TITLE: SHRINE AND PILGRIMAGE IN INNER ASIAN ISLAM: Historical Foundations and Responses to Soviet Policy

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This paper describes, in highly condensed form, the results of a major study of the role of shrines in Muslim areas of Inner Asia. The study is expected to result in publication of much more detailed reports, which will be unavailable through the Council. Interested readers may wish to contact the Project Director, Associate Professor Devin DeWeese, Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, concerning publication plans.
This project has entailed the compilation of catalogues of Muslim shrines, based upon published and unpublished sources from the 10th to the 20th centuries, in two regions of historically Muslim population in the former Soviet Union, the Volga-Ural region and Central Asia; two research trips to these regions were undertaken, with visits to Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, in September, 1994, and to Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in April-May, 1995. The following conclusions are prompted by insights gained from the material assembled to date, and especially from the firsthand visits to over 120 shrines.

1. The Neglect of Shrine-Centered Religion in "Soviet Islam": Western attention to Islam in the Soviet world has seriously neglected the role of shrines and pilgrimage, or at best has approached shrines solely as potential centers for anti-Soviet or anti-government
agitation; in this way the broader and deeper functions of shrine-centered religious, cultural, educational, economic, and political activities were regularly missed, in large measure because most students of "Soviet Islam" lacked any historically rooted understanding of what roles shrines had played in Muslim societies before Russian and Soviet rule. Such attitudes led Sovietological students of Islam in Central Asia, for instance, to accept the insidious conceit put forward both by the Soviet academic establishment and by the official religious bodies that represented Soviet Islam since World War II, namely the notion that shrine veneration was inherently incompatible with Islam and belonged to the realm of "survivals" of pre-Islamic customs. In fact, whether shrine veneration was compatible with Islam depends upon which vision of Islam one adopts as normative; in Central Asia, however, the consensus of even urban, juridical, Islam for many centuries supported the legitimacy of shrine-centered religious practice, and in any case such practices were the central point of contact between the rites and teachings of Islam and the fundamental concerns of most ordinary people.

The study of shrines in history and at present offers a powerful antidote to the prevailing approaches to Islam in Inner Asia. Work during the past year has confirmed the importance of combining a wide range of sources with visits to selected sites, both in order to add historical and analytical depth and in order to avoid simply repeating the biased and ideologically driven approaches of Soviet (and post-Soviet) ethnographers and journalists. Combining and correlating information from Muslim hagiographies and shrine guides with descriptions produced by travelers and administrators of the Tsarist era, as well as with Soviet anti-religious, ethnographic, and archeological or architectural literature, helped immeasurably in revealing continuities in the complex of shrine visitation, relationships among shrines, patterns of connections between shrines and their communities, and other elements that have escaped attention by observers consulting only one type of source. The site visits confirmed that the local knowledge and understanding of shrines, whether major regional sites or minor communal shrines, was generally much more coherent and communally significant than would appear from the often condescending accounts given by outside observers during the Tsarist and Soviet eras.
2. The Effects of Soviet Rule on Muslim Shrines: As the focal points of popular Muslim attachment to traditional religion, shrines were important targets of Soviet antireligious campaigns, but the extent of the destruction is often not realized, and the same holds true for the continuation of shrine destruction into quite recent times. Present-day pilgrims and shrine caretakers quite often identified the 1980s as a particularly destructive time for shrines; several new shrine buildings, especially in Kazakhstan, were described as replacing structures demolished only in 1986-87, already in the early years of Gorbachev's tenure. While the scale of shrine destruction in earlier decades may be gauged by the scores of shrines noted still in sources from the early 20th century, the pressures on shrines and the harassment of pilgrims remained strong until the late 1980s, and only those shrines that were also famous architectural monuments (which still were subject to preemptive "repairs" that discouraged pilgrimage) were spared neglect and decay, or outright demolition.

3. The Revitalization of Shrines in Post-Soviet Russia and Central Asia: In Central Asia, shrines of all types have undergone a dramatic rise in care, attention, and visitation since the end of Soviet antireligious campaigns, with the most explosive growth occurring since independence. I had visited shrines in the days of Soviet pressures (1983-84) and again in 1991, when there was already a marked increase in pilgrimage activity; the 1995 visits revealed extensive repair and restoration of shrines throughout Turkmenistan and southern Kazakhstan, the erection of completely new buildings on sites where earlier structures had been bulldozed in Soviet times, and a resumption of old patterns whereby new shrines are "discovered" (through a dream announcing that an unknown saint is buried at a particular place, for example). The restoration and rebuilding is often done tastelessly and crudely, from the standpoint of the former architectural or artistic standards employed in shrine construction, but this is in itself testimony to the popular character of interest in and care for shrines (others, to be sure, are being refurbished through state patronage). In addition, many shrines are undergoing a parallel process of "re-Islamization," as figures intent upon a more rigorous observance of Islamic rites and a clearer evocation of Islamic doctrine are able to reassert their authority in an environment from which they had been largely excluded in Soviet times, due to the conceit, noted above, that shrine-centered religious practice was alien to Islam.
4. Ethnic and Regional Patterns in the Complex of Shrine and Pilgrimage:
Substantial variety in the physical complex of shrines and in the types of rites performed survived the Soviet era, and is perhaps most pronounced in Turkmenistan. Turkmen shrines appear to belong to a quite distinct complex not found in any other part of Central Asia: they share some of the kinship focus evident for shrines in Kazakhstan, and evident also in Bashkortostan, but are markedly different in the variety both of the physical features typically found at shrines, and of the style and focus of ritual practices. For example, healing is sought directly by Turkmen pilgrims, by various ritual acts undertaken at shrines, while in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan healing is sought from specialized healers, who may prescribe a shrine visit or may visit a shrine themselves to be reinvigorated. Sites in Kazakhstan were more similar to those in Uzbekistan than were sites in either republic to those in Turkmenistan (despite the great variety of burial styles in evidence near the shrines in Kazakhstan); by contrast Turkmen shrines differed substantially from region to region, with features prominent, for example, near Dushak, to the east of Ashgabat, essentially unknown in Garrygala to the west or in Dashhowuz in the north. On the one hand this variety seems to have been suppressed in Soviet times, if only because of repeated "clearings" of ritual objects from some shrines; on the other hand, the Soviet era may have heightened the isolation of shrine practice in one region from that in others, leaving pilgrims who once again may freely visit local shrines less aware of what is done elsewhere, or of what "should" be done according to stricter Islamic norms. There are some signs, finally, that much of this variety may eventually fall victim to the process of re-Islamization noted above.

5. Religious, Cultural, and Communicative Functions of Shrines: The primary aims of pilgrimage for most people are related to health: they come to restore or maintain health or to ensure fertility. The shrines also serve to teach and reinforce the fundamentals of Islam (since even those who come for health or prosperity typically engage in prayers, ablutions, or other rituals enjoined by "normative" Islam), and increasingly to strengthen a sense of local or regional pride; while some saints and their shrines have been raised to the level of virtual national saints, it remains more common to find the qualities or powers of a local shrine spoken of as a source of distinction from and pride over some other region of the same republic, in an apparent echo of older patterns of shrine rivalries. The
communicative functions of the shrine include not only the display and transmission of Islamic rites, but also rehearsals of stories and legends that were often recorded in pre-Soviet times. Such stories formed an integral part of communal lore, but in most cases we simply cannot trace their continued circulation during the Soviet era; they were nonetheless preserved, and have been passed down to a new generation (we met several quite young shrine custodians who had memorized the stories that accompanied their sites, not smoothly enough to sound like the older men, but well enough to serve pilgrims' needs).

6. Economic, Political, and Communal Functions of Shrines: The new openness with which shrines may be visited and patronized has made them once again important economic centers, through offerings of pilgrims and through patronage by both local communities and, in some cases, the state. Offerings are often substantial, and one measure of the new profitability of shrines is the number of custodians we met who had quite different careers four or five years ago. Shrine after shrine had a new custodian, often appointed by a local communal board to rebuild the shrine, prepare food, maintain facilities for pilgrims, and in general improve the condition -- and the renown -- of the site; in most cases the motivation seems genuinely religious (i.e., to restore a cherished practice formerly off-limits) or cultural (to preserve an aspect of traditional life), or familial (many shrines are being restored by groups claiming descent from the saints buried there), but there are more tangible benefits to be had from shouldering the responsibilities that accompany custody of a shrine.

The political role of the shrines is somewhat more difficult to gauge, although the Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen governments have clearly realized the extent of the good-will engendered by at least posing as defenders and supporters of shrines. Turkmenbashy is praised for looking after Turkmenistan’s holy places, and the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi has emerged as a major focus of Kazakh-Turkish cooperation: several particularly important shrines grace the most popular denominations in the new currencies of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. All this suggests that with shrines, as with other focuses of popular Islamic practice and sensibilities, the post-communist governments of the Central Asian republics have proven much more adept at evoking religious symbolism than were opposition groups; there is indeed no sign of the kind of political activity, supposedly directed against the Soviet
regime, that Western analysts used to see (or imagine) taking shape at shrines or in "Sufi brotherhoods" linked to them. In part this may reflect only the effectiveness of the Uzbek and Turkmen governments in suppressing all opposition, but in large measure it reflects the different (and largely apolitical) concerns that bring most people to shrines. There are, to be sure, some indications (in Kazakhstan especially) that the shrines do serve as a rallying point or symbol for a re-Islamizing intelligentsia; even in Tatarstan, for instance, a major opposition leader made a point of breaking a hunger strike with a drink of water from a sacred spring at the shrine of Timershik, located in a Tatar village some 80 kilometers northeast of Kazan. For the most part, however, the people attracted to shrines hardly belong to the intelligentsia, while most members of the Soviet-educated elites maintain no more than passing interest in the shrines.

In the end we are probably asking the wrong question if we ask what percentage of people regard the shrines as important, holy places with real power. Some people frequent shrines, some go occasionally as the need presents itself, and some laugh at the idea that healing or religious inspiration or anything of value can be gotten at shrines; but everyone knows how to show at least the outward signs of reverence when present at a shrine, everyone makes a sign of respect when passing one, and everyone regards them as places where simple decency demands deference and courtesy, both for the pilgrims and for the "sacred things" preserved there (whether they regard those sacred things as inherently powerful or as infused with value "merely" through the piety of past generations). What matters is that a growing number of people take the shrines seriously, and can now operate in an environment free of the artificial constraints of the Soviet era; whether this situation will lead to further expansion of the shrines' popularity as centers of religious or cultural or political identity, or merely to their survival within an increasingly modernized and secular society, depends more on the development of political discourse in Central Asia, and of the range of symbols available to it, than on the present-day caretakers of or pilgrims to the shrines themselves. The shrines belong among those symbols, and the effective evocation of the religious and cultural legacy they represent retains considerable potential to inspire and mobilize Muslims of the post-Soviet world.