



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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IARO 2004-2005

Country of Research: Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

Title of Research Proposal:

An Anthropological Study of Religious Knowledge and Its Transmission among the Uzbek-Kyrgyzstanis: the relationship between identity, ritual, political marginalization, and Islamism

Topic of Research:

While my original intention was to focus primarily on the Uzbek population in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, I soon decided to include the Kyrgyz population in my research on the acquisition and transmission of cultural and religious knowledge. Specifically, I was interested in how people came to know what they claimed to know about religion and culture and how this influenced the way they practiced religion and expressed their culture. This, I believe, will better explain how people shift their religious practice along a liberal to conservative spectrum. In other words, I expect that this will better explain the differences in religious practice between Kyrgyz living in the mountains of Naryn and the Osh area of the Ferghana Valley. It should also shed light on the differences in religious practice between Uzbeks in Osh and in other parts of the Uzbekistan section of the Ferghana Valley, as well as other parts of Uzbekistan such as Bukhara or Monyaq.

Relevance and Contribution to Field:

Emphasizing the value of what people “know” about religion should contribute to the study of an anthropology of knowledge, which highlights the role “knowing” and who possesses knowledge plays in the analysis of culture. As a contribution to the field of religious studies, it will provide a phenomenological understating of everyday religious life in Central Asia, which will hopefully serve as

an example of how to discuss the pragmatic reality of everyday religious life, beyond the focus on religious elites. Lastly, the research should also prove useful to individuals charged with the task of formulating public policy in a complicated environment. One can, for example, read a book about Islam and still not have any idea of what Islam means to practitioners in Central Asia. It is my hope that this research will help address that problem.

Approach and research methodology:

The multi-site research method utilized informant-guided interviews as well as ethnographic observations of the everyday practice of religion and culture in the public sphere – such as the patronization of mosques and shrines or rituals and ceremonies considered essential to community membership, e.g. weddings and funerals – and the private space – such as prayer rituals or the transmission of cultural knowledge that takes place in homes.

I conducted a 180 question survey of religious practice which included questions on: 1) describing religious and social practice; 2) how people learn about religious; 3) the role of religion in the community; and 4) basic identifying information. Approximately 575 surveys were administered in Osh Oblast and 290 were administered in Naryn oblast. Due to the Andijan events in May 2005, the administration of the surveys in Uzbekistan had to be postponed.

List of research sites:

Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek, Kochkor, Naryn, At-Bashi, Karakol, Talas, Osh, Jalalabat, Eski-Nookat, Jangi-Nookat, Shangkol, Batken, Karasuu, Aravan, Karatai, Korshab, Uzgen, Arbyn, User, Ivanovka

Uzbekistan: Andijon, Ferghana, Margillan, Kokand, Oqkorgon, Namangan, Tashkent, Samarqand, Bukhara, Sokh, Rishton

Tajikistan: Khujand

Research findings and preliminary conclusions:

Initial findings suggest that how people learn about religion and culture influences the way they practice religion and culture and come to an understanding of what is important in their religious and cultural identity. While a significant amount of data remains to be analyzed, inconsistencies in individual behavior suggest a low level of religious knowledge and sheds light on how people are brought under the influence of various religious communities concerned with orthopraxy.

Future research agenda:

I anticipate continuing work on the mapping of religious knowledge in general and the everyday understanding of religion in Central Asia in specific. I would like to place the theoretical findings on the construction of religious knowledge in Central Asia in a broader context, showing the similarities of the Central Asian case with ethnographic work done in Bosnia and Zambia. Regarding future work in Central Asia, I will continue my involvement with the religious communities in the region and hope to further collaborate with local scholars working on religion in Central Asia.

Policy recommendations:

In some ways it seems premature to make policy recommendations based on research findings which have yet to be fully analyzed. That being said, I am sure I will have a number of observations that may be useful for making recommendations after I process the data. Nonetheless, I have observed some tendencies in current U.S. policy working with Central Asian religious leaders that I find as a possible cause for concern. Specifically, there is an emphasis to empower local religious leaders and to train them to address inadequacies and failures of the state. Some imams with whom I talk understand their role to include activities beyond their religious expertise. While I believe religious leaders should be encouraged

to hold the state accountable for fulfilling its obligations, I would recommend that the work of religious leaders be concerned primarily with the religious sector, lest the possibility of establishing a caliphate seem a more attractive and increasingly realistic alternative.