledgeable man.
12. *Sunnat (Uzbek)*—'Practices in Islam derived from the Prophet's teachings and habits' *Ibodot (Uzbek)*—Worship.
13. *Navruz*—a holiday local thought of as 'Muslim New Year'. It is celebrated on 21 March.
14. *Hayit—Kurban Hayit* and *Ruza Hayit*—the religious holidays commemorating, respectively, Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son (*Qurban*) and the end of Ramadan (*Ruza*).
15. A discussion of this would reveal an interesting duality concerning the weddings and the debate over orthodoxy (Asad, op cit, ref 1, pp 15–16) I have argued in this article that the wedding is part of the debate over orthodoxy between those who adhere to scripturally-oriented interpretations and those who do not (in essence those who are in fact largely 'secular'). However, the wedding is also a public space where debates over orthodoxy occur among Muslims who, by and large, all adhere to scripturally-oriented interpretations of Islam. This discussion would further reveal the complexity of religious belief in the community.
16. The texts referred to in the wedding speaker's message were the Qur'an, Hadith, and writings from the Hanafi legal school.
17. *Zaochnyi* is a Russian word and describes a programme of 'distance learning'. A student is officially registered at a university but is allowed to study at home. Students are required to come at the end of each term to take there exams. Studying *Zaochnyi* is much cheaper than a regular course of study.
18. I use the term *hijab* here to refer to the style of veiling in which a head scarf fully covers the hair and ears. It is fastened below the chin, fully covering the neck. The remainder of the scarf is draped over the shoulders. The term *hijab*, however, is rarely used by residents themselves. If it is, it is used to describe the overcoat-like covering worn by many Muslim women world-wide, rather than the style of veil.
19. Spaces and activities are often gendered in Bazaar-Korgon, with men at a party eating in one room and women in another. However, the wedding ceremony was different because of the curtain which prohibited the sexes from even seeing one another. In this way the practice of separation was heightened and the idea behind the practice somehow altered. Whereas in other contexts the separation can be read as 'men should eat/be with men' and 'women with women' here the implicit meaning was 'men and women should not be together nor see one another'.
20. Gerald Creed 'Economic crisis and ritual decline in Eastern Europe' in Chris Hann (ed) *Postsocialism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p 70.
21. Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002), p 41.