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Negotiating Everyday Islam after Socialism: A Study of the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

Namara Brede

Macalester College, nbrede@gmail.com

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Negotiating Everyday Islam after Socialism:
A Study of the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

Namara Brede
April 12th, 2010

Honors Project
Advisor: Dr. Holly Barcus
Department of Geography
Macalester College

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor Holly Barcus, Geography
Assistant Professor Laura Smith, Geography
Professor James Laine, Religious Studies

Table of Contents

List of Figures	iv
Abstract	v
Acknowledgements	vi
 Chapter I: Introduction	 1
Chapter II: Data Collection and Methodology	6
<i>Field Methods</i>	7
<i>Sampling Procedures</i>	10
<i>Ethnographic Data Analysis</i>	11
<i>Limitations and Positionality</i>	12
Chapter III: Comparative Historical Overview of Islam in Central Asia	15
<i>Religion in the Pre-Socialist Period</i>	17
<i>Religion in the Socialist Period</i>	20
<i>Religion in the Post-Socialist Period</i>	24
Chapter IV: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	26
Part I: Scholarly Debates	27
<i>Practice, Belief, and Identity: Interconnection and Contention</i>	27
<i>Universality and Particularity: A False Dichotomy</i>	29
Part II: The Concept of Scale in Religious Experience and Identity	32
<i>Transnational Islam: A Complex Set of Influences</i>	32
<i>National Islam: Hierarchy and Community</i>	34
<i>Local Islam: History, Diversity, and the Integration of Scales</i>	36
Part III: The Individual Scale	39
<i>Uniformity, Communitas, and Collective Memory</i>	40
<i>Gender, Social Position, and Individual Experience</i>	42
<i>Age and Life Course</i>	45
<i>Education, Authority, and Religious Professionals</i>	48
Part IV: Conclusions and Methodological Applications	51

Chapter V: The Study Area: Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia	53
<i>A Geographic Overview of Bayan-Ulgii</i>	53
<i>Bayan-Ulgii during the Socialist Period</i>	56
<i>Social and Economic Developments in Contemporary Bayan-Ulgii</i>	58
<i>Current Perspectives on Islam in Bayan-Ulgii</i>	61
Chapter VI: Results I: Networks, Identity, and Education	64
<i>Identity and Networks in Context</i>	65
<i>Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity</i>	66
<i>Normativity in Religious Identity</i>	68
<i>Age and Life Course: Narratives and Influences</i>	71
<i>Islamic Learning, Networks, and Family</i>	74
<i>Obligation and Participation</i>	79
<i>Initiating New Religious Practices</i>	80
Chapter VII: Results II: Pious Practices, Places, and Prohibitions	82
Part I: Mosques, Authority, and Changing Poles of Praxis	83
<i>Namaz: A Daily Obligation</i>	84
<i>Almsgiving: A Popular New Form of Piety</i>	86
<i>The Holy Month: Practices during Ramadan</i>	87
<i>Kurban Ait: Everyone's Favorite Festival</i>	89
<i>Circumcision: A Powerful Marker of Identity</i>	91
<i>Marriage and Life Cycle Rituals</i>	93
Part II: Shrines and Sacred Sites as Centers of Piety	95
<i>Location and Significance of Shrines</i>	96
<i>Pious Acts at Shrines</i>	99
<i>Occasions of Shrine Devotion</i>	101
<i>Burial and Funerary Practice</i>	103
Part III: Other Norms and Prohibitions	106
<i>Alcoholic Beverages</i>	107
<i>Headscarves: Gendered Symbols</i>	109
<i>Alternate Figures of Religious Authority</i>	110

Chapter VIII: Position, Power, and Influence: Imams and Religious Authority	113
<i>The Mongolian Islamic Association and its President</i>	114
<i>A Feminine Perspective on Education at the Central Mosque</i>	117
<i>Loci of Community Piety: Rural Mosques and Imams</i>	120
<i>Independent Voices: Private Mosques in Ulgii</i>	124
<i>Conclusions: Dynamic Networks of Authority</i>	128
Chapter IX: Individual Dimensions of Piety, Networks, and Life Course	130
<i>Children of Post-Socialism: Shokan, Mairagul, and their Age-Peers</i>	131
<i>Middle Aged People: Straddling Two Eras</i>	135
<i>The Elderly Generation: Dynamic Role Models</i>	138
<i>Three Generations in Bauerhus: A Concluding Case Study</i>	141
Chapter X: Conclusions: Special Cases and General Truths	145
<i>Scale and Social Change in Local Religious Life</i>	146
<i>The Individual as Integrative Nexus: Identity, Positionality, and Networks</i>	148
<i>Dynamics of Religious Life in Comparative Perspective</i>	149
<i>Recommendations for Future Research</i>	151
Appendix A: Schedule of Lay Interview Questions	155
Appendix B: Schedule of Imam Interview Questions	157
Bibliography	158

List of Figures

Figure 1: A map of Bayan-Ulgii	3
Figure 2: A map of post-socialist Central Asian states	16
Figure 3: An aerial imagery map of Ulgii showing mosque and shrine sites	54
Figure 4: Elderly Mongolian Kazakh herders	57
Figure 5: A Kazakh girl displays her Qur’anic amulet	68
Figure 6: Girls studying Arabic at an Ulgii <i>madrasa</i>	76
Figure 7: A minaret under construction in Ulgii	81
Figure 8: A Kazakh girl wearing dress and headscarf provided by the Ulgii mosque	85
Figure 9: A Kazakh couple wearing Western garb is married by an imam in a traditional <i>ger</i>	95
Figure 10: The Ulgii cemetery seen from a distance	98
Figure 11: An ornate burial shrine beside simpler plots	98
Figure 12: The liquor selection of an Ulgii grocery store covered with a cloth on a Friday	108
Figure 13: A view of the Ulgii central mosque	118
Figure 14: Young students pose with the imam of the Bauerhus mosque	122
Figure 15: The imam of the Bauerhus mosque reads the Qur’an at his desk	123
Figure 16: A photo showing the size and generational diversity of a rural Mongolian Kazakh household	141

Abstract

Using ethnographic interviews and participant observations from the Kazakh community of Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia in June 2009, this study examines how Islamic discourses, practices, experiences, and scales of influence are negotiated in post-socialist Central Asia. To do this, local, national, and transnational dynamics of Mongolian Kazakh religious practice are considered alongside the individual-scale mediating roles of personal preference, social position, life course, power, and social networks. Islam in Bayan-Ulgii is shown to be integral to community and ethnic identity but also multifaceted, dynamic, and multi-scalar, militating against essentialist portrayals of Islam as monolithic or dichotomously split between “high” and “low” forms.

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Chapter I

Introduction

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the newly-independent states of Central Asia opened to the outside world for the first time in over seventy years, provoking upheavals in social, political, economic, and religious life at every level of society (Diener 2007). Despite these exciting developments, Western academics and popular media have tended to ignore or misrepresent the region (consider Sasha Baron Cohen's parody of Kazakhstan in the film *Borat*, for instance) and Central Asia remains "one of the least known and least-understood parts of the world" (Khalid 2007, 3). One of the only aspects of Central Asian development that has attracted even some popular interest is the "resurgence" of Islamic practice and discourse after so many decades of socialist repression. Unfortunately, much of this attention has focused on a small number of violent religio-political movements like those that have gained notoriety in Afghanistan, catering to Western fears of a "resurgent, militant Islam" and ignoring the real diversity and dynamism of Islamic life in the region (Alam 2006).

A few scholars, however, have approached Islam in Central Asia from a more empirical and balanced perspective. By asking descriptive questions at the local scale, these researchers have sought to deconstruct essentialist discourses that portray Islam as monolithic and violent, or categorically disregard the religious practices of Central Asians as "light Islam," a half-hearted attempt to reclaim religious identity after years of state-sponsored atheism (Privatsky 2001). Such studies have illuminated the fallacies of such arguments, showing that religious life in Central Asia exhibits both historical and contemporary complexity; even during socialism, Islam retained an important role in

Chapter I: Introduction

individual, national, and community identity despite changes in the means of religious teaching and practice (Khalid 2007). In the post-socialist context, Central Asian Muslim identities have remained important, while also changing to integrate novel ideas and practices (Privatsky 2001). As borders and political restrictions on religious life have relaxed, a plethora of new discourses of religion have become available to Central Asians, often mediated through the ideological lenses of newly independent states, internationally-oriented religious organizations, and local visions of Islamic piety passed down through the generations (Roberts 2007, 352).

Geographically, most discussions about religion in Central Asia focus on the post-Soviet republics of the former territory of Russian Turkestan, in particular Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Abazov 2007). Turkic Muslim groups, however, are not confined to these states, as exemplified by the Kazakh community in the western Mongolian province of Bayan-Ulgii (Finke 1999; see figure 1). An ethnic and religious enclave in a predominantly Mongolian Buddhist state, the Mongolian Kazakh population provides an interesting case study in post-socialist religious change from a regional geography perspective. Though Mongolia's Kazakhs experienced restrictions and challenges similar to those that affected other Turkic Central Asians, Russian cultural and political hegemony were less direct, and the small, rural Muslim population of Bayan-Ulgii received little attention, xenophobic or otherwise (Diener 2007). Still geographically isolated, modern Mongolian Kazakhs are nevertheless increasingly connected to international religious discourses and population dynamics; foreign-educated imams have begun to teach at newly opened mosques, and many residents have migrated to Kazakhstan through the *oralman* repatriation program (Barcus & Werner 2007).

The Study Area: Bayan-Ulgii in a Regional Context

Figure 1: A map of Bayan-Ulgii (Brede 2009).

Considering the importance of religion and religious identity in scholarly and popular discourse on Central Asia, and the dearth of information on this subject in Mongolia, the main focus of this paper is exploratory. Using primary ethnographic data collected in the summer of 2009, the ways that Kazakhs in Bayan-Ulgii negotiate Islamic practice and identity in a shifting, developing, and increasingly globalized context are examined. More specifically, this investigative case study seeks to answer three primary questions: First, what Islamic practices, discourses, and authorities are present in Bayan-Ulgii, and how are they changing? Second, how do Mongolian Kazakhs integrate these shifting influences into their religious identities and experiences in daily life? Finally, how do the post-socialist religious experiences of Kazakh Muslims in western Mongolia compare with those of other Turkic Muslim communities in Central Asia?

Chapter I: Introduction

In the hopes of providing both descriptive and theoretically rigorous answers to these questions, an interdisciplinary analytical approach that integrates the geographic concept of scale with critical theory in religious studies and other social sciences is employed in this project. This approach rejects essentialist oversimplifications by using the ideas of dynamism, complexity, and multi-scalar interaction as analytical categories, and takes issue with scholars who have, among other things, considered post-socialist religious dynamics in terms of a transition from local heterodox “low Islam” to internationally normative “high Islam” (Alam 2006). When considered in ethnographic detail, however, the local and the global are anything but distinct. Religious experience, practice, and identity emerge as complex, multi-scalar, and interconnected social phenomena mediated through both individual situations and group networks. Different people in different places understand Islam and “Muslimness” in unique ways, and these understandings are constantly deconstructed and reconstructed through discursive, power, and social dynamics. With this in mind, Islam in Bayan-Ulgii is shown to be a polyvocal and dynamic symbol with many meanings, and also a cornerstone of local, national, and trans-national identities for Mongolian Kazakhs (Privatsky 2001).

The following investigation pursues this argument in a number of different ways, beginning with a discussion of the research methods employed during the summer of 2009 to answer the primary research questions. The next chapter then provides a short overview of the history of Islam in the broader context of Central Asia, followed by an in-depth literature review of academic conversations and theoretical considerations involved in an analysis of religion in post-socialist Central Asia. Subsequently, the study area of Bayan-Ulgii is introduced through a consideration of historical, social, and

economic contexts as well as the few available sources on Mongolian Kazakh Islam.

Two thematically organized chapters detailing results of ethnographic fieldwork then follow: the first chapter discusses networks, identity and education, and the second considers pious practices, places, and prohibitions. The results of interviews with imams and religious authority figures are then considered in order to highlight the importance of power and educational dynamics in shaping religious life in Bayan-Ulgii, and the insights thus gained are applied to a selection of individual lay informant narratives. The paper concludes, finally, with a discussion of the broader implications and potential applications of this investigation and its theoretical approach.

Chapter II

Data Collection and Methodology

This ethnographic exploration of religious life in Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia was a fundamentally collaborative effort, owing both its inception and completion to Drs. Holly Barcus and Cynthia Werner's National Science Foundation-funded project "*Networks, gender, culture and the migration decision-making process: a case study of the Kazakh Diaspora in western Mongolia.*" Thanks to this larger project, and a Macalester College student-faculty collaboration grant, our team was able to travel to Bayan-Ulgii in June 2009 and complete the interviews and observations that are the basis of this thesis. Throughout the process of fieldwork and data processing, Dr. Barcus, Dr. Werner, and Dr. Werner's student Celia Emmelhainz were extremely supportive, identifying research questions, methodologies, and resources and helping overcome many difficulties associated with overseas ethnography in a foreign language.

Most of this project's content is based on ethnographic data collected using semi-structured interviews and participant observations. In order to contextualize these results and provide a framework with which they can be interpreted, however, a number of textual sources have also been employed. These texts fall into three broadly defined categories: theoretical approaches to the social scientific study of religion, ethnographic treatments of religion in post-socialist Central Asia, and literature on the history and contemporary situation of Mongolian Kazakhs. While these sources greatly influenced the progress and shape of this project, from a methodological standpoint it is sufficient to note that they spanned several disciplines and theoretical approaches and will be addressed in more detail in chapter four. This chapter focuses on ethnographic

methodologies through discussions of field methods, sampling, data analysis, and limitations.

Field Methods

During June and July of 2009, our research team collected three datasets consisting of twenty-one semi-structured interviews with lay informants, ten semi-structured interviews with imams and religious professionals, and extensive field notes detailing the results of informal participant observations. At this time of this study, little prior fieldwork had been done on the subject of religion in Bayan-Ulgii, so the data thus collected were primarily exploratory and descriptive, but were nevertheless effective at promoting a preliminary understanding of the dynamics of religious life in a specific social context. Ethnographic case studies have often proven useful in describing dynamic social structures as this project endeavors to do. Moreover, ethnography offers logistical and epistemological advantages over more extensive techniques, “allowing interviewees to construct their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words” (Valentine 2005, 111).

In organizing and conducting interviews, it was important to balance the flexibility of informant input with the need for structured responses that could be compared across individuals and aggregated to find themes. With this in mind, an interview schedule was used for both lay and imam interviews, and additional questions were asked to clarify or explore interesting points when deemed necessary (see Appendices A and B for copies of these question schedules). Within this system, flexibility was maintained; after the first week of interviews, several new questions were included that incorporated themes from previous responses, thereby integrating

Chapter II: Data and Methods

respondent input with the need for continuity and comparability. The interview process itself also required flexibility. In most lay interviews, between twenty and thirty questions were asked, however, due to time constraints, some interviews were shortened and restricted to general questions. For interviews with imams and religious professionals, which sought to elicit more individualized narratives, fewer scheduled questions were used and more follow-up questions were asked.

As interviews were conducted in Kazakh, translation and transcription were major methodological issues. The typical interview involved at least two team members—a bilingual Mongolian Kazakh translator and an English-speaking (or, in the case of Dr. Werner, bilingual) American note-taker. For each question, the translator read the question to the informant in Kazakh, listened to the response, and immediately translated the response into English. The note-taker then wrote the response verbatim in long-hand, using extra time taken by translation to complete the transcription. Follow-up questions, when asked, were translated into Kazakh immediately and the response was relayed to the note-taker. After the interview was completed, responses were typed, and the translator was asked to clarify any unclear or incongruous responses. Privatsky used this same technique in his interviews with Kazakh Muslim residents of the city of Turkistan, Kazakhstan (2001, 25). Though designed to minimize linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, this system was necessarily imperfect, and informant quotes should thus be treated as only *approximations* of the original Kazakh.

Like the question of translation, interviewing situations are very important and can color informants' perceptions and responses (Cook 2005). For the most part we endeavored to conduct interviews in homes or other comfortable private spaces,

beginning by reading a consent form assuring respondents of privacy and anonymity and describing potential risks. Unfortunately, however, respondents were rarely alone during interviews, and their responses were thus likely to be colored by the knowledge that other family members or friends may have been listening. Also, interviews were not limited to the “religion” question set; the average interview lasted around an hour and a half and covered several topics including family history, migration patterns, and citizenship. Religious professionals, who were interviewed privately in their own mosques, were an exception to this rule. As Medhurst & Moyser indicate, however, interviewing religious elites poses its own share of difficulties because of informants’ limited time, authoritative positions, and desire to promote particular agendas and present their own roles in a positive light (1987, 97).

This discussion of interview context brings us to the field notes and participant observations from the four American members of our research team—Dr. Werner, Celia Emmelhainz, Dr. Barcus, and Namara Brede. These notes detail informal interactions in both secular and religious situations ranging from rural *gers* (traditional felt tents) to the Ulgii Central Mosque. Though less systematic than interviews, participant observations help “corroborate [informant responses with] complementary techniques” (Valentine 2005, 12). Moreover, the generosity of Kazakhs who invited us into their homes allowed a better understanding of “insider” emic perspectives and gave insight into how informants conceptualized their own religious worlds (Cook 2005). As researchers, we could thus attempt to consider elements of Mongolian Kazakh social and religious life on their own terms alongside the presuppositions and “outsider” etic categories inherent in social scientific research.

Sampling Procedures

Sampling was another critical step in the research process, in many ways as important as the field methods themselves. Because of this investigation's association with Drs. Barcus and Werner's larger project, it shared their "stratified snowball sampling" approach, utilizing social networks and informal connections to recruit informants who fell into specified age, gender, urban-rural, and migrant-nonmigrant categories that reflected broader population structures. Informants in each of these categories then answered both religion and other question sets. Although random sampling is often considered preferable, many sources suggest that stratified snowball sampling offers logistical benefits without degrading academic rigor.

Practically, when operating with a limited budget in an unfamiliar context, stratified snowball sampling has the advantage of easy participant recruitment, and also allows informants to feel at ease with foreign researchers asking what are likely considered odd questions. If informants already know others who have worked with researchers, a more trusting and productive interview environment results (Valentine 2005, 117). Snowball sampling also has methodological advantages when working with populations for which social and family networks are important because it illuminates interconnections of behavior, ideas and discourse that might otherwise be missed (Mohammadi et al. 2008). Noy confirms this idea, stating, "When [snowball] sampling methods are deployed in qualitative research, they lead to dynamic moments where unique social knowledge of an interactional quality can be fruitfully generated" (2006, 328). Such interactional knowledge is useful when asking questions about small-scale social processes and their connection to multi-scalar networks.

Given the impossibility of obtaining a perfectly “random” or “representative” sample with stratified snowball techniques, our goal was instead to select an *illustrative* one (Valentine 2005, 111). For this reason, men and women of different ages and various socioeconomic positions were selected within the social networks sampled. Additionally, as rural and urban lifestyles in Bayan-Ulgii differ greatly, informants in both rural and urban field sites were interviewed (Diener 2007; Finke 1999; Barcus & Werner 2007). Sampling individuals from several communities had the added advantage of incorporating distinct social networks. As will be shown in chapter nine, rural fieldwork also provided the opportunity to build complex family-scale case studies highlighting the interconnectedness of small-town Mongolian Kazakh life.

Ethnographic Data Analysis

Having collected and formatted hundreds of pages of interviews and field notes, the task of data analysis remained. Since the three data sets addressed different issues and populations, unique strategies were applied to each, keeping an eye out for broader themes (Privatsky 2007). As in much exploratory research, themes, once identified, usually led to more questions, suggesting the outlines of “complex situations... [with] more blanks to be filled” (Kertzer 1991, 8). To partially fill these blanks, short answer and narrative responses from the twenty-one lay interviews were organized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet so that different informants’ answers to the same question could be examined side-by-side. Salient tendencies could thus be identified, tallied, and used to select relevant case studies. Care was taken, however, not to over-generalize tendencies to the whole informant pool. To emphasize individual variations in perspective, informant responses were also sometimes considered in their entirety as a conversational

Chapter II: Data and Methods

narrative rather than a string of responses—a reflexive process that showed how informant responses were contextualized and limited by the questions we chose to ask.

Narrative analyses were especially important when dealing with imam interviews and field notes. In the case of interviews with religious experts, examinations of power dynamics and context were critical (Foucault 1978). Imams, for example, often tailored responses to team members, asking about researchers' religious affiliations and even (once) chastising a female translator for not wearing a headscarf. With respect to field notes, observations were colored by personal and cultural biases, experience, and context. Notes written at different points during fieldwork emphasize different themes and observations, even when returning to the same location or observing the same phenomenon. This contextual dependence demonstrates the importance of considering the subjectivity of our own observations as researchers.

Limitations and Positionality

Before beginning an analysis of results, it is important to consider the weaknesses of the methodological approach taken in this project and the steps taken to correct them. Perhaps the most obvious of these limitations concerns the size and composition of the group of informants. As previously noted, the aim of stratified snowball sampling is to collect an illustrative rather than a representational sample. It should thus be acknowledged that certain perspectives, social networks, and families are inevitably privileged within such an “illustration” (Noy 2006, 329).

Utilizing social networks for participant recruitment also posed ethical challenges (Mohammadi et al. 2008). Since participants were asked questions about sensitive subjects like family and religion and were aware that friends and family members were

also answering the same questions, confidentiality on the part of researchers was very important. To minimize risk, all materials containing personal information, even those in English, were secured while in the field, and digital files were password-protected. Moreover, the names of all informants were changed to pseudonyms, as were the names of rural settlements, small or rural mosques, and other communities whose size would allow individuals to be identified from the information provided. As with all research conducted by affiliates of Macalester College, the research design for this project had to be passed by the college's Institutional Review Board, and accordingly no informants under the age of consent (18) were interviewed.

With respect to the efficacy of field methods, face-to-face interviews in contrived situations are limited in their ability to convey the full reality of local religious life. In particular, the importance of affective or implicit modes of practice complicates our analysis. Previous literature suggests that the boundaries between the secular and the religious in Central Asia are porous, and religious self-conceptions are intertwined with taken-for-granted behaviors that are difficult to consciously articulate (Privatsky 2001, 22). One example of such an activity observed informally during fieldwork was *bet sipay*, a face-stroking gesture made after prayer, before meals, as a sign of respect when passing gravesite shrines, and before killing livestock. Because few informants articulated the importance of *bet sipay* and similar activities in interviews, however, our research tends to focus on explicit, directly documentable, and generally public forms of religious life. This approach inevitably privileges particular—often male-dominated—aspects of public piety while de-emphasizing the less visible traditional domestic domain of women, a bias

Chapter II: Data and Methods

only partially corrected by gender-balanced informant sampling and participant observations (Montgomery 2007, 366).

Finally, our positionality as researchers should be addressed. In ethnographic fieldwork, researcher perspectives are extremely influential, informing data collection, treatment of informants, and analytical position (Chidester 1996). Moreover, power relationships between researcher and informant are always at play; as Valentine states, “research [in the social sciences is] embedded in the context of colonialism” (2005, 114). As “secular” American students of socio-cultural phenomena observing and interacting with Mongolian Kazakh Muslims, we must consider this history and be aware of the ways we impose constructions of reality and power dynamics upon informants (Privatsky 2001). In this light, we have endeavored to learn from the mistakes of the past and incorporate insider views and narratives whenever possible in the hope of better representing the experiences of people for whom we have come to care deeply and with whom we have shared many wonderful experiences.

It is hoped that this research can do justice to some of the factors that make the contemporary religious experiences of Mongolian Kazakhs dynamic, exciting, and important in the face of a troubled past and an uncertain future. With our position in mind, a number of tendencies and themes in Mongolian Kazakh religious life have been gleaned from this tangled web of narratives and perspectives. These broad descriptive themes form the basis of the following chapters.

Chapter III

Comparative Historical Overview of Islam in Central Asia

Before considering the results of the ethnographic research, it is important to understand the Central Asian historical and geographic context into which the Mongolian Kazakh case study fits. Central Asia is an enormous region with a complex history, and its limits are difficult to define; as figure 2 shows, Central Asia is often viewed as encompassing only the post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Levi 2007, 15). Mongolia differs from these states culturally, historically, and politically, and was never part of the Soviet Union (Barcus & Werner 2007). Despite these differences, western Mongolia is included in this study's definition of Central Asia because its inhabitants share cultural, national and religious categories, connections, and historical experiences with other Turkic Central Asians.

Taking into account both the differences and similarities between Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and the other Central Asian republics, this section and the subsequent literature review focus mostly on ethnographic data from Central Asian countries other than Mongolia. This comparative approach is employed for a number of reasons, one of the most important of which is practical: literature on religious life (or any other subject) in Bayan-Ulgii is scarce. Moreover, the more abundant ethnographic studies in post-Soviet Central Asian republics suggest that even with the myriad cultural and contextual differences between Turkic Central Asian groups, forms and means of negotiating everyday popular piety share many similarities, including a tendency to be tied to discourses of national identity (Privatsky 2001). Mongolian Kazakhs share language, ethnicity, and social and family connections with Kazakhstani Kazakhs; especially in

Figure 2: A map of post-socialist Central Asian states (FETEC 2010).

light of the recent migrations to Kazakhstan, the linkages between this part of Mongolia and the rest of Central Asia are undeniable (Diener 2007).

Including other Central Asian republics in the review of literature also allows for broader contextualization of the study area and more complete answers to the third research question, which asks how the dynamic social realities of Mongolian Kazakh religious experience compare to those of other culturally similar groups in the region. In this respect, the marked differences between Mongolia and the former Soviet Union are actually an asset, as they allow the identification of unique tendencies as well as common themes that tie the post-socialist and socialist religious experiences of Mongolian and

post-Soviet Central Asians together. The following chapters thus use a geographically widespread set of sources to provide frameworks and points of comparison for the primary ethnographic data. Literature dealing specifically with the study area will be addressed in greater detail in chapter five.

In the interest of comparative study, it is important to acknowledge that Central Asia is very diverse in almost every sense. For this reason, the subsequent discussion is mostly restricted to developments in the regions most geographically and culturally similar to Bayan-Ulgii, notably the Turkic-majority states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Privatsky 2007, Levi 2007). This smaller area is also incredibly varied, but its inhabitants share many linguistic and cultural forms, troubled socialist and modern histories, and unique and complex ways of relating to Islamic experience. Moreover, as the next part of this chapter will show, prior to the colonial imposition of state boundaries, little could be said to definitively differentiate Kazakhs in the Altai from other Turkic groups now residing in Kazakhstan and nearby regions (Finke 1999).

Religion in the Pre-Socialist Period

Turkic people, both nomadic and settled, have lived in Central Asia since around 2000 BCE. These early groups likely practiced a variation of Zoroastrianism adopted from Persian populations, the putative ancestors of today's Tajiks (Levi 2007). *Navruz*, a celebration of the spring equinox, is the most evident modern manifestation of these ancient traditions, and remains the most popular holiday in Kazakhstan, Western Mongolia, and most other Central Asian countries (Levi 2007, 17). Though *Navruz* has long been distanced from its religious roots, the syncretic influence of pre-Islamic

Chapter III: History

traditions on contemporary practices is a major point of contention in scholarship on Central Asian Islam (DeWeese 1995).

Islam first came to Central Asia in the eighth century, with the expansion of the Abbasid Caliphate and the conversion of ruling elites in cities like Bukhara, Khwarizm and Samarkand. In the following centuries, these cities, already great hubs of trade, art, science and medicine, also became renowned as centers for Islamic practice, architecture, and thought (Levi 2007, 20). The religious authority of the clerical *Ulama* and ascetic Sufi orders was highly influential in social and political life even into the early Russian period, maintaining social order through legal and religious codes of *shariat* and *adat*. Pre-modern Islamic discourse was fluid, multivocal, and integrated into the emergent dynamics of local societies (Abdullaev 2002, 246). Communities like Bukhara encompassed a range of Islamic understandings that nevertheless came together around a perceived common religious identity, “living according to both normative and heterodox values” (Privatsky 2001, 74).

Religion and Islamicate culture were not confined to cities during this period; Sufi orders like the Naqshbandis traveled into the Kazakh and Mongolian steppe, bringing technologies, trade goods, and forms of Islamic practice like relic cults and shrine devotion to local nomadic and semi-nomadic populations (Levi 2007, 20). This gradual process of “Islamization” continued into the 15th century, promoting an understanding of Islam for populations like the Mongolian Kazakhs that was intertwined with local cultural practices and the discourses of Sufis and the *Ulama*. While some see these localized practices in terms of syncretism, Privatsky notes that even urban conceptions of Islam were constantly contested. “Muslimness” (Kazakh *Muslimanshilik*) was an essential and

dynamic component of local identity, signifying participation in religious discourses that linked steppe and city, tradition and innovation, at multiple scales (2001, 14).

Pre-socialist Islamic practices on the Kazakh and Mongolian steppe were poorly documented. Some trends, however, are generalizable to populations across the region. In settled communities and cities, many religious activities centered on mosques and included *namaz* prayer, pilgrimages to Mecca and saint shrines like Turkistan, and formal Qur'anic study (Khalid 2007, 183). For nomadic groups like the Kazakhs whose religious activities could not be organized around a stationary mosque, devotional exercises focused on life-cycle rituals like circumcision, marriage, burial, and holiday feasting (Adams 2007, 200). Members of Sufi lineages and Qur'anic experts (*moldas*) were in charge of disseminating Islamic knowledge, preparing amulets, healing, and orchestrating rites at shrines and cemeteries (Privatsky 2001, 94). During this period, the public performance of Islam was a largely male activity; women tended to remain in the domestic sphere and wore heavy cotton *paranji* robes and horsehair veils called *chachvon* (Northrop 2007, 95).

Russian imperial expansion into Central Asia began in the sixteenth century, culminating in 1864 with the annexation of Turkestan, a territory stretching from the Caspian Sea to the base of the Altai Mountains (Levi 2007, 29). This territorial delineation was a turning point for the Kazakh populations living in the inaccessible further reaches of the Chinese-claimed Altai Mountains, outside the bounds of official Russian rule. Contact with European ideologies and power structures unsettled many aspects of religious and social life for populations in both areas, however in many ways the changes were less direct for the ancestors of Mongolian Kazakhs, who remained

Chapter III: History

pastoral and geographically isolated from European imperial pretensions and discourses until the instatement of Soviet-influenced communist policies in Mongolia in 1924 (Finke 1999). Even then, Russian influence touched Soviet Central Asians more directly than it did Mongolian Kazakhs. The policies toward religion that the two socialist governments pursued, however, both had devastating and transformative effects on local culture and daily life. Moreover, the connections between the USSR and Mongolia meant that Soviet ideas about Kazakh national and religious identity influenced life in Mongolia as well.

Religion in the Socialist Period

In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Russian imperial territories were restructured into Soviet Republics, a process that provoked catastrophic political and social upheavals that permanently changed everyday life and everyday piety in Central Asia. Stalinist purges disrupted socio-religious discourses, killing or silencing political and clerical elites along with the religious systems in which they participated (Khalid 2007, 99). At the same time, the Central Asian peoples were divided into ethnic state territories, a process that involved the rhetorical and structural imposition of essentialist differences between groups whose linguistic and cultural (not to mention religious) identities had been historically fluid (Levi 2007, 30). Although Mongolia has been independent since its separation from China in 1921, its communist policies between 1924 and 1990 also led to social restructuring and repression of Muslim and Buddhist religious groups—particularly under the Stalinist Choibalsan regime (Diener 2007).

By 1920, most of the steppe people of Turkestan were organized into the Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), which was further subdivided into Kyrgyz and Kazakh ASSRs in 1924. The two ASSRs became full Soviet Socialist

Republics in 1936 (Svanberg 1999, 2). This example illustrates the arbitrariness of the national categories created by the Soviet “divide and rule” strategy, which enforced ideas of historical, national, and linguistic difference between Central Asian groups at the expense of commonality—a legacy reflected in the modern geopolitics of the region. Keller argues that one driving force behind Soviet nationalization policies was the desire to “limit the dangers of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islam,” diffusing “threats” of large-scale resistance by compartmentalizing larger-scale Islamic and Turkic identities (2001, 79).

Amid this ethnic subdivision, the socialist assault on “religion,” “tradition” and “backwardness,” called the *hujum*, began in 1926—paralleled by similar policies in Mongolia under Choibalsan (Diener 2007, Khalid 2007). Mosques were destroyed, the courts and *madradas* (Islamic schools) of the *Ulama* were closed, and religious experts were killed, imprisoned, deported to labor camps, or forced into hiding (Khalid 2007, 71). Religious practices that did continue were curtailed, restricted to groups of “believers” who had to register with the state. Such groups were forbidden to do charity work, organize community activities, or do anything other than operate places of worship. These policies not only restricted religion, but also imposed specific imperialist discourses. As Khalid writes, “the assumptions about religion that underlay the law—that it was [exclusively] a corporate enterprise undertaken by believers coming together in tangible organizations—derived from Christianity but were now extended in Soviet practice to all religions” (2007, 73).

In light of this conception of religion, Soviet and Mongolian communist institutions saw communal or non-hierarchical Islamic forms as degenerate, ignorant, and detrimental to the new socialist society. In the USSR, one powerful mechanism for this

Chapter III: History

change was the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), an organization whose very name demonstrated its “spiritual” or faith-based religious ideas. Headed by the most compliant of the *Ulama*, SADUM sought to restructure ideas about religion that resisted eradication to suit the needs of socialist hierarchies (Abramson & Karimov 2007, 333). SADUM declared that fasting during Ramadan, *Kurban Ait* (a feast commemorating Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Ishmael), and almsgiving were no longer Islamic obligations since they were “wasteful and unproductive” (Khalid 2007, 110). Visiting shrines (*zirats*), praying for the dead and wearing veils were likewise prohibited (Adams 2007, 199). Through these prohibitions and discursive techniques, SADUM and other socialist institutions restructured ideas about religion, severing connections with the wider Islamic world, relegating most Islamic practices to the domestic and unofficial sphere, and localizing Islamic identity as ethno-national “tradition” (Khalid 2007, 115, 83). Soviet and Mongolian children learned that they were Muslim because they were Kazakh (or Kyrgyz, or Uzbek), but discussions of Islam as a transnational identity were avoided (Privatsky 2001, Post 2007).

Despite these restrictions, Islamic practices, piety, and identity maintained some vitality under socialism and people found new ways of continuing Islamic practices. For example, while many women welcomed the abandonment of the veil, others—either because of personal preference or external factors—demanded to wear it, and the practice was not completely abandoned in public until the 1960s (Northrop 2007, 97).

Pilgrimages and shrine visits also continued sporadically in many different parts of Central Asia, especially during relatively liberal periods like the Khrushchev era; the Takht-i Sulayman pilgrimage to a Sufi shrine in Kyrgyzstan drew tens of thousands of

devotees annually throughout the 1950s, and experienced minimal governmental opposition. Many younger pilgrims, however, having grown up without exposure to such ideas, were unfamiliar with the rites performed by older pilgrims educated before socialism (Khalid 2007, 102).

Many other practices of socialist Islam were performed in the home and local/village/neighborhood community, promoting a common localized sense of “Muslimness” defined in terms of purity, moral uprightness, and certain ritual markers (Khalid 2007). In Kazakhstan, Privatsky notes that circumcision continued to be an important symbol that bodily marked Kazakhs as Muslims, reflected in the popularity of *sundet toi* circumcision feasts despite official prohibitions. *Neke toi* marriage feasts, similarly restricted, were also very popular. Burial and funeral practices were another occasion for Islamic expression, often facilitated by elderly *molda* religious experts who remembered proper rituals of burial and shrine visitation (Privatsky 2007, 63). In rural nomadic areas of Bayan-Ulgii, all of these activities, in addition to some public rituals like *Kurban Ait*, also continued to be practiced despite the opposition of governmental authorities (Finke 1999; Adams 2007, 198).

Since Party members and people in the public eye risked losing careers or worse if they were discovered to engage in overt acts of piety, the shift toward the domestic religious world also changed *who* engaged in Islamic practices. Gillian Tett, working in early 1990s Tajikistan, reported a revealing conversation with a local communist leader who said that he sensed no conflict between being a communist and being Muslim—he might not be able to pray, but, in order for his family to “avoid falling into sin,” his wife and daughter-in-law prayed and fasted during Ramadan in his place. In this piety-by-

Chapter III: History

proxy framework, women became keepers of Islamic purity, piety, practice, and identity—a theme explored in later chapters (Khalid 2007, 103; Privatsky 2007). During the socialist period, older and retired men were also commonly expected to become more pious and represent the community religiously along with women (Adams 2007, 200). This generational religious differentiation, compounded by the different life experiences of people raised before, during, and after socialism, continues to influence the way Islam is practiced today.

Religion in the Post-Socialist Period

After the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union, Central Asian populations again experienced radical and highly varied economic, social, and religious changes. State policies—from the relatively noninvasive approach of Kazakhstan to the intense repression and isolation of Turkmenistan—have been particularly important in determining the way that people “return” to Islam. In those states whose governments permit greater religious freedom (notably Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan), there has been a tremendous resurgence in Islamic practice in both traditional/local and new/transnational forms (Privatsky 2007). In Uzbekistan, however, Islam Karimov’s totalitarian government has curtailed this process in the name of preventing “Islamic extremism” (Adams 2007). Some Western academics’ unquestioning acceptance of Karimov’s reactionary and essentialist rhetoric has led them to contend (in a manner reminiscent of early Soviet discourse) that a new era of “pan Central-Asian Islamic extremism” is at hand (Babadzhanov 2002, 320; Huntington 1996; Alam 2006).

A less alarmist analysis of the trends of Islamic revival reveals that the situation is far more complex. States like Uzbekistan that continue the socialist policy of suppressing

“extremist” Islam can cause more damage than the groups they claim to be controlling, whose aims are usually peaceful and community-minded (Adams 2007). Islamic identity is not inherently antithetical to state power; as the next chapter shows, religious discourse often enforces national categories and can enhance the control of state governments (Khalid 2007, 118). Approaches to Islamic practice also vary greatly along individual lines like gender, age, resources, and social networks (Roberts 2007).

Keeping in mind the historical, geographic, and cultural situation of Central Asia (and Mongolia within it) the following literature review examines ways in which Central Asians negotiate religious discourse, practice, and identity in a contemporary local context. More specifically, it examines the different scales of religious discourse and influence present in Central Asian communities like Bayan-Ulgii and the power structures in which they are deployed. Communal and individual dynamics and networks are also considered, with the goal of understanding the ways individual Central Asians relate to religion. The discussion thus provides a theoretical framework for addressing these complex processes of religious change in the context of interviews and participant observations in Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia.

Chapter IV

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

As post-Soviet Central Asian countries and Mongolia have opened to outsiders in the last two decades, scholars have begun to ask questions about religion in areas long dominated by atheistic regimes. Many of these questions are political, however those of interest to this study are more anthropological: In what forms did Islamic practice and identity survive Soviet atheism and how did they vary in different places? What discourses of religion are present and important in the everyday lives of Central Asians? How do local communities and individuals negotiate the profusion of new Islamic ideas, both domestic and international, available after the socialist era? The following chapter reviews the answers that scholars have found to these questions, and relates their findings to debates that influence the study of Mongolian Kazakh Islam.

This chapter has four parts. Part I begins with an analysis of two ongoing academic conversations about A) the social formations of religious experience, practice, belief, and identity, and B) the role of scale and the validity of categories of “local/low” and “universal/high” Islam. Informed by these debates, religious practices and identities are recognized to be complex, and the dichotomy of universal vs. local is rejected in favor of a more nuanced understanding based on the geographic concept of multiple interrelated scales. Part II comprises an extended discussion of three such scales of religious understanding that affect communities—transnational, national, and local. Part III surveys the literature on a fourth, individual, scale, emphasizing the roles of social position, location, age, life course, and power. Finally, Part IV integrates these arguments and outlines their applicability to the case study of Bayan-Ulgii.

Part I: Scholarly Debates

Practice, Belief, and Identity: Interconnection and Contention

Before discussing the nature of religious practice and identity, it is important to understand these terms and the relationships between them. “Practice,” “identity,” and “belief” are broad, overlapping, contextually-dependent categories that cannot, many argue, be separated from each other. Durkheim’s classic work, *the elementary forms of religious life*, epitomizes this view, defining belief and practice as mental and physical acts by which people relate to shared ideas of the sacred and the profane. For Durkheim, belief and practice are inseparable components of social life that “unite into one single moral community [and identity]...all those who share them” (1995, 44). This discussion employs Durkheim’s understanding of belief, practice, and identity as interconnected parts of a social system, though the term “experience” is used to embrace all three when speaking of individual perception. Durkheim’s assertion that religious experience and identity require social homogeneity is also complicated by drawing on scholars who argue that religion in Central Asian countries is anything but homogeneous.

Central Asia’s demonstrable religious diversity of religious interpretation, however, does not preclude the existence of normative or homogenizing discourses like those that Durkheim describes. In fact, much recent research has built on such classic sociological constructions by showing how a sense of common identity remains important, even as it is utilized in competing normative ideologies. In their fieldwork on shrines in Uzbekistan, Abramson & Karimov found that Uzbek devotees were influenced by often-divergent “spiritual, social, economic, and political” ideologies propounded by governments, international organizations, and local religious authorities. Nevertheless,

Chapter IV: Literature Review

their respondents considered “Muslimness” (*Muslimanshilik*), in whatever form it took, to be essential to ethnic and social identities (2007, 335; Privatsky 2007).

To explain the phenomenon of perceived social unity in the face of differences in practice and ideology, theorists in many disciplines have considered the role of power in shaping social systems. Foucault asserts that all discourses and actions promote a system of power relations that is simultaneously hierarchical, horizontal and interpersonal (1978). In Foucault’s view, the combination of forces that influence how people view religion are mediated through the lens of individual and group social position. Thus, the diversity of religious experience within any given community is a function of complex and contentious power dynamics at different scales. Building on these ideas, anthropologist Michael Taussig partially reconciles Durkheimian structure with Foucauldian critique, arguing that transgression and conflict in religious life are not just inevitable but also *necessary* for delimiting and maintaining religious groups (1998, 349).

Such complexity, connectivity, and contention-driven arguments are difficult to grasp and can be unsatisfying for those hoping to find “essential” elements in community and individual religious expression. In attempting to do so, scholars often isolate the “essence” of religion in terms of “faith” as an exclusive category, ignoring its relatedness to practice and culture (Abazov 2007; Asad 2009). For example, a Soviet survey of religious involvement in the Central Asian republics in the 1970s differentiated “real believers” (24.8%) from “nonbelievers who engage in religious practices” (74.2%) (Kaiser 1992, 287). Western writers like Huntington and Lewis employ similar rhetorical devices, constructing “Islamic faith” as a homogenizing force that affects all “real Muslims” (Huntington 1996; Lewis 2002; Montgomery 2007, 358).

Troubled by this essentialist evaluation of “real” and “false” Islam, many theorists have argued that simplifying religion to “faith” alone is an imposition of colonial European conceptions of religion—methodologically unsound and, like the ideologies of SADUM, potentially harmful (Chidester 1996, 4; Khalid 2007). Anthropological theorist Talal Asad is particularly vocal in condemning the simplification of religion to belief. He argues that “identity,” “belief” and “ritual” are problematic categories when taken alone and are better considered as components of an interconnected discursive system filled with contentions and ambiguities (2009). Echoing Said, Asad notes that the division of belief and practice continues the work of Orientalist scholars who characterized “ritual” and “belief” as the respective hallmarks of “primitive” and “advanced” societies (Asad 2009; Said 1979).

In light of these critiques, this investigation employs an understanding of belief, practice, and identity as integrated parts of social experience subject to many different interpretations and influences. Central Asians’ diverse ideas about religion are integrated under the umbrella of perceived common Muslim identity, and this identity is subject to simultaneous transnational, national, local, communal, personal, gendered, and political power dynamics. In addition, the relative importance placed on religiousness also varies between individuals and social groups (Alonso & Kalanov 2008, 185).

Universality and Particularity: A False Dichotomy

Scholars of religion are often disappointed that essentialist views of Muslim identity as universal, homogeneous, and unchanging dominate popular discourse on Central Asia (Alam 2006). Huntington, for example, asserts that the post-Cold War world is divided into internally consistent, mutually exclusive civilizations, and the

Chapter IV: Literature Review

Muslim countries of Central Asia will inexorably unite with other “Islamic nations” under the banner of “Islamic extremism” (1996, 45).

Though Huntington’s theory is untenable and objectionable on many levels, many scholars nevertheless accept some elements of it, positing a transnational, universalizing pole of Islamic “orthodoxy” that exists separate from local religious traditions (Asad 2009). For example, Geertz’s study of popular religion in Morocco and Indonesia found few similarities between the two Muslim countries, leading him to argue for the existence of a local, syncretic “folk Islam” against which he contrasted “scripturalist Islam,” a homogeneous, international movement emphasizing pan-Muslim unity and Qur’anic learning (1968, 36). Gellner makes a similar distinction between an intellectual “high Islam” that emphasizes piety and a direct relationship with God and the “low Islam” of rural, traditional populations that focuses on shrine visitation and Sufi orders. Both authors draw on convincing anthropological evidence to suggest that universalizing discourses and power relations displace local traditions in favor of practices and ideas imported from countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Gellner 1992; Geertz 1968).

While acknowledging the usefulness of Geertz and Gellner’s deconstruction of Islam as a unitary category, recent scholarship has challenged their reification of the global, the local, and the “clash” between them. Diener’s work on Mongolian Kazakh identity problematizes the intellectual history of the distinction between local and global communities, tracing the idea back colonial-era scholars who contrasted the “irrationality, tradition, and religion” of the local with the “rational, nationalistic tone” of the global (2007, 31). Additionally, Privatsky’s early 1990s ethnographic study of religion in Kazakhstan demonstrates that “universalizing” and “low” Islam are outsider’s categories

that separate what for many is a single lived religious experience. Even foreign-educated Islamic clerics employed multiple approaches to religion including ancestral shrine veneration and adherence to the five pillars of Islam (widely accepted Sunni Islamic obligations consisting of the *shahada* profession of faith, *namaz* prayers, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, *zakat* almsgiving, and completion of the *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca). Local laypeople also saw no conflict between learning new transnationally normative practices and continuing family and local traditions (2001, 14).

In an intellectual environment where dichotomies and hard-and-fast categories are constantly being deconstructed, it is difficult to maintain a useful model of religious life that is practically applicable in a diverse community like Bayan-Ulgii. Fragner's discussion of the role of scale in Central Asian regionalism and nationalism, however, suggests a possible framework for this task, showing that interconnected local, national, and transnational categories are useful in describing patterns of sociopolitical identity formation—an idea that can be equally well applied to religious identity. Using the analogy of a Russian *matrioshka*-doll, he describes how identities are acted out at the local level, incorporating transnational, regional and local influences within themselves in an “ultimately changing pattern” (Fragner 2001, 342).

Abdullaev's geographic study of Central Asian Islam, though political in focus, advances Fragner's analysis and applies it to religion. Utilizing the idea of a “cultural nexus,” he describes ways in which multiple scales of influence are acted out on the stage of intra-communal power dynamics like those described by Foucault and Taussig (Abdullaev 2002). Beginning with an understanding of the shifting and interconnected quality of scalar categories of analysis, the following discussion addresses transnational,

national, and local discourses and influences that affect how Central Asian communities approach religion on a day-to-day basis.

Part II: The Concept of Scale in Religious Experience and Identity

Transnational Islam: A Complex Set of Influences

The idea of the *Umma*, or universal community of believers, has been present in Islamic thought since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and is a common theme in Muslim scholarship and rhetoric (Geertz 1968). Western popular media and writers like Lewis, Huntington, and Rashid, however, routinely capitalize on this discourse to vilify the idea of pan-Islamic unity, cautioning against the “threat” of a “united” or “extremist” Islam (Alam 2006). As mentioned previously, such claims overlook the fact that Islamic universalism, while very much a real phenomenon, is not synonymous with “fundamentalism” and “extremism.” Moreover, universalistic discourses and movements, though by definition transnational in scope, have specific contexts, histories, and aims and operate differently in different communities (Khalid 2007, Fragner 2001).

Though Central Asia has a long history of connection with, and contribution to, the wider Islamicate world, socialist isolation severed most transnational religious connections until the arrival of foreign organizations in the 1990s (Levi 2007). While a tiny minority of international radical movements (like the Taliban) utilizes Islamic rhetoric, Khalid mentions two groups in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that confound alarmist conflation of universalizing and “extremist” Islam. The first of these, Fethullah Gülen, is a modern, Sufi-inspired Islamic organization from Turkey that seeks to “educate a new elite...solidly grounded in Islamic morals and able to operate in a globalized, free-market world” and has built schools and helped many communities.

Tabligh Jama'at, founded in India in 1929, is also popular throughout the region, and is primarily dedicated to building mosques and promoting charitable groups (Khalid 2007, 122-124). Both movements are transnational in scope and claim to speak for the whole global Islamic community, yet they are peaceful, humanitarian, and tolerant of diversity.

As Fethullah Gülen demonstrates, education is a key means by which transnational discourses have been promoted after socialism. Beginning in the 1990s, the Saudi and Pakistani governments, alongside private sponsors, paid for the distribution of copies of the Qur'an and the building of *madrasas* and mosques throughout Central Asia (McGlinchey 2007, 315). At the same time, local organizations like the Islamic Renaissance Party of Kazakhstan began hiring teachers and advisors from other countries to set up systems of Islamic education drawing on "international standards" (Rashid 1994, 132). Individuals intending to teach or work with religion in their home countries have also sought education abroad, learning the attitudes of the schools and countries where they study. This process was already underway in the early 1990s when Roberts showed that the most vocal advocates for "high Islamic" practices like completion of the five pillars, temperance, and mosque-based worship in a Kazakhstani neighborhood were young men who had studied in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (2007, 343).

Because of the paucity of connections to other Islamic countries and schools of thought in the Socialist period, transnational Islam and Islamic identity is a relatively new phenomenon in post-socialist Central Asia. Nevertheless, transnational discourses are an increasingly powerful influence on local religious experience as foreign organizations and internationally educated imams and religious professionals have become primary religious authorities in the region (Roberts 2007). Such discourses are often contested at

Chapter IV: Literature Review

the national level, however, as states like Uzbekistan often brand efforts to import Islamic knowledge from abroad as “extremism” and “Wahhabism,” conflating the largely peaceful and educational policies of most transnational organizations with the agendas of militant groups like Warriors of Islam in Tajikistan and Afghanistan’s Taliban (Alonso & Kalanov 2008, 179).

National Islam: Hierarchy and Community

Even after the fall of socialism, religion, nationalism, and state power remain closely interconnected. This national scale of religious life can be seen in the ways governments approach the subject of religion, and the ways citizens employ religion in discourses of national identity. Though overt state power plays like those of Uzbekistan are not present in Mongolia, the inhabitants of Bayan-Ulgii are nevertheless involved with the national scale of Islam through linguistic, cultural, and discursive connections with Kazakhstan, as well as recent migration to that country (Diener 2007, Finke 1999). It is important, therefore, to understand the roles of nation, state and Islam in considering the position of Mongolian Kazakhs as a religious and ethnic minority in Mongolia.

The best-documented example of state control over Islam in Central Asia is Islom Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan, long supported by the American government because of its “suppression of extremist Islam” (Khalid 2001). In 1990s Uzbekistan, groups like Tabligh Jama’at, Fethullah Gülen, and Saudi-sponsored organizations gained great popularity alongside local religious movements, building thousands of mosques and *madrasas*. Karimov, however, fearing a loss of control over domestic populations, sought to curtail these developments (Abramson & Karimov 2007). Although the Uzbekistani constitution proclaims the separation of religion and state, Karimov’s regime

used rhetoric of “anti-terrorism” to marginalize politically dissident Muslim leaders, branding religious people who critique government policies or human rights abuses as “extremists” and “Wahhabis” (Abdullaev 2002, 264). Between 1991 and 2004, over 7,000 Uzbeks were imprisoned for “Islamist extremism,” and Imams like Muhammad Rajab, who advocated for more open democracy in the early 1990s, have been silenced or killed (McGlinchey 2007, 306).

Such policies represent one extreme of state control over religion. A more common and subtler approach at the national scale involves appropriating certain approaches to Islam for political ends. Karimov’s government, for example, encourages certain religious expressions as long as they align with nationalist agendas (Adams 2007, 199). A state committee known as the Muftiate drafts all the country’s Friday sermons, filling them with pro-government rhetoric, limiting references to non-Uzbek Muslims, and condemning “un-Islamic traditional practices” like praying for favors from dead relatives at shrines and tying ribbons to sacred trees (McGlinchey 2007, 307). Other governments—including those of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—also employ variations of this “soft power” approach, using discourse to achieve political and nationalist goals (Abramson & Karimov 2007, 220; Foucault 1978). Khalid brings these dynamics to light, showing that the Kazakhstani government’s restoration of “landmark mosques” and sites like the Akhmet Yesevi shrine acts to assert ethnic Kazakh presence on the landscape in opposition to non-Muslim, and presumably non-Kazakh, “foreign influence” (Khalid 2007, 118-119).

As noted in chapter three, the socialist division and isolation of Central Asian republics led many people to consider “Muslimness” a subset of national culture rather

Chapter IV: Literature Review

than a potentially transnational identity, inextricably fusing national and religious identities (Khalid 2007, 83). Privatsky's study of religion and collective memory in early 1990s Kazakhstan demonstrates the continued importance of this connection. While many of his respondents stated that their Islamic identity superseded their nationality when pressed, most were reluctant to differentiate between the two (2001). This finding suggests that, though people have incorporated ideas of the pan-Islamic *Umma* to some degree, the overlap between national and religious identity is still critical, heightened by religious-nationalist rhetoric and population policies.

Privatsky also addresses the interrelationships of national and Islamic identities. Most of his informants lacked formal Islamic education and disagreed about the necessity of praying namaz and completing the five pillars. Regardless of their interpretations of orthopraxy, however, all agreed that they were Muslims by virtue of being Kazakhs. When asked if someone who did not identify as a Muslim could still be Kazakh, many replied that such a thing was impossible—even apostates and atheists were still Kazakhs and were therefore *by definition* still Muslims (Privatsky 2007, 65). Certain markers of religious identity that survived socialism, such as circumcision, were seen as essential to Kazakh identity, and families that did not circumcise their sons were considered “offensively Russified.” Our own fieldwork suggests that Mongolian Kazakhs also place great importance on ascriptive markers of religious identity like circumcision to differentiate themselves both nationally and religiously.

Local Islam: History, Diversity, and the Integration of Scales

National and state power dynamics and discourses are clearly important in shaping religious experiences, however great differences also exist at the local scale

within the same country (Fragner 2001). Discussions of local Islam in Central Asia reflect this fact, tending to focus on the profusion of heterodox practices, traditions, communal rituals, and popular perceptions commonly grouped under Gellner's problematic but often descriptive term "low Islam" (Abazov 2007, 71). While national and transnational factors also come into play in local Islam, "unofficial" locally normative Islamic forms can vary greatly from place to place, having long histories intertwined with pre-Islamic traditions, pre-socialist religious discourses, and efforts to retain religious heritage in the face of socialist repression (Privatsky 2001).

Questions of authenticity and syncretism remain at the forefront in discussions of locally normative practices and ideas. Whereas traditional Islamic authorities like *moldas* commonly recognized practices such as visiting the shrines of saints or family ancestors, tying ribbons to sacred trees, and lighting candles for the dead, many modern advocates of transnational and national Islamic ideas consider such activities to be heretical pre-Islamic survivals (Abramson & Karimov 2007, 325). Western scholars often take a middle ground between these positions and assert that, while some traditions have pre-Islamic origins, they are nevertheless integral to local conceptions of Islam and "Muslimness." Geertz propounds of this view, describing the development of "syncretic" Indonesian and Moroccan religious practices in terms of a distinctive historical relationship between Sufi, juridical, and pre-Islamic influences (1968).

Many researchers dispute the idea that syncretism is unique to local Islam. Privatsky contends that all religions are influenced by their precursors and are thus "syncretic," arguing that even "scripturalist" discourses of Islam are hardly impartial or neutral, and have specific historical origins (2001, 15; DeWeese 1995, 2). Moreover,

Chapter IV: Literature Review

Roberts problematizes the conflation of locality and tradition, arguing that burial shrine visitation, domestic rituals, and variants of widely accepted Islamic mandates like burial within 24 hours after death are functions of a specific “post-Soviet moment” rather than syncretic heresies from a pre-Islamic past (2007, 342). Khalid adds to this argument, showing socialist prohibitions of “internationally normative” practices like *namaz*, *Hajj*, veiling, and public rituals “demodernized” Islam, leading to greater emphasis on less hierarchical, low-profile practices. He argues that “low Islam” is a modern response to a modern situation, not an ancient survival (2007, 115).

Adams articulates the specific means by which multiple scales of influence combine in this “modern situation,” highlighting festivals as poles of religious practice and identity that survived socialism and have subsequently been transformed through contact with new Islamic discourses (2007). She notes that *Kurban Ait* and *Ramazon Ait*, a celebration of the end of Ramadan, were popular “pseudosecular” events during the Soviet period that were “re-Islamized” and grew in popularity recently with the support of foreign-funded mosques (Adams 2007, 198). Both feasts are occasions for family visits, slaughtering livestock, and (for many) copious drinking. Some people now abjure alcohol, fast during Ramadan, perform *namaz*, and give alms, but these same festivals remain poles of local, ethnic, and religious belonging regardless of the differing religious views of the participants (Adams 2007, 199). Even “syncretic” practices like shrine visitation can be transformed in a post-socialist framework; young people in Kazakhstan and elsewhere study the Qur’an and pray in Arabic at the same ancestral shrines where their parents once hired *moldas* and tied ribbons to trees (Privatsky 2001, 122).

The reality of local post-socialist religious change is far more complicated than the collective “return” from atheism or “Islam without belief” to a unitary Sunni faith (Poliakov 1992; Roberts 2007). Discourses of Islam in Central Asia incorporate both “scripturalist universalism” and shrine offering rituals passed on by grandparents (Roberts 2007). Moreover, different people and communities appropriate the polyvocal symbols of Islam into their beliefs, practices and identities in unique ways. Weddings overseen by imams often end in parties with open bars. While some people fast during Ramadan and go on *Hajj* to Mecca, others toast the Prophet with a shot of vodka at *Kurban Ait* (Montgomery 2007). In Kazakhstan and elsewhere, it is common to see women in miniskirts walking side by side with friends wearing *hijab* headscarves, and for both to consider themselves to be Muslims (Abazov 2007, 73).

There are, however, limits to the religious diversity of Central Asia; religious expression is contextualized historically and socio-politically and mediated through the lenses of states, imams, traditional authorities, family members, and other sources of influence (Roberts 2007, 352; Abdullaev 2002). Central Asians, by and large, see Islam as an essential, ascriptive element of their ethno-national and local identities, a taken-for-granted category that is nevertheless being rethought in light of new teachings imported from countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Montgomery 2007). This transformation of religious experience and identity occurs through complex dynamics acted on a fourth scale: the individual (Fragner 2001).

Part III: The Individual Scale

The preceding discussion has considered the sources, scales, and interconnections of religious discourses and approaches to Islam in Central Asian communities, yet it has

Chapter IV: Literature Review

only briefly alluded to the ways that individuals and subgroups within a community negotiate these influences. The following pages focus in-depth on this individual scale, beginning with an examination of the means by which individuals experience commonality through religious experience. Next, questions of difference are discussed, focusing on how social position, gender, power, and connectivity impact individual approaches to Islamic discourse and practice. The roles of age and life-course in religious life are also considered. Finally, the role of religious professionals as knowledge and power brokers is examined before concluding with a reflection on how multi-scalar influences intersect with individual experiences.

Uniformity, Communitas, and Collective Memory

In the early 20th Century, Durkheim argued that religious practices and beliefs are “individually accepted by all members of the group...and also belong to the group and unify it” (1995, 41). The preceding discussions, however, have revealed that many differences in interpretations, ideas, and practices exist between Central Asian Muslims (Privatsky 2001). Given this finding, it would be easy to dismiss Durkheim’s assertion out of hand. Foucault, however, notes that individual agency is never complete; social forces, in combination with multiple scales of influence and power, combine to circumscribe ideas and actions at an individual level (1978). Social cohesion, ascriptive identities, and communal practices do indeed exist, and a shared feeling of Muslim identity, as seen in the responses to Privatsky’s questions, is very strong for many Central Asians. (Roberts 2007).

Researchers have used different means to explain commonalities of individual experience without resorting to Durkheimian oversimplification. Adams focuses on the

role of religious activities like *Kurban Ait* in promoting common identities through shared practice (2007). Privatsky similarly explains the maintenance of communal religious identity during socialism by employing the idea of “collective memory,” a sense of community elicited by shared, non-hierarchical experiences. Privatsky characterizes collective memory as an affective experience embodied through gestures like *bet sipay* and shrine visitation (2007, 22). This idea explains the popularity of religious activities in which members of a community participate regardless of differing religious ideas, education, or interest.

Khalid also touches on commonality in embodied religion, outlining the importance of circumcision, burial, and regular shrine visitation for even the most secular urban Uzbeks—individuals otherwise reluctant to engage in Islamic activities (2007). He argues that such practices provide “a sense of communal belonging and a certain moral authority for a clean (uncorrupt) life [that coexists] with a disregard for legal exactitude and indeed real skepticism of any ostentatious display of piety” (Khalid 2007, 104). Montgomery too examines taken-for-granted everyday acts that transcend gender, class, rural-urban divides, and all but the most iconoclastic of ideological distinctions. For many, he asserts, visiting shrines or doing *bet sipay* blurs the line between religious and “secular” life; it can be “imbued with the sincerity of thanks being offered to God, but other times it is just an act of everyday living in Central Asia” (Montgomery 2007, 366). Common gestures and rituals, to borrow a term from the anthropological theorist Victor Turner, could be said to promote *communitas*, the feeling of fellowship in spite of difference experienced by pilgrims, soldiers, and others who engage in activities that promote a shared sense of identity (Turner & Turner 1978).

Gender, Social Position, and Individual Experience

Although observers of Central Asian Islamic life generally acknowledge that *communitas*, collective memory, and taken-for-granted common practices are important, they exist within a reality rich in individual differences (Khalid 2007). Power relations, expectations, social positions, and factors including gender, socioeconomic status, rural or urban location, and age influence the religious roles of groups and individuals. Such factors are not deterministic; demographically similar individuals in the same area often have very different attitudes toward religion. Consider, for example, the gendered practice of wearing the *hijab*. Decisions about veiling can be matters of personal preference, but social expectations and ascriptive identities, family opinions, internalized and externally imposed gender roles, and governmental policies that limit or promote such practices also come into play (Privatsky 2007).

Gender roles and representation in Muslim cultures have attracted a good deal of scholarly attention with regard to veiling and differential participation in social activities (Northrop 2007; Poliakov 1992). This tendency holds true of Central Asia, where women's roles in both historical and modern contexts have differed greatly from those of men. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, women throughout pre-socialist Central Asia wore heavy *paranji* robes and *chachvon* horsehair veils and tended to be involved only with domestic religious activities. Public religion—including worship at mosques and formal Qur'anic learning—was the domain of men, while women maintained religious practices like fasting, praying for the dead, and the organization of family religious feasts (Northrop 2007). The religious roles of both men and women changed drastically with socialist prohibitions of public religious activities. Far from being

“freed” of religiously oriented gender differences, women in the domestic sphere became primary carriers of religious knowledge and practice (Khalid 2007, 103; Privatsky 2007).

In the post-socialist context, gendered experiences of religion are still the norm. In particular, wearing the *hijab* has become a potent symbol of purity, piety, and even national identification. In 1990s Uzbekistan, for example, many young women began to wear headscarves and veils “as a way of expressing their national as well as religio-cultural identity” even in the face of governmental disapproval (Northrop 2007, 97). While a few women explicitly opposed the *hijab* as “backward,” those who did not veil tended to respect the practice and consider it desirable (Abazov 2007). McGlinchey’s fieldwork, also in Uzbekistan, showed that, though most women did not wear the *hijab*, veiling was expected for “religious women” who studied Arabic (2007, 312). Other scholarship on Central Asia confirms that even women who do not regularly wear a *hijab* tend to veil at shrines and in mosques at the instruction of both traditional and new religious authorities (Khalid 2007).

In addition to the visible quotidian symbol of the headscarf, gender differences manifest themselves in the types of religious activities that women and men perform. In mosques and *madrasas* that subscribe to national and transnational discourses of Islam, women and men pray and study separately, and religious experts tend to be male (Privatsky 2001). Most of the people who pray *namaz* at mosques are also male, despite the growing popularity of mosque-based practices for both men and women (McGlinchey 2007, 312). Practices generally considered the domain of “low Islam” are also often gendered. Some traditional sacred places and shrines are available to only female or

Chapter IV: Literature Review

male pilgrims, and domestic pious acts like lighting candles for the dead are commonly considered female prerogatives (Alonso & Kalanov 2008, 183).

Besides gender, geographic location and socioeconomic status also influence the way individuals approach religion in public and private spheres. Geertz observed that “low Islam” is often the domain of rural people who are economically marginalized, undereducated, and poorly connected with state power structures and international discourses in religion and society (Geertz 1968). Though the socialist system in both the Soviet Union and Mongolia was unique in encouraging educated people to work in rural areas and discouraging urban class divides, huge differences in connectivity and economic opportunities existed—and continue to persist—between urban and rural communities (Diener 2007, Barcus & Werner 2007). This divide, as Geertz would predict, is conducive to different ways of relating to Islam (1968).

DeWeese’s study of shrines in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan indicates that though shrine visitation practice had been revitalized after the socialist period, new religious authorities condemned it as “un-Islamic” and suitable only for women, rural people, and the poor (1995). Abramson and Karimov’s recent work in Uzbekistan shows how these prejudices are reflected socially: the authors observed that rural people, women, the elderly, and the poor were disproportionately represented among the visitors to *ziratgoh* shrines (2007, 345). Differences in practice and attitudes within ostensibly *communitas*-building religious events like *Kurban Ait* are also commonly correlated with socioeconomic status and geographic location; one study showed new urban migrants from disadvantaged or rural backgrounds in Kazakhstan

tended to be less responsive to prohibitions against alcohol at feasts and more interested in concrete religious practices like sacrificing sheep (Roberts 2007, 345).

These variations in the form and degree of religious participation between demographic groups connect to questions of access and power. As Privatsky notes, even before socialist restrictions on religion, mosque-based activities and formal Islamic education tended to be the domain of urban men in positions of relative power (2007). This history plays out in the contemporary de-legitimization of forms of piety like shrine worship that are traditionally associated with the socially or geographically marginalized groups that DeWeese discusses. Even when participating in religious forms organized along national or transnational lines, local and individual factors of gender, access, and socioeconomic status continue to affect individual experiences.

Age and Life Course

Age is another significant and extremely complex influence on religious experience that crosscuts other social divisions like gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic position. Age and religious experience are closely interrelated, and important to consider in any local case study. Not only does the historical situation (socialist or post-socialist) in which people learn to relate to religion affect their experiences, but age itself is a powerful social category that carries differing expectations and roles for the old, the middle-aged, and the young (Privatsky 2007).

Kertzer's method of life course analysis provides a useful way to consider the dynamics of age and religion for individuals and generational cohorts, considering the "continuous interplay between social change and the life-course of individuals" (1991, 2). Kertzer examines how situations in which individuals grow up shape and contextualize

Chapter IV: Literature Review

their thoughts, actions, and life possibilities, acknowledging that great variation exists within age-cohorts that face the same large-scale dynamics. For example, the introduction of mandatory education for girls would have a larger effect on rural or underprivileged women growing up at that time than for urban contemporaries for whom education was already available, but the change would nevertheless be very influential for society as a whole (Kertzer 1991, 3). In examining life-histories at the individual scale, life course theory also “forces us to see the real dynamism of people’s lives and to avoid the reification of academic analytical categories” (Kertzer 1991, 3).

The fluidity and flexibility of life course theory helps make sense of the modes of religious experience and discourse that individuals embrace in particular historical periods and at different times in their lives. Babadzhanov’s observations in early post-Soviet Uzbekistan, for example, indicate that elderly people who grew up thinking of Islam as a subset of national identity were less likely to engage with the teachings of foreign-educated imams, and tended to maintain religious practices within the home that emphasized the religious role of women (2002, 314). The children of such individuals, however, raised in an environment with new religious discourses, were more likely to adopt transnationally normative ideas about Muslim gender roles, identity, and religious practices. Nevertheless, they continued to align their Islamic identities with family, history, and national traditions (Babadzhanov 2002; Privatsky 2001).

Gellner’s analysis of the transition from “low” to “high” Islam adds yet another factor to this complex portrait of intergenerational religious change: socioeconomic status and upward mobility. As noted previously, large-scale Islamic discourses in Central Asia tend to be associated with connectedness, urban living, and wealth. This idea lends

credence to Gellner's generalized assertion that "the typical Muslim woman in a Muslim city doesn't wear the veil because her grandmother did so, but because her grandmother did *not*; her grandmother in her village was far too busy in the fields, and she frequented the shrine without a veil, and left the veil to her betters" (1992, 16). In Central Asia, young people also experience a positive association between connectivity, new Islamic discourse, and status (Privatsky 2001; Alonso & Kalanov 2007).

In addition to the contexts in which people are raised, Kertzer suggests that differential roles for older and younger people are influential across cohorts (1991). Data on Central Asian religious attitudes support this idea. As noted previously, men and women in socialist Central Asia were expected to become more pious in old age, when greater time at home and freedom from public scrutiny allowed them to engage in religious practices for the benefit of their families and communities (Khalid 2007, 103). Finke notes that many *moldas* in socialist Bayan-Ulgii were elderly men who learned Islam in secret, and the region's first imams in the early 1990s came from this age-group (1999, 137). Privatsky observed a similar age distribution of post-socialist Islamic authorities when foreign-funded mosques were first built in Turkistan, Kazakhstan in 1997. Though most new foreign-educated imams were younger men, elderly men also sought such positions, wishing to "validate the responsibilities and honors of eldership" through active involvement in mosques and *madrasas* (Privatsky 2001, 50). These case studies demonstrate the importance of avoiding generalizations that attribute the capacity to adopt and promote new religious ideas exclusively to young people.

Age is also important when considering how ideas about religion are exchanged between individuals, particularly in communities in which multiple new sources of

Chapter IV: Literature Review

information are available to both young and old people. In socialist Kazakhstan, for example, elderly people tended to have the most religious expertise and authority, and *moldas* and elderly women were therefore expected to teach younger people and family members about religion (Privatsky 2001, 92). With the opening of Central Asia to outside religious influences, however, younger men and women have come to occupy religious expert roles, and in many cases young people can reverse the direction of the established flow of information, teaching or otherwise influencing the religious experiences of their seniors. McGlinchey's example of an elderly urban woman in Uzbekistan who began veiling when her son became an imam illustrates this point and at the same time highlights the reluctance of some elderly people to wholeheartedly embrace newer teachings. When asked why she wore the *hijab*, the woman answered, "I wear this more for him than for me" (McGlinchey 2007, 314).

Education, Authority, and Religious Professionals

The previous example alludes to an important theme in the development of Islamic discourse in the post-socialist period: the role of religious authorities and professionals. Foucault states that knowledge and power are indistinguishable; though power is distributed horizontally across social networks as well as vertically, both power and knowledge are highly dependent on certain individuals in authoritative positions (1978). In Central Asia, the emergence of a post-socialist clerical class heralds a shift in religious authority between groups of individuals—young and old, female and male, rural and urban, poor and wealthy—that can influence the everyday religious experiences of laypeople in all of these groups. Foucault's argument is pertinent in this context; as the sources of Islamic knowledge and power shift from women and elderly people in the

domestic sphere to public mosques and *madrasas* run by younger, mostly foreign-educated male imams, transnational and national discourses on everything from burial to gender roles become more prevalent and intermix to a greater degree with locally-normative practices and discourses (Khalid 2007; Roberts 2007).

Several researchers address how the generalized and widely accepted authority of imams has reduced or changed the roles of local religious specialists who worked in secret during the socialist period. This shift has particularly affected female fortunetellers and healers (*baqsis*). Long a part of Central Asian folk Islam, *baqsis* have been targeted as un-Islamic by transnationally-oriented imams and national governments. Though their services are still in high demand, *baqsis* are now commonly seen in opposition to “real Islam” (Abramson & Karimov 322). Traditional *moldas* have also lost authority, since their primary activities—praying at shrines by proxy for others, burial, making amulets for children and the sick, and other specialist activities—have been subsumed into the repertoire of Islamic professionals (Privatsky 2001, 94).

Such changes highlight questions about the identity of new Islamic authorities and the specific discourses they promote. As noted earlier, newly educated imams tend to be young men; some, however, are elderly, and women also hold positions of authority as teachers and organizers at some mosques (Abazov 2007, 71). Socioeconomically, Khalid suggests that most imams come from urban, relatively affluent backgrounds, though some poorer or more rural people have studied abroad through scholarships (2007). Most are educated abroad in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey, but some learn Arabic and Islamic teachings in their own home communities. In either case, a variety of ideas influence their teachings (Abramson & Karimov 2007). “Secular” power structures

Chapter IV: Literature Review

also come into play in the discourses of religious leaders; for example, Uzbekistani imams, regardless of their personal opinions, are forced to read government propaganda during Friday prayers (Khalid 2007).

Despite such variations, the discourses that imams and mosque-based religious authorities utilize tend to be transnational or national in scope, and integrate “local Islamic ideas” to differing degrees depending on subscription to particular schools of thought (Privatsky 2001). Imams educated in the conservative tradition of many Saudi schools, for instance, are more likely to condemn shrine visitation than those influenced by the neo-Sufi tolerance rhetoric of Fethullah Gülen (Khalid 2007). Even imams who accept plurality in religious practice still exercise a transformative influence on local religious life. DeWeese highlights one example of such transformation in early 1990s Kazakhstan. Utilizing nationalistic and Islamic-universalist rhetoric, imams encouraged the “re-Islamization” of shrine visitation practice through an emphasis on reciting prayers in Arabic and avoidance of “heterodox” practices in order to counter the “Soviet conceit...that shrine-centered religious practice was alien to Islam” (DeWeese 1995, 3).

Questions of authority, legitimacy, and the transmission of Islamic knowledge are central to any discussion of changes that popular religious understandings, identities, and experiences face in the post-socialist era. As the primary forces behind what Gellner calls “high Islam” and what Kaiser would categorize as the transnational and national poles of identity, imams and the emergent Islamic professional class represent a dramatic change from previous means of transmission of religious knowledge under the socialist system (Gellner 1992, 11; Kaiser 1992, 287). Considerable diversity exists within the discourses of locally normative or domestic religious figures like *moldas*, *baqsis*, and

pious elders and also within those of new religious professionals, yet the interaction of old and new forms of religious authority can nevertheless explain many of the dynamics of religious life in contemporary Central Asia (Roberts 2007).

Part IV: Conclusions and Methodological Applications

The preceding literature review has positioned this project in an ongoing academic conversation, at the same time providing a descriptive framework for understanding the dynamics of everyday Islamic experience in a single Central Asian community. This task is much more complex than it appears; despite the insistence of essentialists like Huntington, “there are no pure, homogeneous cultural systems” (Chidester 1996, 262). Understanding how people relate to religion, even in a small community like Bayan-Ulgii, requires the integration of unique histories, diverse internal viewpoints, power structures, and discourses at many spatial scales. Even Fragner’s vision of the interlocking and overlapping layers of the *matrioshka* doll of identity seems inadequate to describe the many ways that people construct and reconstruct religion in any local “nexus” (Fragner 2001; Abdullaev 2002). The preceding discussion, however, has isolated a number of factors that contribute to religious understandings and identities.

To conceptualize the influences involved in constructing Islam, the idea of scale is useful, problematizing the dichotomy between “high” and “low” Islam and allowing consideration of interactions between transnational, national, and local phenomena. A variety of sources confirm the efficacy of this method, showing that the common Islamic identity claimed by most Central Asians, including the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ulgii, is polyvocal, carrying a host of overlapping meanings ranging from family connections to national, and even transnational, belonging (Privatsky 2007).

Chapter IV: Literature Review

Understanding the individual as the point at which these influences are integrated, discussion can productively proceed to examine how individual and group characteristics affect what it means to be Muslim in Central Asia. Gender, socioeconomic status, location, and age are important factors, affecting personal and interpersonal expectations, power dynamics, and the transmission of knowledge. At the same time, some aspects of “Muslimness” are ascriptive, carrying long histories both before and during socialist restrictions. Despite differing opinions, many community religious events, markings, and experiences promote powerful feelings of commonality (Turner & Turner 1978). Even apparent uniformity, however, exists within uneven power frameworks; understanding how religious authorities influence, create, and modify religious discourses and experiences is crucial to all the dynamics discussed above.

The scholarly discussions addressed in this chapter tie in directly to the field research for this project conducted in Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia in 2009. In addition to framing the questions that informants were asked, the conceptual frameworks set out by other researchers contribute to data analysis and thus influence findings. Without a comparative literature review, it would be impossible to consider how Mongolian Kazakh religious experiences relate to those of other Central Asian communities. Likewise, without understanding the conceptual frameworks that have previously been applied to similar questions, coherent and timely analyses of primary data are impossible.

Chapter V

The Study Area: Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

The previous two chapters focused primarily on theoretical considerations and background for this project's ethnographic investigation, and therefore considered data from other Central Asian countries rather than the study area itself. References to Bayan-Ulgii have been brief, and more contextual than descriptive. This chapter, however, sets the stage for the analysis of ethnographic data, providing a brief geographic and historical description of Bayan-Ulgii, illuminating some of the factors that distinguish the study area and connect it to the rest of Central Asia, and surveying the existing literature on Islam in the region.

A Geographic Overview of Bayan-Ulgii

The predominantly Kazakh-speaking Mongolian *aimag* (province) of Bayan-Ulgii forms part of Mongolia's Western Region, alongside neighboring Khovd and Uvs *aimags*. This high, arid, landlocked area of the Altai Mountains shares borders with Russia and China, and is separated from Kazakhstan to the west by a 60 km strip of Chinese-Russian border (Barcus and Werner 2007, 7; see figure 1). Conditions in Bayan-Ulgii are harsh: with little vegetation or precipitation, elevations averaging 1300 meters, and extreme continental temperatures ranging from -50° C in the winter to 40° C in the summer, there is little potential for agriculture. Many inhabitants of the region, both Kazakh and Mongolian, engage in herding as a means of subsistence and primary economic activity (Finke 1999, 104, Diener 2007).

Bayan-Ulgii is home to around 90,000 Kazakhs, who represented around 80 percent of the *aimag* population according to the 2000 census (Barcus & Werner 2007, 6).

Islamic Places and Mosques in Ulgii, 2009

Figure 3: An aerial-imagery map of Ulgii showing mosque and shrine sites (Brede 2009).

At 4.3% of the country's total population, the region's Kazakhs (including 10,000 more in Khovd *aimag*) are the largest ethnic minority in Mongolia, a country dominated by the Khalkh Mongol ethnic group. Ulgii, a city of around twenty thousand inhabitants that straddles the Khovd River, is the provincial administrative center and a hub of social, economic, and religious organization for Mongolia's Kazakhs (see figure 3). Like other Mongolian *aimags*, Bayan-Ulgii's peripheral areas are divided into *soums*, each of which

is organized around a small central town or settlement providing commercial and community services and a boarding school for the children of herders. In recent years, many *soum* centers also support mosques (Finke 1999, 107).

Kazakh populations began living in Western Mongolia as early as the mid 1800s, and continued to migrate into the open pasturelands of the Altai Mountains from China's Xinjiang province and elsewhere until state control limited such movements in the 1940s (Portisch 2006, 2). Despite this history of mobility, Mongolian Kazakhs currently find themselves in "a peripheral unit in a peripheral region of a peripheral state," plagued by problems of transportation, limited connectivity, and economic underdevelopment (Diener 2007, 164). No paved road exists between Ulaanbaatar and Ulgii, and travel to Kazakhstan involves a 900 km journey through Russia. Even in Ulgii, Internet and telecommunications have become available only in the last few years (Diener 2007).

Partly because of this isolation, the World Association of Kazakhs declared in 1992 that the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ulgii had retained their "traditional culture and language" more effectively than any other Kazakh community inside or outside of the territory of Kazakhstan (Diener 2007, 159). Bayan-Ulgii still retains its small population and strong ethnic identification, however new transnational connections, development, and social changes have helped make the *aimag* decidedly less "traditional." In light of these changes, and the region's relatively benign political situation, Bayan-Ulgii provides an interesting case study of post-socialist religious, social and cultural development. Informed by the debates and historical considerations presented in the previous chapters, the next section frames this project's primary research questions by providing a brief overview of the historical, socioeconomic, and religious context of the study area.

Bayan-Ulgii during the Socialist Period

As mentioned in chapter two, Mongolia did not follow the same political trajectory as other Central Asian states, remaining independent of both Russia and China while nevertheless undergoing many aspects of the socioeconomic restructuring and religious and cultural repression that characterized Soviet rule in other states (Diener 2007). The Mongolian Peoples' Republic achieved independence from China with the help of the Soviets in 1921, and in 1924 the new state became the second communist country in the world after the USSR (Finke 1999, 106). In the subsequent years, the central government in Ulaanbaatar began a series of programs similar to the *hujum* to “modernize” the country’s largely rural Mongolian and Kazakh populations (Khalid 2007). While initial attempts to collectivize land and livestock met with such intense resistance that they had to be postponed until the 1950s, campaigns of systematic destruction against religious individuals and institutions were more successful.

In the 1930s, while Stalin was subdividing Turkestan and purging dissidents, the Choibalsan regime attacked all forms of religious life in Mongolia. Temples and mosques were destroyed and imams, monks, and lamas were killed or driven from public life (Diener 2007, 161). Like in the pre-socialist steppe areas, however, Islam in Mongolia was not entirely centered in mosques—even before the purges, the Mongolian ethnographer Rinchen reported only three mosques in all of Bayan-Ulgii (Finke 1999, 136). Additionally, since the government did not collectivize the herders for several decades after its initial purges, Islamic knowledge was preserved through nomadic lifestyles beyond the reach of government control. In Diener’s words, “though unable to openly practice Islam, the pastoral character of Kazakh life in the *aimag* facilitated the

Figure 4: Elderly Mongolian Kazakh herders (Werner 2009).

retention of nomadic cultural knowledge” (Diener 2007, 162). Use of Kazakh language also helped maintain this continuity. Despite the dominance of Khalkh Mongol culture and language in Mongolia, Kazakhs were allowed surprising autonomy, and Kazakh was accepted as an official provincial language. During the socialist period, both Mongol and Kazakh officials held positions of power in Bayan-Ulgii (Finke 1999, 118).

Beginning in the 1950s, the state began a more intense campaign of land collectivization into farms and ranches called *negdels*, and even unsuccessfully tried to encourage agriculture on the arid steppe. Many herders, however, continued to be employed in their accustomed line of work, managing herds of collective animals in a semi-nomadic fashion while their children attended boarding schools in *soum* centers (Finke 1999, 120-122). In addition to changes in education and rural economies, some urbanization also occurred; prior to the 20th century, only small settled communities had

Chapter V: Study Area

existed in the Altaic steppe (Diener 2007). Though little is known about local Islamic practice during this period, Finke notes that circumcision and life cycle/burial rituals were strictly observed (1999, 136). Interviews with older community members confirm this observation, and many older residents retain religious customs passed on through their families during socialism (Note the headscarf and skullcap of the couple in figure 4).

Social and Economic Developments in Contemporary Bayan-Ulgii

The end of socialist rule in the 1990s ushered in a period of rapid social and economic change, in many ways even more drastic than the first years of the communist era (Diener 2007). The shift from communist to democratic political systems and the adoption of a capitalist rather than a command economy influenced every aspect of daily life, and not always in a positive way. Though the Kazakhs in Bayan-Ulgii benefited from increased religious and personal freedom and mobility, poverty rates increased from 1% in 1989 to 33% in 1998, and basic social services and healthcare fell victim to budgetary crises (Portisch 2006, 3). At the same time, consumer goods from China and other countries became much more readily available. Despite economic hardships, trade and tourism have increased as Mongolia has worked toward political and economic openness with trade partners in Asia, Europe and America (Diener 2007).

As all these changes were taking place, the newly independent state of Kazakhstan instituted policies that provided support for Diasporic Kazakhs (*oralman*) to “return” to their “homeland.” With these ideological and economic incentives, over 60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs migrated to Kazakhstan in the early 1990s (Diener 2007, 160). Barcus and Werner’s research on Kazakh migration from Bayan-Ulgii has shown that many factors are implicated in this process, making it more than a simple out-

migration from an undesirable area to a desirable one (2007, 9). Situations in Kazakhstan are not always better, and *oralman* have to contend with anonymity, discrimination from Kazakhstani Kazakhs, distance from family, different weather, and homesickness. In fact, one-third of these early migrants have returned to Mongolia, and the population of the province has not decreased for several years (Diener 2007; Barcus & Werner 2007).

In part because of these trans-national migrations and the fluidity of Mongolian Kazakh nationality and citizenship, Kazakh integration with the Khalkh Mongol population has been an issue of contention in the last two decades. This issue, however, is often glossed over in comparison to states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan that have expelled minorities by force. The Mongolian government, both during and after socialism, has been uniquely tolerant of Kazakh autonomy and cultural expression, permitting Kazakh representatives in the government, statues of Kazakh cultural heroes, schools taught in the Kazakh language, and (recently) the construction of mosques in Bayan-Ulgii and Ulaanbaatar (Diener 2007). Despite this tolerance, however, religious, cultural, and linguistic issues sometimes surface as points of conflict between groups at a local scale. Finke observes that Kazakh men are sometimes criticized for being unwilling to “integrate” and marry Mongol women because of “affiliation to Islam, which, in spite of its limited meaning in religious respect, is an important part of ethnic delimitation” (1999, 138). While the assertion that Mongolian Kazakh Islam has *limited* religious meaning is subject to debate, Finke’s remark nevertheless indicates important tensions.

Diener confirms that Mongolian Kazakh autonomy is not complete: “Though civic ideals have most certainly been enacted since 1990, the Kazakhs remain ‘non-Mongol,’ and are thus subject to relegation to a position of ‘second among equals’

Chapter V: Study Area

through the formation of a more broadly defined Mongol hegemony” (2007, 61). Observations in Ulgii in 2009 support this claim. Signs are mostly in Mongolian, computer keyboards feature the Mongolian version of the Cyrillic alphabet, and most people know both Kazakh and Mongolian. Huang’s study of education in Mongolia introduces the additional issue of educational representation; schools that provide instruction in Kazakh have inadequate teaching materials and often fail to transition children into full Mongolian language proficiency. This creates a “situation where students have half a foot in each language but may not be sufficiently proficient in either one” (Huang 2005, 28). Inadequate education also can curtail the economic opportunities of older people for whom herding is still the most effective source of income.

Such educational issues echo Bayan-Ulgii’s overall problems of economic development, though the province’s situation is beginning to improve through increased connectivity, tourist income, and remittances from abroad. Diener reports that telephone and Internet were only sporadically available in Ulgii in 2003, but during fieldwork in 2009, cell phones and network coverage were very common, even in rural areas. Additionally, Ulgii now supports at least half a dozen internet cafés and online gaming establishments, a testament to the region’s newfound connectivity and development.

Despite these changes, Bayan-Ulgii experiences a significant “brain drain,” as only thirty percent of people educated in Ulaanbaatar or abroad return home, and many families see availability of secondary and post-secondary education as an incentive to migrate (Barcus and Werner 2007, 10; Diener 2007, 168). Islamic education is the one exception to this rule of educational out-migration: Most Mongolian Kazakhs educated in foreign *madrasas* return to teach in Mongolia (Diener 2007). These foreign-educated

Islamic experts are instrumental in bringing transnationally normative viewpoints and discourses to Mongolian Kazakh Islam.

Current Perspectives on Islam in Bayan-Ulgii

In the modern era of rapid changes in culture, development, connectivity, and migration, Islamic experience and identity in Bayan-Ulgii have changed significantly, and this process has not been adequately documented. Most treatments of Mongolian Kazakh Islam address religion only in terms of adherence to the five pillars of Islam. Barcus & Werner write that while most Mongolian Kazakhs consider themselves to be Muslims, they do not adhere to the five pillars (2007). Portisch claims Mongolian Kazakhs consider themselves “only nominally Muslim,” since “religious knowledge and many practices...have only begun to be revived after the collapse of Soviet-backed communism” (2006, 2). Finke elaborates the same point, stating, “religion has a growing influence...but [there are] few strong adherents to Islam among the Kazakhs and the number of people praying regularly is very small. The same is true of fasting and giving alms” (1999, 136). One objective of this paper is to move beyond these observations both in terms of data and theory, drawing on recent fieldwork and a more nuanced understanding of religious experience beyond “strong” or “weak” adherence to a single set of normative standards (Privatsky 2007; Adams 2007; Abramson & Karimov 2007).

Finke’s study, the fieldwork for which was completed in the mid-1990s, is the only source to write more than a few sentences about Islamic practice in Bayan-Ulgii, and is helpful in contextualizing this investigation by providing a snapshot of the period immediately after the end of socialism (Finke 1999). At the time of his fieldwork, Finke observed one large mosque in Ulgii, which he claimed was financed by Saudi interests.

Chapter V: Study Area

He also mentioned several other mosques in peripheral *soum* centers that were seasonally staffed and closed in the summer when herders were in the countryside. Some of these mosques were run by *moldas* who had worked secretly during socialism. The rest operated under the control of younger, foreign educated imams, some of whom, Finke asserts, were former high-ranking members of the Communist Party. Interviews with imams in Ulgii and surrounding *soums* revealed that there are now over thirty mosques in Bayan-Ulgii, financed by governmental and private donations from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, and other countries. Now open all year long, these mosques are critical to the distribution of Islamic discourse and serve as increasingly important centers of community life.

Finke also describes some popular Islamic rituals, which he distinguishes from mosque-based practices like reading *namaz*. He puts particular emphasis on festivals like *Kurban Ait*, mourning, burial, shrine visitation, and life-cycle celebrations like *sundet toi* circumcision feasts—all of which are celebrated with animal sacrifice and entertainment of guests (1999, 137). These annual and life-cycle events, which survived socialism in a limited form, were becoming increasingly public with the relaxation of government control over religion. Marriage, formerly conducted by a *molda* in secret prior to legal formalities, gained a more overtly religious tone with the arrival of imams who could perform the ceremony officially. Like other celebrations, Finke notes that marriage was accompanied by heavy drinking, a source of contention in post-socialist societies faced with conflicting legacies of Soviet drinking culture and Islamic prohibitions against alcohol (Finke 1999, Adams 2007, Montgomery 2007).

While the above overview exhausts the existing literature on Islam in Bayan-Ulgii, it was helpful in shaping preliminary interview questions and providing a framework for an in-depth study of local religious life and experience. Many of the themes that Finke, Diener, Portisch, Barcus & Werner describe—the significance of festivals, feasts, and shrines, the links between Kazakh and Muslim identity, and the importation of Islamic knowledge from abroad—are central to this study’s findings and inform interpretations of participant observations and interviews. These previous observations also share commonalities with ethnographic work on religion in other Central Asian countries. Keeping in mind the uniqueness and locality of Bayan-Ulgii as well as its connections with and similarities to other Turkic Central Asian communities, this work aims to fill in the gaps in scholarly knowledge about Mongolian Kazakh Islam and relate this information to ongoing conversations about the role of religion in the regional and cultural geographies of Central Asia.

Chapter VI

Results I: Networks, Identity, and Education

Having set up the theoretical frame of this project and introduced the study area and research methodologies, the four remaining content chapters explore ethnographic data on religious life, experience, and identity in Bayan-Ulgii collected in the summer of 2009. These chapters address the themes and theories outlined in the literature review in the context of these primary data sets, and each chapter approaches a different element of the data. The first two chapters are the most general, considering participant-observation and interview results indicative of common themes, influences, and ideas in the development of post-socialist religious life in Bayan-Ulgii.

In this chapter, religio-ethnic identity, social networks, family influences, and perceived religious obligations are explored, with special emphasis on integration with shifting normative frameworks of religious authority. One consistent theme throughout this discussion is the changing scalar orientation of identity and discourse as locally normative, family-based, and historically continuous practices and ideas are subsumed into new patterns of piety based on mosques, imams, and internationally oriented religious authority. Chapter seven continues this conversation in terms of religious practices mentioned by informants, considering the location of religious acts, the sets of individuals who perform them, and the continuity and “re-introduction” of some practices. Furthermore, the impacts of these dynamics on religious experience, ascriptive identity, ethnic and place-based belonging, and other experiential aspects are explored.

After examining generalized data on religious identity and expression, chapter eight uses the ideas of Foucault, Privatsky and other authors to address the roles of power

and new religious authority in shaping experiences of religion in post-socialist Bayan-Ulgii (1978; 2001). To do this, it uses interviews with imams, teachers, and Mongolian Islamic Association (MIA) leaders to consider the uniformity and variability of discourses and practices promoted by these authorities in different contexts.

Finally, chapter nine integrates themes and ideas from the previous three chapters through individual informant narratives. Using life-course theory and Kaiser's concept of the individual as an integrative nexus of multiple networks and influences, it integrates ethnographic observations and analyses at the individual scale through a series of informant case studies (Kertzer 1991; Kaiser 1992). In considering the individual as the "nexus" of many influences, the personal narratives of men and women of different ages, economic positions, and geographic settings are examined. This final section emphasizes that, though generalizations can be made about tendencies of religious life and identity in Bayan-Ulgii, religious experience ultimately depends on individual preference, context, and position in power/knowledge networks.

Identity and Networks in Context

Returning to the present chapter, ideas about identity, learning, religious roles voiced by informants are examined. Given the lack of attention paid to the intersection of religious and national, local, and other identities in previous work on Bayan-Ulgii, a primary aim of this chapter is to provide a generalized analysis of interview responses with respect to transnational, national, and local identity and religious normativity (Finke 1999; Montgomery 2007). In particular, constructions of socio-religious identity and the authorities and perspectives that make such constructions possible are explored through an analysis of themes and case studies in the aggregated interview data.

Chapter VI: Results I

This analysis begins with informant responses to questions about ascriptive and individual identity, highlighting the conflation and interaction of national, religious, and generational standards and ideas—themes central to other discussions of Central Asian Islam (Privatsky 2001; Abramson & Karimov 2007). Following this, the role of official and unofficial authority figures in religious learning is considered, with particular focus on the integration of trans-generational and transnational (mosque-centered) religious knowledge into family and social networks. The last section expands this discussion of complex identity by considering responses to questions about perceived obligations to perform religious practices, the most common means by which informants contextualized and described both religious identity and Islamic piety.

Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity

Literature on religious identity in Central Asia consistently suggests that Islamic identity has powerful ascriptive elements. Finke asserts that this was true in Mongolia at the time of his fieldwork, stating that nearly all Mongolian Kazakhs considered themselves to be Muslims despite low levels of overt religious practice (1999). The first question asked in interviews aimed to ascertain whether this ascription could be generalized to all the informants, who had been selected—with the exception of imam interviewees—based on the criteria of the Kazakh Migration Project.

Considering that religious participation was not a criterion for informant selection, it is notable that each of the twenty-one people interviewed stated that they considered themselves to be Muslim. In fact, many informants considered the question, “do you consider yourself to be a Muslim?” absurd, and were visibly amused by its obviousness. One young woman in Ulgii notably stated, “of course I’m a Muslim, I am a Kazakh!”

(Kulpynai). Her response highlights and confirms prior observations of the ascriptive conflation of national and Islamic identity on local and individual scales. Additionally, it indicates the commonality of perceived religious identity as an element binding together diverse groups and perspectives; this was the only response on which informants all agreed (Privatsky 2001; Turner & Turner 1978).

A look inside the house, apartment, or *ger* (felt tent) of even the least pious Mongolian Kazakh family is sufficient to demonstrate the symbolic importance of these ethnic and ascriptive religious identities. Alongside photos of family members and hand- and machine- made rugs and tapestries, a guest almost invariably notices a panoply of Islamic images such as framed Qur'anic verses and pictures of holy sites like the Kaaba and Masjid al-Haram in Mecca or Kazakhstan's Akhmet Yesevi shrine. People of all ages and levels of religiosity also commonly wear amulets containing verses from the Qur'an (see figure 5). Kazakhstani flags and pictures of the Kazakhstani president Nazarbayev are also a common sight alongside these religious items, indeed far more common than Mongolian flags or national symbols. A trip to the Ulgii Bazaar attests to the conceptual connection of such pious and nationalist symbols; several shops in the city's open market sell a selection of Islamic prayer beads, decorations, and amulets alongside Kazakhstani nationalist paraphernalia.

The universality of such symbols and the uniformity of informant assertions of the connection between Mongolian Kazakh and Muslim identity can give the mistaken impression that perceptions of the meaning of religious identity and practice are also uniform. In reality, however, many different views about the importance and role of Muslim identity exist within the community. When informants were asked, "what does it

Figure 5: A Kazakh girl displays her Qur’anic amulet (Brede 2009).

mean to be Muslim?” most mentioned believing in God, having a “pure [*taza*] heart,” and possessing values like honesty and reliability. A few, however, named only the five pillars of Islam. This diversity is seen in practice as well. Visiting ancestral shrines was more popular than any “transnationally normative” practice like praying *namaz*, yet several informants condemned it entirely. This juxtaposition of common Muslim identity with heterodox practices and ideas appeared repeatedly in informant responses.

Normativity in Religious Identity

To further explore the connection between the Kazakh and Muslim identities that our informants all claimed, respondents were asked the same question that Privatsky asked in his interviews in early 1990s Kazakhstan—“In your opinion, is it necessary to be a Muslim to be a Kazakh, and why?” (Privatsky 2001, 65). Despite the distance and time gap between the two investigations, the results were surprisingly consistent. Of the fifteen informants who answered this question, twelve agreed, as had Privatsky’s

Kazakhstani respondents, that it was necessary to be Muslim in order to be a Kazakh. Moreover, most of those individuals stated that all Kazakhs, regardless of their level of piety or religious self-ascription, were by definition Muslims. As one informant put it, “All Kazakhs are Muslims. You don’t have to do Islamic practices or say you’re Muslim. If you are Kazakh, you are Muslim” (Muratkhan).

Other informants, while agreeing with Muratkhan’s first statement, were more conditional in their conflation of national and religious identities, using the connection between the two as a vehicle for normative moral discourse, a tendency also documented in other case studies: “You must be Muslim to be Kazakh, but some Kazakhs drink and smoke. I wonder if they are real Kazakhs” (Tazagul; Abramson & Karimov 2007). While three informants did contend that it was not *necessary* to be Muslim to be Kazakh, one of the three nevertheless used religious-nationalist rhetoric in his response. In his words, Kazakhs should be Muslim because “Kazakh ancestors were Muslim and Kazakh customs depend on Islam” (Shokan).

Drawing from Privatsky and Khalid, who suggest that individuals raised during the socialist era often consider religion a subset of national identity rather than a potentially transnational connection, informants were also asked whether they considered themselves first to be Muslim or first to be Kazakh (2001; 2007). In the context of life course theory, those individuals who grew up after the fall of socialism would have been exposed to more transnational Islamic discourses during their formative years than their parents and grandparents, thus influencing their religious and national self-conceptions. Though most informants stated the question was difficult because of the inseparability of the two categories, respondent choices were divided along age lines. Only one of the six

Chapter VI: Results I

who considered themselves first Kazakh was under 25, and the eight informants who considered themselves first to be Muslim—including a cohort of college-aged women and men—were under 25, with only exception: the wife of an imam.

While one should not over-interpret demographic tendencies in such a small sample, these patterns do advance the idea that age and life history are important considerations in national and religious identity. Moreover, the near-universal agreement on the inseparability of Kazakh and Muslim identity contradicts arguments that increased piety among young people involves a de-emphasis of ethnic or national identification (Huntington 1996). Moreover, pious practice was not a guarantee of primary religious identification. One 55-year old informant described her decision to begin studying Islam as a way of “discovering my national traditions...during socialism we knew that we were Muslims and that we were Kazakhs, but we did not know the practices of Islam that would let us be real Kazakhs” (Tazagul). For her, a conception of Islam as a subset of Kazakh national identity led directly to the adoption and internalization of transnationally normative Islamic ideas taught by Turkish-educated imams.

Considering informants’ conflation of Islamic and Kazakh identity, and the predilection among Mongolian Kazakhs for considering Kazakhstan the true Kazakh homeland, informants were asked if they thought Kazakhstan would be a better location than Mongolia for engaging in religious activities (Diener 2007). While six of fifteen informants said they did not prefer either country, eight responded that they would feel more comfortable and find religious practice easier in Kazakhstan. Reasons given ranged from the personal to the political; four respondents, both rural and urban, mentioned the greater numbers of mosques, access to large pilgrimage sites like Akhmet Yesevi shrine,

the ease of religious education in the “Kazakh homeland,” and the preferability of “be[ing] around Muslim people” (Kunsuslu, Shokan). When informants were asked if religion would play a role in future migration decisions, however, all responded that it would not. The consensus among informants was that, though practicing Islam in Kazakhstan might be easier, economic incentives and family connections were more important to their migration decision-making processes (Barcus & Werner 2007).

Interestingly, the three informants who preferred Islamic practice in Mongolia justified their choices with the same rationale of religious and ethnic purity used by those who preferred Kazakhstan. One claimed Kazakhstani Kazakhs were not “real Muslims” because they were “Russian influenced,” and another stated, “Islam is purer here because we are all Kazakhs and everyone is Muslim, even if we don’t do our obligations” (Saparzhan; Altingul). These responses brought to mind the declaration that Mongolian Kazakhs have the “best-preserved traditions” by implying that, although Kazakhstan is the “homeland” of the Kazakhs, Bayan-Ulgii is more religiously (and ethnically) pure, with less Russian influence and a small non-Muslim population (Diener 2007). Privatsky suggests that considering purity (*taza*) as an element of national and religious identity is also common for Kazakhstani Kazakhs (2001). Even in post-socialist milieux filled with allegedly “pan-Islamic” religious discourses, connections between nationhood and religious identity remain prevalent and powerful.

Age and Life Course: Narratives and Influences

In the current period of rapid social change in Bayan-Ulgii, access to transnational, national, and local discourses is extremely uneven and often generationally dependent; the age-variability of responses in the last section exemplifies how conditions

Chapter VI: Results I

in which religious self-conceptions are developed have changed, even in the last decade (Kertzer 1991). To learn more about this dynamic, informants were asked how Islamic practice in Bayan-Ulgii had changed during their lifetimes. Responses showed how everyday experiences of religion had changed both during the socialist era and in the last few years, and also revealed effects of historical and remembered experiences on modern religious practices and identities. Older people still remembered the socialist repression and transformation of Islam, and ideas and opinions formed in that context continued to influence the religious lives of younger people, even those born after the fall of socialism (Montgomery 2007; Kertzer 1991).

All sixteen informants who answered this question agreed that religious life had qualitatively improved during their lifetimes. Thirteen mentioned an increase in religious practice, noting greater numbers of mosques and larger numbers of people praying regularly, and ten talked about the ease of access to Islamic education. Such unanimity, even among informants who were born in the democratic period, indicates that increases in piety, practice, and teaching have been continuous, and are generally seen as positive. As one 20-year old informant stated, “When I was a girl, only old people knew Islamic things, but now more young people know about Islam” (Kulpynai). Imam informants confirmed this trend, noting increasing participation in religious education and religious activities; most said that in the last five years alone, the number of students at *madrasas* and the number of people praying daily *namaz* had increased dramatically, and sometimes even doubled.

The socialist experiences of some elderly people often fueled a desire to educate themselves and their children about Islam despite lost connections to local religious

knowledge. Serik, a 62 year-old retired engineer, told the story of his grandfather, who had been a *molda* before socialism but was forced to abandon public Islamic practices and pray *namaz* in secret for almost forty years out of fear of government reprisals. Following the pattern of increased piety late in life that Privatsky mentions, however, he became more religiously active when he retired in 1958. At this time, he began to practice secret circumcisions, slaughter sheep on *Kurban Ait*, and pray at gravesite shrines for others who did not know the correct prayers (2001). Though Serik did not join in performing these practices because he feared losing his government job, his grandfather's example inspired him to begin studying and sending his children to the newly built mosque in the mid 1990s. In this way, narratives and memories of the repression and resilience of traditional religious authority in the socialist era catalyzed involvement with new systems of Islamic educational authority (Khalid 2007).

Serik's story highlights both differences and similarities between socialist and post-socialist constructions of Islamic identity. In some senses, the modern period is very different from the socialist era. Islamic education is more available every year, and it is becoming accepted and expected for young people, rather than just the old, to engage in religious life through both local traditions like shrine veneration and transnationally normative practices performed at mosques. On the other hand, socialist-era experiences and tendencies of religious thought and participation remain influential. Many imam informants noted that, while both elderly and young people had begun to study at mosques in great numbers, people between 25 and 45 remained less involved in new religious practices. In the words of one informant in this demographic category, "I believe in God but I am too busy to pray. I will do it later, when I am old like my

father...Kazakhs should do this when they are older” (Muratbai). Such a response suggests that while overt restrictions on practice and piety have been lifted, Islamic participation and education retain generational aspects heavily influenced by standards developed under the socialist system (Kertzer 1991, Khalid 2007).

Social networks also appear to be instrumental in the transformation of practice and identity, and many younger informants spoke of being inspired to learn about Islam by older family members, parents, siblings, and fellow students. Three informants, all of whom attended the Khalkh Mongol-majority Khovd University (the largest postsecondary institution in Western Mongolia) had become more religious at college through contact with a Kazakh student organization dedicated to “reconnecting with Kazakh national traditions” (Mairagul). In this case, the conflation of religion and nationality, social networks of age-peers, and even “secular” education were all implicated in informants’ decisions to engage in more religious practices. One informant notably said that she liked taking classes at the Khovd mosque because it helped “remind her of what made Kazakhs different from Mongols” and also because she wanted to follow her grandmother’s example and be more pious (Kunsuslu).

Islamic Learning, Networks, and Family

Though great variation exists among individual experiences, the preceding discussion makes it clear that religious piety, identity, and learning are not entirely individual processes. From education to ritual, the everyday experience of religion is a social phenomenon, one that depends on many factors including individual preference, discourses of religious authorities, family and generational dynamics and roles, and social networks (Durkheim 1995; Asad 2009). Among these factors, social networks are a

particularly fruitful area of inquiry given the quota-based snowball sampling design, and several questions about religious learning and teaching with respect to social and family networks were asked (Barcus & Werner 2007).

To begin, nineteen informants were asked the question “how have you learned about Islam?” and responses reinforced Kertzer’s idea of the individual as a unique point of integration of various discourses and influences (1991). Even those informants educated at *madrasas* (a total of eight) responded that they had learned in a variety of ways from a variety of sources including books, imams, friends, and family members. The most common means of Islamic education, mentioned by eleven participants, was learning from parents and grandparents. Another three informants had learned about Islam from same-age relatives and siblings. One young man, discussed in chapter nine, said both his grandfather and brother had encouraged him to study Islam at the mosque. In an archetypically circular family network dynamic, he then returned home to encourage his parents to do the same (Khanmurat).

Finke’s early 1990s research suggests that, then as now, Mongolian Kazakh family networks were critical for passing on religious knowledge, particularly from older to younger generations (1999). Additionally, our research suggests that as the availability of official forms of Islamic education has increased, the educational role of older people has *transformed* rather than simply decreased. In Khanmurat’s case, older people taught younger family members themselves and also encouraged learning at *madrasas*. The responses of a group of five elderly people in the rural community of Bauerhus confirmed this tendency; four of the five sent their children and grandchildren to the mosque to study in addition to providing personal religious instruction at home (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Girls studying Arabic at an Ulgii *madrassa* (Brede 2009).

While domestic and official forms of education were both considered important, they were not thought to be interchangeable; different types of religious knowledge were imparted in different contexts. In particular, many informants emphasized a division between scriptural and official teachings available in the mosque and more personalized “moral” education in the home. One 60 year-old informant said, for example, that he depended on the imam to teach his children about the Qur’an, but it was his responsibility to teach them to “be pure, not to steal, lie, or drink, and to respect others” (Saparzhan). This language echoes Privatsky’s conception of Kazakh Islam as an ethnic and ethical “pure path” or *taza jol* exemplified by the piety of one’s elders (2001).

In addition to age and family roles, Geertz, Roberts, and Montgomery have all noted the importance of gender in religious learning, focusing on women as instructors of religious and moral ideas in the home (1978, 2007, 2007). Several informant narratives

bore out this idea, mentioning learning Islamic ideas from their mothers and grandmothers. In particular, several college-age women informants stated that their mothers were their primary sources of religious knowledge (Kertzer 1991). One 20 year-old Ulgii informant said her mother had taught her to give alms and to pray at the shrines of her ancestors for good luck, and another young woman said her grandmother's piety had inspired her to pray more when she got older (Kulpynai; Kunsuslu). Despite the importance of women family members in teaching and religious involvement, however, their teachings were often considered less valuable than ideas learned from imams at mosques and *madrasas*. One middle-aged woman who regularly practiced almsgiving and shrine visitation stated that she knew "nothing about Islam" since she had "only" learned from her mother (Togzhan). Having not learned at a mosque, she was self-conscious about the quality of her religious education.

Because of the priority that informants gave to official forms of Islamic education and the frequency with which they encouraged their children (or parents) to study at *madrasas*, respondents were asked if (and where) they or any of their close relatives had formally studied Islam. Even preliminary results were interesting from a generational standpoint. Of the eight who said that they had studied at a madrasa at some point, only two were over thirty years of age. In spite of the paucity of informants who formally studied Islam, however, eighteen of the twenty-one respondents had a close family member, usually a younger person, who studied at a *madrasa*.

This result is interesting in that it suggests that that many family networks in both rural and urban locations contain at least a few individuals educated in new, transnational Islamic discourse. In fact, five informants knew a family member who had studied in

Chapter VI: Results I

another country (usually Turkey or Kazakhstan). This tendency toward international Islamic connectivity at the level of individual family networks marks a dramatic departure from Finke and Privatsky's decade-old observations of piety stemming from local trans-generational sources (1999; 2001). Currently, family networks appear to be augmented by a more geographically diverse set of information sources and power hierarchies—explored in more detail in chapter eight's discussion of imams.

Having ascertained the importance of family networks in both domestic and official/mosque-based religious education, eighteen informants were asked the question, “Do you do more Islamic practices than your family members?” Contextualizing piety in terms of other family members highlighted the multifaceted qualities of family networks in Bayan-Ulgii. Informant responses were evenly split between those who said they did more practices than other family members and those who did fewer, yet this division did not correspond to age. When informants were divided into “over 30” and “under 30” age categories, each category again contained an even split, demonstrating that both old and young people can be exemplars of piety for their family members.

Individual cases are even more revealing of this dynamic. People who claimed to be “more religious” included an old Ulgii woman educated during the socialist regime and a young man who began studying at the Ulgii mosque after his Kazakhstani-educated siblings told him to. Those who claimed to be “less religious” included an old rural herder who learned to pray *namaz* from his grandson and a young woman who learned to pray at shrines and light candles for the dead from her mother. These examples show that patterns of Islamic learning are generationally multidirectional; while forms of learning

and piety do vary by age, location, and gender, social networks are an instrumental contextualizing factor.

Obligation and Participation

Working from an understanding of pious practice as more than simple completion of internationally normative obligations, further interview questions examined the standards to which Mongolian Kazakhs in Bayan-Ulgii held themselves with regard to practice. Responses suggest that understandings of obligation, while primarily rooted in the five pillars, are multifaceted and variable. Though nearly every informant had a family member who had studied at a *madrassa*, and eight had personally done so, only three of twenty-one respondents who were asked the question “what obligations do you feel you have as a Muslim?” named all five Sunni pillars. Some of the most popular responses, however, were drawn from the five pillars: fourteen informants noted daily prayer as an obligation, ten mentioned fasting during Ramadan, seven talked about (but none had gone on) the *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, and six people mentioned *zakat* almsgiving and reciting the *shahada* profession of faith.

Variations on these themes illuminate the different religious standards to which Mongolian Kazakhs hold themselves. Nearly all informants said that sacrificing a sheep on *Kurban Ait* was an obligation, and five said that *Kurban Ait* was one of the five pillars. Moreover, twelve informants spoke of maintaining the values of the *taza jol* ideal, namely cleanliness, “good behavior,” and avoidance of “vices” like alcohol and cigarettes (Privatsky 2001). While several mentioned such personal values alongside the five pillars, many also said that completion of all five pillars was a duty incumbent only on “religious people.” For example, one 55-year-old rural respondent argued that she did

Chapter VI: Results I

not need to perform the five pillars as long as she had a “pure heart,” visited shrines, sacrificed a sheep on *Kurban Ait*, and made sure a *molda* came to bury the dead.

The Islamic practices in which informants participated were even more variable, and often bore little resemblance to the obligations that they professed. When asked the question, “what Islamic practices, rituals, and celebrations do you participate in?” informants mentioned killing sheep on *Kurban Ait*, fasting during Ramadan, giving alms, praying *namaz*, visiting burial shrines, burying family members, circumcising boys, and participating in marriage rituals. Further questions were geared to elicit detailed responses within these themes, and to gauge the prevalence of certain practices. Such clarification was important for interview technique, since some informants were less divulgatory than others and did not mention all the practices they engaged in without being asked about them individually. For example, three informants who initially claimed to do no religious practices at all actually prayed at shrines and gave alms.

Initiating New Religious Practices

One final consideration before beginning a systematic analysis of categories of religious acts involves the times at which informants began to perform Islamic practices. Alongside questions about participation in individual religious activities, informants were asked to state when they began to perform each ritual or practice. While six informants either did not know when they had begun or did not claim to have changed their religious patterns since the end of socialism, the remaining fifteen claimed to have adopted new pious practices ranging from all five pillars except *Hajj* to just almsgiving and *Kurban Ait*. Though the dates that people began performing such activities varied, most informants and their families began their new practices within the space of a few years.

Figure 7: A minaret under construction in Ulgii (Brede 2009).

These changes tended to be fairly recent: only four informants began practicing between 1990 and 1999, but eleven began after 2000, and eight of those started after 2005. Interviews with imams further confirmed that participation in mosque-based activities like *namaz* and almsgiving had increased in the last five years. Construction of new mosques and *madrasas* mirrored this trend, altering the nature of Ulgii's visible religious landscape. In the summer of 2009 alone, construction and expansion projects were observed at three of Ulgii's six mosques, including the building of a three-story minaret and new religious center at Ulgii's largest religious school (see figure 7).

Chapter VII

Results II: Pious Practices, Places, and Prohibitions

In spite of their diversity of social networks, approaches to identity, life stages, and demographic characteristics, most informants tended to speak about piety and religious identity in terms of practices, prohibitions, and acceptance of social norms. In particular, certain practices such as *Kurban Ait* and ancestor shrine visitation were popular among informants with a variety of backgrounds and attitudes, including some who self-identified as “not religious.” This focus on lived piety again supports the argument that religious practice for Mongolian Kazakhs is not reducible to completion of the five pillars. As Khalid writes, “Islam is an ongoing argument in which adherents can take any number of different positions and make any point, all with reference to the same set of sources...and practices” (2007, 202). This chapter describes the variety of pious practices that informants mentioned and the positions that such practices allowed them to take by focusing on interview responses and participant observations.

The three sections of this chapter each focus on a different aspect of piety, organized around locations where practices are performed and how these locations have shifted as a result of changing dynamics of authority. Though many practices historically were (and sometimes still are) based in the home, the two poles selected for this analysis are mosques and shrines—primarily because of the growing importance and influence of the former and the locational uniqueness and significance of the latter. The first section considers practices based in mosques as well as domestic pious acts that have shifted to become more affiliated with such institutions. The second section addresses devotional and life-cycle rituals performed at shrines. The third section explores a range of norms

and prohibitions including female veiling, and injunctions against alcohol and alternate religious authorities like *baqsi* fortunetellers and traditional *moldas*.

Part I: Mosques, Authority, and Changing Poles of Praxis

In light of the increases in mosque construction and overall religious activity in the years since Finke's study, and the importance that respondents placed on mosques and religious professionals, the next part of this chapter explores six religious activities centered on these important locations. As centers of piety, mosques are versatile, providing many services and acting as hubs for religious education and new religious practices like *namaz*, *zhuma namaz* (Friday prayers), and almsgiving. In addition they host activities like circumcision rituals, weddings, and *Kurban Ait* celebrations that historically were performed at home, in secret, or in other places. This co-option of religious authority and religious space by new institutions represents a change in public and private religious expression in Bayan-Ulgii.

All the informants interviewed claimed to engage in at least one ritual or practice at mosques, usually almsgiving. When asked how they chose which mosque to attend, informants also unanimously declared that any mosque was as good as any other; rural communities often have only one mosque, and Ulgii informants said they went either to the closest mosque or to the Ulgii Central Mosque. Most imams expressed a similar sentiment, stating that people should be free to go to multiple mosques or pick whichever mosque they wished since "all mosques are houses of God" (Nurlan). As will be discussed in the next chapter, however, there are ways in which Bayan-Ulgii's mosques are not mutually interchangeable. Imams have different political and religious affiliations and provide for different community needs depending on context. Moreover, several

Chapter VII: Results II

informants expressed strong connections to individual mosques; one university student informant actually lived in the Khovd mosque while attending classes (Khanmurat).

Namaz: A Daily Obligation

Across all informants, the most frequently mentioned standard for overall piety was the five-times daily *namaz* prayer; as one informant said, “if you pray *namaz*, you are a very religious person” (Shokan). Finke also uses *namaz* as a benchmark, claiming, “the number of people praying regularly is very small...the same is true of fasting and giving alms” (1999, 136). Though more people pray now than during Finke’s fieldwork, the idea that *namaz* is a predictor for other pious activities—particularly those performed in mosques—appears well founded. All seven respondents who claimed to pray *namaz* also fasted during Ramadan and gave alms.

The demographic characteristics of these seven informants also support the assertion that those who pray daily tend to be either elderly or young, and are predominantly male. Of the seven, two were older rural men (66 and 75 years of age) who had prayed since 2003 and 1999 respectively. Both were the only members of their households other than their grandchildren to do so, feeling an obligation to pray “for their families” (Saparzhan; Amantai). Another three informants were young men between 18 and 21 who lived or studied in urban areas and began praying independently of their parents in late high school (Shokan; Khanmurat; Temir). The two women in the study who prayed *namaz* were an elderly woman who had done so throughout the socialist period and a 40 year-old madrasa teacher who began in 1994 (Alia; Altingul).

Interviews with imams revealed that overall mosque attendance for *namaz* followed the same demographic trends present in the sample population, though they

Figure 8: A Kazakh girl wearing dress and headscarf provided by the Ulgii Central Mosque (Brede 2009).

acknowledged that the domestic nature of most prayer (except for *zhuma namaz*) makes overall demographics difficult to judge. During *zhuma namaz* at the Ulgii Central Mosque in June 2009, around two hundred people were in attendance, and most were men in their teens and twenties. While several older men were also present, less than a dozen men between the ages of 30 and 50—with the exception of the imam and his assistant—were present. As in most Sunni mosques, women were separated from men during prayer and given a separate, smaller space to pray, emphasizing the gendered nature of the mosque as a religious space (Roberts 2007; Khalid 2007). While women did attend prayers at mosques, the conditions of their entry reinforced gender-normative behavior; those who entered to give alms had to don a headscarf (see figure 8).

Despite the demographically limited nature of *namaz*, respect for the practice is widespread. Even secular Kazakhs consider religion important to their national identities, and praise those who pray as “very religious” (Muratbai; Montgomery 2007). An anecdote from an Ulgii park adjacent to the Central Mosque illustrates this point. At dusk, the park was filled with people of all ages sitting with friends, talking, and drinking beer. The moment the call to prayer was heard, however, all activity ceased. None of the occupants of the park made signs of praying *namaz*, but the respectful silence served as a reminder of the increasingly public nature of Mongolian Kazakh Islam. Both newly practicing and more traditional Kazakhs seem to welcome this shift, however it is primarily an urban phenomenon. Rural areas, with fewer mosques, fewer young people, and more traditional practices experience different changes (Finke 1999).

Almsgiving: A Popular New Form of Piety

Like *namaz*, *zakat* almsgiving is an almost entirely post-socialist religious activity in Bayan-Ulgii. Unlike *namaz*, however, the third pillar of Islam enjoys widespread popularity. All but two informants had given alms at some point, and most did so at least once a year. Certain times and occasions were particularly popular, the most common being Ramadan, mentioned by seventeen informants as a time to give alms. Over half also mentioned giving alms in order to have good luck on special occasions such as travel—a spiritual transaction once performed by fortunetellers and traditional *moldas*. Participant observation confirmed the importance of this use of almsgiving; each time our research team traveled to rural field sites, the Kazakh women who worked as translators and research assistants went to the Ulgii Central Mosque to give alms and receive a blessing for the trip from the imam.

Almsgiving takes several forms, demonstrating the local variety of even new and internationally normative pious practices. Whereas most informants gave small amounts of money (usually a few thousand Mongolian togrog, or between one and five US dollars), some rural respondents gave sheep instead. This was particularly common among herders, whose limited involvement in cash economies made livestock alms easier than monetary donations (Diener 2007; Finke 1999). Livestock alms were often given by families or groups of families rather than individuals in order to offset the high value (around 40 US dollars) of an animal. Imams often preferred such donations as well, since animals provided extra food to give to the poor and facilitated animal sacrifices during *Kurban Ait* festivities at the mosque (Alibek).

Despite the popularity of almsgiving, disagreements over imams' use of alms illuminate issues of authority and trust between some Mongolian Kazakhs and Islamic professionals. One elderly rural informant explained that he liked to donate a sheep to the Bauerhus mosque during Ramadan, but his middle-aged sons argued that he should give directly to the poor instead because they did not trust the imam (Muratkhan). An interview with the imam of the Bauerhus mosque presented the other side of the story, and partially confirmed Muratkhan's sons' suspicions: while some alms were used for charitable purposes, most of the resources were used for building upkeep and salaries. Most respondents, however, seemed happy to support such activities with their donations while fulfilling an obligation and receiving blessings and good luck.

The Holy Month: Practices during Ramadan

Pious activities during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—including fasting, praying, and going without sleep on the 27th night—were nearly as popular among

Chapter VII: Results II

informants as almsgiving. In fact, Ramadan was the single most popular time to give alms. All but three informants engaged in religious activities relating to Ramadan, and over half fasted from dawn to dusk each day. Of those who fasted during the holy month, most also recited special *tarawih* prayers at a mosque—for several, the only time they engaged in organized prayer. According to imam informants, *tarawih* prayers are the most popular prayers at mosques throughout Bayan-Ulgii, with attendance higher than even *zhuma namaz*. Along with *tarawih* prayers, informants of all ages in both rural and urban settings said that they stayed awake all night on the 27th night of Ramadan, a popular practice for Central Asian Muslims even during socialism (Adams 2007).

Unlike almsgiving and *namaz*, Ramadan practices have a long socialist and pre-socialist history, and gendered social tendencies developed over this time can be seen in modern forms of piety. Though *namaz* is currently a predominantly male phenomenon, fasting was more popular among women respondents than men, and the feasting, celebration, and prayer associated with Ramadan were performed primarily at home—the traditional locus of feminine piety (Northrop 2007). Though most respondents began fasting in the democratic period, the case of Kulpynai, a Khovd University student, illustrates the continued importance of socialist-era Ramadan practices for gendered, ethnic and intergenerational identity. Growing up, Kulpynai was impressed with her mother and grandmother’s maintenance of “Kazakh traditions” by fasting during Ramadan. In fifth grade, years before she went to the mosque to learn from the imam, her mother taught her to fast and also instructed her in other “Kazakh Islamic values.” Although her familial and clerical education complemented each other, she said that she was embarrassed to have learned more from her mother than from the imam.

In one sense, Kulpynai's religious experience represents the modern Mongolian culmination of the case of the Tajikistani Communist official who enlisted his female family members to fast and pray for him by proxy in order to be a "good Tajik" (Khalid 2007; see chapter 3). In both cases, Ramadan practices were performed and learned in a feminine, domestic space, and evoked both religious and ethnic identity. In Kulpynai's case, however, socialist-era secrecy has given way to what W.E.B. Du Bois might call a "double consciousness...of two warring ideals in one [body]," a sense of self-denigration also expressed by other women who learned religious practices and discourses at home (Du Bois 1903, 45; Kunsuslu). Even as she continued to employ traditional, domestic, and feminine approaches to piety, Kunsuslu acknowledged these approaches as inferior to the transnational discourses of imams. In spite of such internal and external contradictions, however, she enjoyed fasting during Ramadan "because it is good to fast with other Muslims"—a case of practice enforcing *communitas* with other Mongolian Kazakh Muslims regardless of religious orientation (Turner & Turner 1978, Kulpynai).

Kurban Ait: *Everyone's Favorite Festival*

With regard to *communitas*, ethnic identification, and the integration of local and large-scale religious discourses, few Islamic practices receive more academic or local attention than *Kurban Ait*, celebrated on the tenth day of the Islamic month of *Dhu al-Hijjah* (Adams 2007; Montgomery 2007). Though celebrations of *Kurban Ait* (also known as *Eid al-Adha*) vary in length between Muslim countries, in Central Asia and Mongolia the feast lasts at least three days and involves ritual animal sacrifice, *toi* parties, family gatherings, and, for some, copious drinking (Adams 2007). More than any of the previously mentioned religious activities, *Kurban Ait* was widely practiced in Bayan-

Chapter VII: Results II

Ulgii during the socialist period: of the seventeen informants who currently sacrificed a sheep for the holiday, the families of seven had done so before 1990. Finke's observations suggest that *Kurban Ait* was already popular in the early 1990s, alongside festivals like *Navruz* and the Mongolian national festival *Naadam* (1999, 137).

Since then, *Kurban Ait*'s popularity appears to have grown among almost all demographics, even before the construction of large numbers of mosques. Whereas most informants who prayed *namaz* or fasted during Ramadan initiated their new religious practices within the same timeframe, *Kurban Ait* usually predated other practices by several years, and participation in the religious feast was not correlated with other forms of piety. Eighteen year-old Shokan, for instance, began studying Islam and praying *namaz* at the behest of his older siblings in 2007, yet his parents had sacrificed a sheep on *Kurban Ait* even before he was born. The rural herder Saparzhan, who did not begin praying *namaz* or visiting ancestral shrines until his grandson told him to do so in 2003, had sacrificed a sheep on *Kurban Ait* every year during socialism. Even Altingul, a madrasa teacher married to an imam who began praying *namaz* in 1994, started to celebrate *Kurban Ait* in 1990 even before she met her husband.

In addition to this strong historical legacy, *Kurban Ait* has been integrated into the new practices of mosques and *madrasas*. According to the president of the Mongolian Islamic Association (MIA), every mosque that can afford to do so sacrifices between one and a dozen sheep each year for *Kurban Ait* and gives the meat to the poor (Aybek). International and local donors have been known to provide funds to purchase sheep for these festivities, bringing a large-scale element to a once-secret, private celebration. By adopting and promoting a practice that was historically a domestic, private, or secret

celebration, authorities like the MIA have increased the popularity of what was already one of the most popular Islamic practices in Bayan-Ulgii.

This expansion of a private celebration to a public sphere controlled by new religious authorities has implications in terms of content as well as form. Though most families continue to celebrate *Kurban Ait* at home, new prayers, forms, and ideas are added to the old celebration while certain acts, like drinking vodka at the *Kurban Ait toi* feast, are falling by the wayside among many families (Amantai, Roberts 2007). These new elements may represent what DeWeese calls the “re-Islamization” of practices by “figures intent upon a more rigorous observance of Islamic rites and a clearer evocation of Islamic doctrine...to reassert their authority in an environment from which they had been largely excluded in socialist times” (DeWeese 1995, 3). *Kurban Ait*, like all of Bayan-Ulgii’s Islamic practices, is undergoing discursive and structural changes as a result of changing sources of authority. Nevertheless, the practice is unique in its endurance. To quote one informant, “the only Muslim practices that we Kazakhs did during socialism were shrine visitation, burial, *Kurban Ait*, and circumcision” (Altingul).

Circumcision: A Powerful Marker of Identity

Like other Central Asian Muslim groups, Mongolian Kazakhs consider circumcision an important marker of ethnic and religious identity, and the significance of the practice during both socialist and post-socialist eras has been well-documented (Finke 1999). Privatsky discusses attitudes toward the custom at length in his exploration of “collective memory” in Kazakhstan, noting that most families circumcised their sons, and those that did not were scorned as betrayers of ethnic unity (2001, 63). Finke confirms the similarly great importance of circumcision for Mongolian Kazakhs, echoing Altingul

Chapter VII: Results II

by asserting, “the only Moslem [sic] custom rather strictly observed in socialist times was circumcision” (1999, 136). While it is difficult to ask questions about such delicate issues, these sources indicate that circumcision is such an important marker of identity and religiosity that a question on the subject was deemed necessary. Responses confirmed the continued importance of circumcision and also indicated that it, like other religious practices, has moved from the domestic sphere to become closely affiliated with mosques, religious authorities, and transnational religio-cultural influences.

Circumcision was almost universal among male respondents and the sons, siblings, and relatives of women respondents. Only one individual, an Ulgii man in his mid-twenties, claimed to be uncircumcised. Most informants and/or their male relatives were circumcised as children, though ages at circumcision varied greatly. Several young men, both urban and rural, claimed to have been circumcised as babies, one Ulgii woman said she circumcised her sons at age 6, and the brother of one college-aged informant was circumcised as a teenager in 1990. Much of this variability had to do with difficulties performing the procedure; several informants offered narratives of difficult circumcisions during socialism. One rural informant, who worked as a mining engineer, said he had to secretly circumcise his sons at home in the middle of the night because he would be fired if his supervisors found out. Ironically, he noted that that the supervisors were also Kazakh, and also circumcised their sons in secret.

Compared to the socialist period, modern circumcision is easier and more available—particularly in Ulgii, where doctors perform the procedure at clinics and hospitals. In rural areas, however, a lack of physicians and specialists brings the practice under the purview of mosques. Several rural informants mentioned that a specialist from

a Turkish religious organization comes to mosques in each *soum* and circumcises the region's young boys on a semi-annual basis (Bibigul, Amantai). Rural imams confirmed this story, adding that the specialist has come regularly since the early 1990s, and that he performs up to four-dozen circumcisions a day as a free service (Alibek). After circumcision, informants mentioned organizing elaborate *sundet toi* circumcision feasts, entertaining guests and celebrating their son's ascriptive accomplishment.

The presence of a Turkish specialist heralds an unprecedented standardization and trans-nationalization of circumcision practices, a departure from a past in which the procedure was performed at home and in secret as a sign of ethno-religious identity and resistance (Privatsky 2007). By making circumcision not just a public but also a non-Kazakh act, this state of affairs brings a new level of international connectivity to a symbol literally inscribed on the bodies of its carriers (Foucault 1978). For a rural population that remains poor, pastoral, and geographically isolated, the trans-nationalization of this powerful yet private symbol reinforces the newly connected nature of the religious and ethnic identities that it connotes.

Marriage and Life Cycle Rituals

Like circumcision, marriage is a religiously significant life cycle marker that creates and delineates gendered experiences and roles. Moreover, the importance of ethnicity and religion in choosing a marriage partner, noted by Finke, remains to this day (1999, 138). Most informants who spoke about marriage said that they would only marry a Kazakh (and therefore a Muslim), and the one reference to inter-ethnic marriage encountered during fieldwork involved the need for a Mongolian man to convert to Islam should he choose to marry a Kazakh woman (Saparzhan). Such limitations are not

Chapter VII: Results II

merely a question of parental control. In informal conversation, one young Kazakh woman mentioned she was dating a boy she met at college, and had not yet told her parents. When asked if he was Kazakh or Mongolian, she responded, shocked, “of course he’s a Kazakh, I would not want to date someone who is not Muslim” (Mairagul).

The importance of delineating ethnic and religious identity through marriage may account for the attention that informants gave to narratives of marriage during socialism. Several older informants talked about being married in secret by a *molda*, considering the religious ceremony more important than the civil registration. Just like other religiously significant activities formerly performed in secret, marriage has increasingly become the purview of imams, who perform marriage ceremonies prior to the inevitable, and frequently alcoholic, *neke toi* marriage feast. One rural wedding, to which our research team was invited, boasted a small ceremony with the imam followed by a boisterous party with free vodka and beer (see figure 9). Invitations to such events, for which no expense is spared at the photo shop in Ulgii, evince an open approach to the religiosity of marriage and are replete with Arabic script, stars, crescents, and other Islamic imagery.

Beyond the ceremonial aspect, married life itself carries religious connotations, particularly with respect to gender roles and prohibitions. Several informants, for example, said that they expected married women to wear headscarves and dress modestly. Additionally, married women are often expected to perform domestic rituals for their household, organize activities like *Kurban Ait*, name children, and give their sons their first haircut, another important life-cycle ritual (Finke 1999). Duties of mourning and burial, as well as prayer rituals at burial shrines, are also considered obligations for the spouse of the deceased (Bibigul).

Figure 9: A Kazakh couple wearing Western garb is married by an imam in a traditional *ger* (Emmelhainz 2009).

Part II: Shrines and Sacred Sites as Centers of Piety

Though the practices described in the previous part of this chapter are diverse, they are united in their increasing orientation toward mosques as local nodes of piety, connectivity, knowledge, and authority (Foucault 1978). Devotional practices at *zirat* shrines, however, are an exception to this rule, since devotees travel to locations scattered around the landscape to engage in such activities. Moreover, shrine practices are popular and enduring at a domestic level; acts of devotion at shrines remain mostly a family affair, conducted at the burial sites of family members and other local sacred places. Almost all respondents visited ancestral shrines, and even people whose family burial shrines were very far away still expended the time and effort to visit.

Chapter VII: Results II

Only one informant directly opposed shrine visitation, using rhetoric similar to that of some conservative international groups to claim that Muslims should not build burial shrines or decorate burial places in any way (Temir). Such ideologically motivated condemnations of shrine practice emphasize the contested and dynamic nature of shrine visitation. Many of the tendencies of trans-nationalization, “re-Islamization,” and increasing post-socialist popularity that affect other rituals based in mosques also influence *zirat* praxis (DeWeese 1995). In light of the popular, enduring, and contested quality of these rituals, informants were asked a number of questions on the subject, and responses confirmed the importance of *zirats* to both traditional and modern piety.

Location and Significance of Shrines

Shrines are unique among places of religious practice in Bayan-Ulgii in that they are personalized, and the location of such sites can be highly significant for devotees. Privatsky discusses this subject in depth, considering shrines as foci of religious territoriality that mark the landscape (and by extension its inhabitants) as both Muslims and Kazakhs and simultaneously offer a sense of historical connection to religious tradition through family lines (2001). Shrines in Bayan-Ulgii serve many of these same functions; as Altingul stated, burial and prayer at gravesides were some of the few explicit forms of religious expression that remained during socialism—a bridge from past Muslim identity to the present in a single spiritually meaningful place.

Informant responses and participant observations indicate that *zirat* shrines in Bayan-Ulgii tend to be clustered around historic family pastures of the province’s residents, reinforcing the recentness of urbanization in a place that remains largely nomadic and rural to this day (Diener 2007). Visiting such places serves several social

functions; informant narratives emphasized the importance of shrine visits in connecting with national, local, familial and religious heritage, in addition to spiritual fulfillment. Informants also stated that visiting rural shrines helped them connect with family members who still lived in the countryside, especially when relatives visited from Kazakhstan or other faraway locations (Gulzhan, Kunsuslu). Some expressed pride in the location of their family shrines; one Ulgii man, who claimed that shrine visitation was the only religious practice he performed, told a story about his ancestor who was buried at the site of a battle of great significance for the Kazakh nation. The continuity of shrine visitation during the socialist period added to this sense of connection to, and pride in, the past; several respondents visited shrines during socialism, and even young people who had learned the prayers for shrine visitation at mosques expressed pride in older family members who had visited shrines during socialism.

A visit to the Ulgii cemetery with two imams from the Ulgii Central Mosque confirmed the ongoing popularity, widespread official sanction, and historical continuity of shrine-based practices. The cemetery, whose oldest graves correspond with the early socialist-era development of Ulgii in the 1930s, is sprawling and disorganized, covering almost a square mile (see figure 10). The individualized and elaborate nature of burial shrines is one of the cemetery's most striking features, and shrines range from simple raised beds to huge hexagonal constructions embellished with ornate Islamic imagery (see figure 11). Although elaborate shrines are more common in sections of the cemetery built after 1990, even shrines from as early as the 1940s display explicit Islamic images like stars, crescents and Arabic script. According to our imam guide, burial sites were among the few locations where such symbols could be used in communist Mongolia;

Figure 10: The Ulgii cemetery seen from a distance (Werner 2009).

Figure 11: An ornate burial shrine beside simpler plots (Brede 2009).

he recalled his parents discussing the decorations for the shrine of his grandfather, who died in the 1980s (Aybek). Interestingly, while he decried the few people who left “shamanistic offerings” at shrines, the imam noted with pride a tendency toward shrine “re-Islamization,” as people added more Islamic symbols to the graves of relatives (DeWeese 1995).

New Islamic symbols are also common around other rural sacred sites, though unlike *zirats* they are not authoritatively recognized. One example of such a local devotional site, a sacred spring traditionally considered to have healing powers, was encountered while staying with a Kazakh family in their pasture in Khovd *aimag*. Though not as elaborate as other such sites, or *mazars*, in other countries, the spring was littered with small Islamic devotional items like those available in the Ulgii Bazaar, and strips of cloth were tied around clumps of grass (DeWeese 1995, Montgomery 2007). A nearby rock believed to cure warts if rubbed against the foot was similarly festooned. The prevalence of items common to other Central Asian sacred sites like cloth strips, in addition to explicit Islamic symbols, suggests a connection between the healing site and other popular conceptions of Islam.

Pious Acts at Shrines

In addition to the location and personal significance of shrines, informants were asked about practices in which they engaged while visiting shrines. Initial observations of healing springs, rocks, and other sacred places seemed to suggest a pattern of popular site-specific piety including practices like tying ribbons on trees and leaving food for spirits, following Abramson & Karimov's work in Uzbekistan (2007). These practices were less widespread than might be thought, however. The most popular shrine activity among informants was "reading *Ayat*"—the recitation of *Ayat al-Kursi*, a Qur'anic verse widely considered valuable for both the individual who recites it and for the spirits of the dead (Alonso & Kalanov 2008).

While the absence of some common Central Asian religious practices at shrines is attributable in part to the influence of new authorities who prefer Qur'anic recitation to

Chapter VII: Results II

other forms of piety, reading *Ayat* appears to pre-date the teachings of such authorities. Several older informants spoke of reciting *Ayat* during the socialist period or hiring *moldas* to recite the prayer at occasions of death, burial, and remembrance. Currently, however, knowledge of the Arabic prayer is widespread; informants of all ages and levels of religious training recited *Ayat* in Arabic, and those who could not expressed embarrassment about their inability. As with other practices that survived socialism, new religious authorities have played a role in promoting this broader familiarity with *Ayat*. Imam informants said the short classes they offered on praying *Ayat* were among their most popular, and the Ulgii Central Mosque pays a man to live year-round at the entrance to the city's cemetery in order to assist shrine visitors who do not know the correct rituals and prayers.

Despite the relative uniformity of *Ayat* as a form of practice, the meanings that the recitation held for different informants demonstrated its polyvocality as a religious symbol. Of the fifteen people who knew how to recite the prayer, twelve said they did so for the benefit of the spirits of dead ancestors, yet the quality of this benefit was disputed. Four informants said they prayed *Ayat* to help their ancestors or relatives get into paradise, but another two (both educated at the independent Hussein mosque, run by an imam who vehemently opposes shrine worship as “idolatry”) emphatically stated that they did *not* read *Ayat* for that purpose and that it was impossible to help a dead person get into heaven. Most imams, however, agreed that people could pray for their ancestors to get into paradise as long as they did not ask their ancestors to give them anything in return.

Nevertheless, five informants, two of whom had learned to pray *Ayat* in mosques, said that they prayed to receive blessings, good luck, and good health from their ancestors.

The prevalence of this idea despite the efforts of imams to discourage it and present a different conception of shrine devotion indicates the continued importance of trans-generational teaching and learning. In the pre-socialist period, many Hanafi and Naqsbandi Sufi authorities promoted a wider variety of shrine practices than are currently exhibited in Bayan-Ulgii, and praying for favors from the dead was considered acceptable (Abramson & Karimov 2007). Alia, an Ulgii woman from a pre-socialist clerical family, exemplified the modern continuation of such ideas, having maintained them along with practices like *namaz*, Ramadan fasting, and *Kurban Ait*. Alia taught her younger family members to pray in Arabic on the anniversaries of the death of family members, since “It helps give good wishes to dead people, and in return we Kazakhs can ask the spirits of the dead for help.”

Occasions of Shrine Devotion

Just as with other forms of piety in Bayan-Ulgii, the times that shrine visits and *Ayat* were performed varied among informants, and most asserted that they visited family *zirats* on multiple occasions and for multiple reasons. The most common of such occasions was travel and migration, a consistent theme in the life of the increasingly transnational Mongolian Kazakh community. Over half of respondents said that they went to family shrines if relatives visited from abroad, and they would do the same before traveling or migrating. This tendency emphasizes two important aspects of local piety. First, shrine visitation can serve to reinforce family networks, bringing multiple generations together around a common activity in a place that evokes narratives of family history (Privatsky 2001, Turner & Turner 1978). Secondly, through shrine visits, migration and transnational movement are framed and contextualized in a religious way.

Chapter VII: Results II

To quote one young woman, “it is good to remember our family and our religion when we are about to move away” (Mairagul).

Holidays like *Kurban Ait* and the month of Ramadan also provided opportunities for families to gather and travel to shrines. Informants frequently mentioned the importance of visiting family *zirats* on Muslim holidays, and several considered the practice necessary for the completion of such celebrations (Kulpynai). In this sense, shrine visitation can be seen as another dimension of festival practices in addition to activities at home and at mosques initiated through both familial and transnational religious networks. As with other holiday activities popular during socialism, new religious authorities officially sanction *zirat* practices at these times; several imam informants actively encouraged shrine visitation during Ramadan and *Kurban Ait*.

In addition to travel, migration, and festivals, informants mentioned another occasion of shrine visitation that connected them to family members in a less material way; eight respondents said that they visited shrines and/or prayed *Ayat* after having a dream in which a dead relative or ancestor played a part. Informants had no sense that this common Central Asian Muslim belief was in any way unorthodox, and most religious authorities interviewed did not object to praying after dreams (Khalid 2007). Such dreams were widely seen as incentives to connect with one’s family members and homeland, and five respondents said that they would be sure to return to their family shrine when they visited Bayan-Ulgii if they dreamt of an ancestor while abroad. Several informants also linked this expression of family oriented piety to national discourses: “We should pray in order to help our ancestors if they come to us in our dreams, it is the Kazakh way” (Gulzhan).

A final occasion for shrine visits—burial—is addressed in more detail below. It should be noted, however, that visiting the graves of deceased family members one week, forty days, and one year after death (a tendency that Finke mentions) remains common in Bayan-Ulgii (1999, 137). If such visits were not possible, many informants made a special effort to pray *Ayat* at home on these dates. Several others spoke of lighting candles for the dead inside their homes, a practice common across much of Central Asia that some new religious authorities and institutions condemn (Gulzhan; Alia; Montgomery 2007). Such dates can even affect the timing of major trips; one rural informant's brother, who was unable to come from his home in Kazakhstan in time for a burial, scheduled his next visit to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the death.

Burial and Funerary Practice

Considering the importance informants placed on burial shrines, it is not surprising that burial itself is an important part of popular Mongolian Kazakh religious life. Islamic burial and shrine construction were some of the only openly religious practices of the socialist period, accompanied by festivities and mourning practices that Finke describes as “very ritualized...[and always] connected with the slaughter of animals and the entertainment of guests” (1999, 137). Informants agreed that burial and mourning remain elaborate and important, however such practices have changed somewhat, falling increasingly under the purview of imams and mosques. Additionally, burial practices are contested; informants disagreed about the location and timing of burial and the decoration of burial sites. These issues are notable because they relate to discourses of religious and national belonging, homeland, and tradition.

Chapter VII: Results II

Almost all informants practiced shrine veneration and mourning rituals, but many informants were unclear on the specifics of burial practices. Nevertheless, most agreed on general points: the body of the deceased should be buried in the ground, it should be “pure” (*taza*), and either a *molda* or an imam should conduct the burial. Informants had differing opinions, however, about the time that should be taken between death and burial—a question informed by interpretations of the Islamic mandate for burial within 24 hours (Roberts 2007). Though beholden to the opinions of religious experts in this matter, most informants did not consider observance of the 24-hour limit to be critical.

Serik, for example, whose *molda* grandfather had performed burials for decades, said that burial times were flexible and could be postponed for as long as two or three days in order for family members to arrive and attend the ceremony. On the other hand, the conservative Saudi-educated imam Khanibek vociferously condemned the laxity of Serik’s approach and argued that no exceptions should be made to the 24-hour rule; dead people, in his opinion, should immediately be buried in undecorated places. The majority view among imams was closer to that of lay informants than to Khanibek’s hard-line opinions. Even the president of the MIA said exceptions could be made, mentioning a prominent local imam who died in Turkey and whose body took several days to return to Ulgii for burial (Aybek).

The case of the imam whose body was transported from Turkey to Ulgii highlights the relevance of burial shrine location to multi-scalar discourses of identity and religiosity. Shrines, as noted earlier, serve as foci for the construction and re-affirmation of local and Kazakh identities and the strengthening of ties between family members and ancestral places. The decision of where to bury a dead family member thus has far-

reaching implications for patterns of devotion, social networks, history, identity, and sense of place (Privatsky 2001). Though imams like Khanibek may get some headway, the ethnographic data suggest that most laypeople and authorities wish to continue traditional burial patterns. Most informants agreed with the statement, “It is important to be buried in your birthplace,” and many noted that women tend to be buried with their husband’s family in the traditional patrilocal fashion (Finke 1999; Diener 2007).

Although most interviewees expressed a preference for being buried “in [their] birthplace,” many also said that a body did not have to be moved if it could be buried “in the homeland.” One informant said that it was actually better to be buried in Kazakhstan because it was the “homeland of the Kazakhs...and it is right to be buried with Muslim people” (Saparzhan). This comment evidences the projection of local religious sites, practices and identities onto a larger (national) scale in the context of transnational migration, a tendency explored by Diener in his discussion of Mongolian Kazakh territoriality (Diener 2007). While burial sites were, and remain, small-scale, familial loci of pious practice, migration and increased connectivity have broadened the scope of religious meaning evoked by the location of burial shrines. Privatsky confirms that such a tendency to expand the meanings of local sacred sites to a national scale is not unique to Mongolia. He observes, “Sacred space so dominates the cultural horizon in Turkistan that it has ramified into a quasi-sacral conception of Kazak ethnic descent,” noting that burial shrines are often employed as tools to discursively conflate Kazakh national and religious identity (Privatsky 2001, 66-67).

Religious conviction and national ideology are not the only factors influencing people’s opinions about burial practices; for many, convenience was the primary criterion

Chapter VII: Results II

for decisions about burial sites and timing. When a group of six Ulgii respondents were asked how they would pick a place to bury a family member who died in Kazakhstan, all mentioned that the cost of transporting the body would be beyond the means of most families, and three said that moving a body was unnecessary since “Kazakhstan is the homeland.” The other three informants (all of whom were over 45 years of age) said they would bring the body of a relative home for burial alongside other family members if they were financially able. Burial location seemed particularly important for older informants, and one older woman (Alia) who had recently migrated to Kazakhstan said that she wanted her body to be buried “in my homeland [Mongolia], with my family.” With the growth of discourses that portray Kazakhstan, rather than Bayan-Ulgii, as the “homeland” of Mongolian Kazakhs, the orientation of future generations with respect to burial practices and locations is unclear; in the words of one middle-aged informant “old people want to be buried in their birthplace, but young people don’t care; they don’t like to think about death” (Gulzhan, Diener 2007).

Part III: Other Norms and Prohibitions

Shifting and contested religious discourses affect every aspect of religious thought and practice in Bayan-Ulgii. New religious authorities, imams, and mosques have been particularly influential, introducing nationally and trans-nationally normative practices and altering practices that survived socialism. On the whole, Mongolian Kazakhs have also become more religiously involved; even respondents with no formal Islamic education engaged in practices and expressed ideas that tied them to new transnational discourses, supporting the institutions that promoted them through alms and other means.

Despite the clear importance of newly introduced and transformed religious practices, practices discouraged by new religious authority figures and religiously oriented limitations on behavior such as veiling and abstinence from alcohol have received relatively little attention. Such prohibitions are central to the idea of *taza jol* and ethno-religious constructions of purity. Moreover, adherence to norms and prohibitions is one of the most frequently mentioned indicators of generalized Islamic piety in scholarly literature (Abazov 2007; Finke 1999). The following discussion explores three contested norms and prohibitions in religious life that informants identified: consumption of alcohol, gendered codes of dress, and the role of alternate spiritual and religious authority figures like *moldas* and *baqsi* fortunetellers.

Alcoholic Beverages

Among informants, consumption of alcohol was by far the most commonly mentioned religious prohibition, cited as a source of social problems and impiety. All but one informant asserted that Muslims—and therefore Kazakhs—should not drink alcohol. This widespread acknowledgement of injunctions against alcohol, however, does not appear to affect the continued popularity of drinking among Mongolian Kazakhs. Finke observed, “drinking alcohol is common among the Kazakhs,” and the same remains true today; only a third of informants claimed not to drink, and these responses may be biased since most informants were embarrassed by what they considered to be a “bad habit” (Finke 1999, 137; Kulpynai). This “double standard” of acknowledging normative prohibitions but not acting on them is a common theme in societies with shifting religious standards, made more poignant by the provision of alcoholic beverages at religious celebrations such as feasts and weddings (Finke 1999; Montgomery 2007).

Figure 12: The liquor selection of an Ulgii grocery store covered with a cloth on Friday (Brede 2009).

Though the idea of a prohibition against alcohol existed in socialist times, the views of informants who claimed not to drink had a more recent provenance; four young respondents cited the teachings of imams as a rationale for temperance. Family networks were also critical in promoting such ideas. Young informants mentioned trying to teach their parents not to drink, and older respondents spoke of teaching their children not to drink in order to be “good Muslims” (Khanmurat; Saparzhap). Discourses that combined ethnic and religious norms appeared in such discussions in phrases like “Kazakhs shouldn’t drink alcohol, and those who drink are not true Muslims” (Amantai). One informant even blamed “Russian influence” for the presence of alcoholism among Kazakhs—claiming that “Kazakh ancestors” never drank alcohol (Muratkhan).

Despite vociferous condemnations, alcohol retains a very public role in Bayan-Ulgii, which boasts its own provincial brand of vodka that displays an outline of the

aimag, a Kazakh eagle hunter, and a traditional *ger* on the bottle. Most grocery stores feature a wide selection of beer, liquor, and wine, and drinking is a prominent feature of many festivities. Shops that sell alcohol, however, often make gestures toward religious propriety, covering the alcohol section with a sheet to hide it from view on Fridays (see figure 12). Many restaurants serve beer, and only one Turkish-owned restaurant in Ulgii publicly declines to serve alcoholic beverages, keeping a “halal” sign in the window.

Headscarves: Gendered Symbols

Like abstinence from alcohol, standards of propriety for women such as veiling or wearing the *hijab* are often noted as indicators of Islamic piety and subscription to normative religious standards (Northrop 2007). In addition to such popular connotations, the symbol of the *hijab* in Ulgii illuminates conflicts between perceived obligations and actions, as well as the gendered qualities of religious standards, norms, and prohibitions. While a walk around the streets of Ulgii is sufficient to demonstrate that most women do not wear headscarves on a daily basis, informants of both genders nevertheless asserted that veiling was an important aspect of ideal feminine behavior.

When asked how they thought girls and women ought to dress, informants were divided along gender lines, and men generally considered veiling to be more important than women did. Only six informants—four of them men—said that women should always wear a headscarf. Moreover, the two women who said they ought to always wear headscarves exhibited the same “double consciousness” of standards and practices common in other realms of religious life, acknowledging an obligation to wear the *hijab* and feeling bad about failing to do so (Kulpynai). While few said that all women should cover their hair, six men and seven women informants said that gendered standards for

Chapter VII: Results II

clothing should be exercised, and that women should wear “modest” clothing covering necklines, shoulders, and thighs. Only two young urban respondents, one man and one woman, said that women should be able to wear any clothing that they wanted.

Most respondents of both genders perceived the “obligation” of wearing a headscarf to be situational rather than universal, and four informants said that women should wear headscarves only “if they are religious.” Six more, four of whom were men, argued that married women should veil in public. In fact, veiling was more common among married women of the older generation, though it was unclear whether the practice had been reinstated recently or maintained through socialism. Regardless of the provenance of the practice in such cases, standards for feminine dress in Bayan-Ulgii are intimately connected to transnational modern discourses. All women respondents wore headscarves while giving alms and praying at mosques and even young girls who studied at *madrastas* had to wear headscarves and long dresses to class.

While many women take pride in the *hijab* as a marker of piety, purity, and connectedness to multiple scales of Muslim identity, unequal power dynamics are inherent in this contested symbol (Northrop 2007). Men were more ready to impose standards of behavior on women than were women themselves, and only one informant mentioned similar standards for men, saying, “[Muslim] men should wear long pants and shirts, and can decide whether or not to grow a beard” (Khanmurat). Moreover, the most vocal advocates of veiling—religious professionals—were almost all men.

Alternate Figures of Religious Authority

Recourse to “unofficial” religious professionals like *moldas* and *baqsis* was the third category of norms and prohibitions that informants discussed. In light of the

influence of transnationally and nationally oriented imams and teachers, such traditional religious or spiritual authorities have experienced increasing criticism in Bayan-Ulgii, just like in other Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Abramson & Karimov 2007).

As mentioned earlier, the transition from one form of religious authority to another is rarely clear-cut. The move from *moldas* to imams is particularly difficult to quantify, as many of the services formerly provided by *moldas*—including burial, blessings, prayers, and the preparation of amulets for good luck and good health—are now available from imams and even stores in the Ulgii Bazaar. Moreover, most imams also claim the title *molda*, though some spurn traditional practices and titles and refuse to provide amulets and similar religious items (Khanibek).

Unlike predominantly male *moldas*, female *baqsis*—who provide similar services including healing, blessings, and amulets—have maintained an entirely separate vocational purview from imams. Though *baqsis* have long been associated with popular Islam in Central Asia, and were targeted in socialist-era purges along with *moldas* and imams, all imam informants condemned them as un-Islamic (Abramson & Karimov 2007). Their popularity, however, continues unabated. While several younger, madrasa-educated respondents denounced *baqsis*, over a third of informants had visited a fortuneteller for one reason or other. Of the two men and six women who had done so, five mentioned going to treat an illness, three went to have a fortune told, and two went to find lost things. All said that the visit had the desired effect; in fact, *baqsis* were thought to be so effective that rural informants who had never visited one consistently expressed interest in going.

Chapter VII: Results II

Four of the eight who had gone to a *baqsi* admitted to being uncomfortable that imams condemned the practice, and they reacted to this conflict in different ways. Some rejected fortunetellers entirely; Shokan, who had gone to a fortuneteller with his parents, stopped going after he attended classes at the Ulgii Central Mosque. Others justified the choice out of practicality: “I know it’s wrong, but I want to be healthy and know if I’ll get a good job” (Kunsuslu). Finally, one informant employed an ethnic/traditionalist approach, claiming that since her ancestors had visited *baqsis* long before there were imams, it was perfectly fine for her to do the same; “[fortune-telling] is a Kazakh tradition, so it is okay for Muslims to go” (Kulpynai).

Regardless of how such conflicts were negotiated, a visit to the crowded waiting room of one of Ulgii’s *baqsis* revealed that demand for her services remained high—a fact that may contribute to imams’ scathing denunciations. Even as both mosques and fortunetellers grow in popularity, however, the two sources of spiritual service are not in competition. Imams are unquestionably the primary religious authorities in Bayan-Ulgii, and the discourses they promote are indirectly or directly influential in all segments of the Mongolian Kazakh community. While the ways that individual Mongolian Kazakh Muslims interpret, integrate and receive these ideas vary by age, experience, social position, preference, and family network, no aspect of religious practice, identity, or community in Bayan-Ulgii can be separated from the influence of such authorities.

Chapter VIII

Position, Power, and Influence: Imams and Religious Authority

While the bulk of this project focuses on the religious experiences of laypeople in Bayan-Ulgii, an analysis of changing religious practice and identity would be incomplete without considering the influence and importance of new religious authorities. Imams have shaped the form and content of Mongolian Kazakh piety over the last two decades, serving as nodes in an emergent network of religious knowledge and power (Foucault 1978; Finke 1999). In the interest of learning more about this network and the multi-scalar discourses within it, ten religious professionals from nine mosques in Ulgii and surrounding rural communities were interviewed.

Prior to this study, little work had been done on religious organizations in Ulgii, and the available information was very limited. In 2007, a U.S. State Department report noted that, while the Mongolian government does not officially control or restrict religious expression, religious organizations are required to register with the state. According to the report, twenty-four mosques were officially registered in 2007. All but five had been established since 2000, most of them affiliated with a central organization, presumably the Mongolian Islamic Association (MIA) (U.S. State Department 2007).

Ethnographic fieldwork revealed that increased mosque construction and organization continues, and according to the president of the MIA, there are now at least thirty-five mosques associated with the Association in Mongolia. Moreover, the young ages of imam informants testify to the recentness of mosque and *madrasa* construction and the importance of life-course in determining the identity of religious professionals (Kertzer 1991). All but one were between the ages of thirty and forty-five, and most had

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

been educated in Turkish, Pakistani, Kazakhstani and Saudi *madrasas* immediately following graduation from high school in the early 1990s. Moreover, all imams in Bayan-Ulgii are men; even in interviews with two women madrasa teachers, gendered dynamics of religious authority were evident.

This chapter explores religious authority in Bayan-Ulgii through an analysis of the everyday situations in different mosques and the discourses and educational trajectories of their leaders, beginning with a description of the Mongolian Islamic Association through the eyes of its president. Next, educational and organizational aspects of the MIA and its seat in the Ulgii Central Mosque are considered from the perspective of its most powerful female leader. Moving outside the urban context of Ulgii, the experiences of MIA-affiliated imams and mosques in rural areas are then addressed. Finally, the perspectives of imams who are not affiliated with the MIA are considered through an analysis of two differing narratives.

The Mongolian Islamic Association and its President

The Mongolian Islamic Association is by far the most influential religious organization in Bayan-Ulgii, a fact that was made evident in a meeting with its thirty-five year old president Aybek. Walking into his office in the Ulgii Central Mosque, his professional demeanor, tailored suit, and new desktop computer stood as visible reminders of the organization's wealth and importance; the card of the American ambassador to Mongolia was displayed on his desk in remembrance of their meeting at a conference on religious freedom in Ulaanbaatar. Given his position, Aybek was a surprisingly divulgatory informant, describing the organization and operation of the MIA and the Central Mosque as well as his own role. As in any interview with an authority

figure, discretion was used in considering the political and social implications of his narrative. Nonetheless, the information he provided was helpful in understanding the framework of official Islam in Mongolia (Medhurst & Moyser 1987).

According to Aybek, the MIA is a young association, having taken over from a “central Islamic committee” in 2007 following demands for better organization among mosques. The Association is organized democratically, and Aybek is the second president, having attained his two-year position by a vote of all sixty of the Association’s member imams in 2008. Despite its democratic structure, the MIA is a very hierarchical organization. While Mongolian law stipulates that each mosque must be independently incorporated, the president controls the distribution of funds to member mosques and has the power to fire imams who act “against the interests of the Association” (Aybek; U.S. State Department 2007).

Much of the MIA’s work is practical and administrative. Festivities that use the Islamic calendar such as Ramadan and *Kurban Ait* are centrally orchestrated so they do not occur on different days in different places, and funding is required for rural imams to perform burial ceremonies for remote families and to pay for the airfare and accommodation of the Turkish circumcision expert. Additionally, the MIA has attempted to standardize the times of *namaz* prayer, which vary by date and location. At the time of fieldwork, imams from all around Bayan-Ulgii had recently agreed to standardize prayer times through the use of cellular phone text messages (Aybek, Nurlan, Altingul).

The MIA claims authority over most official Islamic discourse and practice in Bayan-Ulgii and Mongolia. Aybek admitted, however, that a number of “private” mosques, particularly in Ulgii, are outside its control. In fact, though most rural mosques

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

are affiliated with the MIA, all those in Ulgii except the Central Mosque are private. These mosques are not necessarily opposed to the central organization. They are financially independent to a greater degree than MIA mosques, but their imams still attend MIA meetings, and few unaffiliated imams who were interviewed claimed to have any disagreements with the Association. Aybek also denied the existence of major ideological differences between mosques, though he did mention having to chastise an unaffiliated Ulgii imam for publicly decrying shrine visitation as un-Islamic.

With regard to the teachings that the MIA expounds, a short educational history of its president is informative. Aybek graduated from high school in 1991 and wanted to attend medical school in Kazakhstan, but he was unable to pass the qualifying exam. Though neither Aybek nor his family were very religious, after graduation he studied under a Turkish imam at the new Ulgii Central Mosque in order to “learn about the religion of the Kazakhs,” a common ethno-religious rationale for Islamic education. In 1993, a Pakistani organization offered him a scholarship to study at a *madrasa* in the Swat Valley, from which he graduated in 1996. Following his education, he worked as an imam in several rural communities in Western Mongolia before finally starting work at the Central Mosque in 2005. Similar post-socialist educational trajectories were common among imam interviewees. They are also well documented in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, where Saudi, Turkish, and Pakistani organizations also recruit young men to become imams (Montgomery 2007, Abramson & Karimov 2007, Khalid 2007).

Aybek’s education, coupled with his experiences before and after the fall of the communist regime, contributed to his doctrinal positions as well as those of the other imams in the MIA. When asked if he saw Islam to be different in other countries, he said,

“Islam is strongest” in Pakistan, but it is also “strong” in Kazakhstan *and* Bayan-Ulgii because “all Kazakhs know that they are Muslim even if they do few practices.” In his view, involvement in Islamic practices was secondary in importance to ascriptive ethno-religious identity. Moreover, he encouraged the (re) adoption of traditional Kazakh practices like shrine visitation as long as they did not promote “idolatry”: “our Kazakh ancestors knew the pure way [*taza jol*] of Islam, and were Sunnis... we should respect their ways” (Privatsky 2001). While condemning some practices like fortunetelling, he argued that the popularity of *baqsis* did not make Islam in Mongolia “weak.” Other countries’ religious “weakness,” he argued, stemmed from political and doctrinal issues rather than popular impiety: “Turkish people are too secular,” “the Saudis are *Wahhabis*,” and “people from Iran are *Shia*.”

Like most informants in this investigation and in other literature, Aybek saw no direct conflict between new and transnational practices and discourses and a strongly ethno-national conception of Islam (Privatsky 2001). He argued against the consumption of alcohol and said that more people should pray *namaz* and more women should wear headscarves; yet, according to him, the status quo of religious life in Bayan-Ulgii did not reflect poorly on Mongolian Kazakhs, who were Muslims by virtue of birth. He had confidence that as people learned more about Islam and sent their children to mosques to learn about Islam, everyone would become more pious.

A Feminine Perspective on Education and the Central Mosque

While Aybek and other imams took care of the organizational side of the MIA, the educational practices in which they put stake were conducted in the same building. Altingul, a teacher, social worker, and program organizer was a primary source on the

Figure 13: A view of the Ulgii Central Mosque (Brede 2009).

Central Mosque's everyday operation. The wife of one of the mosque's four imams, she had also studied at a *madrasa* in Kazakhstan. In her interview, she provided information about the history, funding and organization of the largest mosque in Mongolia and also about the classes and other programs that it that it supports. Moreover, she presented a perspective on the experiences of women in authority in Ulgii's new religious landscape.

Independent of its affiliation with the MIA, the Central mosque is a large organization in its own right, employing four imams, four teachers, four grounds and maintenance workers, and a driver (see figure 13). Built in 1990 with help from a Pakistani benefactor—rather than the Saudi funding that Finke presumed—the mosque has been the organizational center of Islam in Mongolia ever since. It is a place for rituals including burial, weddings, and naming ceremonies, as well as education and prayer. Over two hundred come for *zhuma namaz* on Fridays, and Altingul observed a

one-third increase in the number of people praying since 2004 alone. Although men dominate *namaz* attendance, at least as many women as men come for classes.

As one of the mosque's two female instructors, Altingul teaches classes about Islam for young girls, old women, and even a few women her own age. Such classes cater to many levels of interest and experience, from one-day sessions on how to pray *Ayat* to multiple-month courses on Arabic grammar and the Qur'an. Class content also depends on the gender of students. While classes for men tend to focus on *namaz* and Qur'anic study, women are also taught "how to be good Kazakh wives," a skill set that includes "modesty," work in the home, and "raising a good Muslim family." Altingul saw such gender-specific instruction as empowering for women and as a way to embrace "traditional Kazakh culture and religion." Observing, "Women are the Islamic teachers of the home," she expressed hope that Islamic education would prevent vices like alcoholism and smoking that she saw as products of irreligious and foreign influences: "Kazakhs should raise their children well, just like our ancestors did."

In addition to teaching, Altingul supervises other services provided by the Central Mosque, including the publishing of *Inabat*, a "Kazakh women's religion journal" available at local grocery stores. Additionally, she supervises the organization of the *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca for people from Bayan-Ulgii, and publishes records on the number of people who go each year. Beginning in 1989 with Sairan Khaji, the former Mongolian ambassador to Egypt and consistent supporter of Mongolian Kazakh religious revival, her records showed that over 150 Mongolian Kazakhs had made *Hajj* as of 2008. The increasing numbers of pilgrims mirrored trends toward transnationally oriented piety and economic prosperity in the region; fifteen or more pilgrims went each year since

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

2001, and 28 Mongolian Kazakhs went in 2008. Altingul also noted that *Hajj* is a predominantly male activity, and only twelve Mongolian Kazakh women had ever made the pilgrimage.

While the teachings and programs that religious professionals support are predominantly male-dominated, Altingul demonstrates that women can occupy important roles in the new landscape of official Islam in Mongolia. Her testimony, in addition to providing information on the Central Mosque's operation, serves as a reminder of the ways that women can seek and find empowerment within a male-dominated religious system (Kertzer 1991, Privatsky 2001, Khalid 2007).

Loci of Community Piety: Rural Mosques and Imams

The Central Mosque is extremely important to Bayan-Ulgii's Muslim community. Its large size and urban location, however, make it only partially representative of other Mongolian Islamic institutions. Most of the province's mosques are more rural, smaller, and less well connected and funded (Diener 2007). Though most rural mosques are affiliated with the MIA, the services and education they offer differ significantly from their urban counterparts, as do the roles that rural imams are expected to fulfill. For example, rural mosques serve as places for boys to be circumcised in the absence of adequate medical facilities. An interview with Alibek, the 36-year old imam of the small *soum* center mosque of Bauerhus, revealed more differences from, as well as striking commonalities with urban mosques like Aybek's.

One difference between the Bauerhus mosque and comparable urban institutions is its date of establishment; built in 2004 with funds from a Turkish organization and the aforementioned politician Sairan Khaji, it was the first religious institution to serve the

inhabitants of Bauerhus *soum*. The mosque's founding date highlights the temporal disconnect between the arrival of new Islamic discourses and institutions in rural and urban communities, a dynamic that contributed to Finke's decade-old observation, still applicable today, that rural religious practices are more "traditional" (1999, 137). Since its construction, however, community involvement in Alibek's mosque increased quickly, and the small structure now boasts a regular *zhuma namaz* turnout of around a dozen, mostly students from the local herders' boarding school and elderly people.

Alibek teaches a class for elderly people with four or five students and another for young students that boasts significantly higher participation (see figure 14). While initial attendance was low, Alibek noted that intergenerational family networks in the small community accounted for the rapid increase in students—an observation supported by the fact that most informants, even those in rural areas, had a family member who had studied at a mosque (Kertzer 1991). Despite growing attendance, Alibek had no money to hire another teacher and thus could not support separate classes for boys and girls. With only one female student, classes and prayers remained gender-mixed—a departure from the urban Islamic educational norm.

As local people, often influenced by relatives who study at the mosque, have begun giving alms more regularly, the services that the mosque provides have expanded, influencing existing practices like *Kurban Ait*, circumcision, and shrine visitation and also introducing new ones. Particularly because of the absence of other infrastructure in the community, the mosque's social services have quickly grown in popularity; the imam has even taken over duties like burial preparations that were previously performed by *moldas*. Boys from around the *soum* are brought to the mosque for circumcision when

Figure 14: Young students pose with the imam of the Bauerhus mosque (Brede 2009).

the Turkish expert visits, and other life-cycle ceremonies including weddings are common events. For the last several years, *Kurban Ait* and other celebrations have also become more extravagant, involving more community members. During *Kurban Ait* in November 2008, the MIA and foreign donors donated over 100 sheep that were sacrificed and given to poor families to help them through a harsh winter.

While many of the religious and social services provided in the Bauerhus mosque are unique to rural areas, Alibek's personal and educational profile is not. Like most imam informants, he graduated high school in the early 1990. Knowing only that "Kazakhs should be Muslims," he then began to study Arabic at the mosque in Khovd. After taking courses in Ulgii and Almaty, Kazakhstan, he became the assistant imam at another rural mosque. In 1998, he received a scholarship to study in Turkey that allowed him to move up within the ranks of the MIA into the position of head imam and facilitated continued connections with Turkey and Turkish organizations (see figure 15).

**Figure 15: The imam of the Bauerhus mosque reads the Qur'an at his desk.
Note Turkish flag and books in Kazakh and Turkish (Brede 2009).**

Like other MIA-affiliated imams, he supports some traditional practices like shrine visitation, condemns others like fortunetelling, and encourages new ones such as wearing the *hijab*, temperance, and praying *namaz*.

Alibek's narrative raises important themes about religious life in rural areas—the recentness of the construction of rural mosques, the importance of social networks in recruiting new students, the role of the mosque as a networking center and service provider, and the common educational trajectories and discourses of imams. This does not mean it represents all rural communities in Bayan-Ulgii and their corresponding religious institutions, however. Rural communities vary in size, population composition, connectivity, location, and overall religious involvement. For example, the slightly larger town of Sengur boasts two mosques, one of which was built in 1993 and has weekly *zhuma namaz* attendance of over 100 (Baltabek). The small mosque of Bayanlog, on the

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

other hand, also established in the 1990s, still shuts down in the summer just as Finke noted a decade ago (Zhanibek; Finke 1999). Despite their differences, however, all three mosques are very important to their communities and are staffed by imams with similar organizational affiliations, religious viewpoints, and educational histories.

Independent Voices: Private Mosques in Ulgii

Most rural mosques in Bayan-Ulgii are affiliated with the MIA—a situation that, despite unique local situations and services, promotes considerable homogeneity in religious discourse (Khalid 2007). In Ulgii, however, this trend is reversed; the Central Mosque is the only MIA-affiliated mosque in the city, and the remaining five mosques are owned and funded by private individuals, operating with no direct MIA oversight. In most cases, this independence does not imply disagreement with the central organization, though it does open the door for the expression of multiple normative points of view. The following short discussion examines two such unique authoritative voices in the city's religious landscape—one deeply rooted in local Islamic traditions and culture, the other a vehement opponent of both.

Khanibek, a 35-year old Saudi-educated imam and owner of the independent Hussein mosque, is one of Ulgii's most contentious religious authorities. He achieved this status in part because of a sermon broadcast on a local radio show in 2006 in which he exhorted listeners to stop visiting burial shrines and lighting candles for the dead. In his interview, he expanded on this thesis, arguing, "our Islam here is too close to Kazakh customs—it does not matter what our ancestors did...we are not going the way the Qur'an says we should go." This "scripturalist" condemnation, echoed in other case studies from Central Asia, met with a frosty reception from other authorities

(Montgomery 2007, Geertz 1968). In the words of another Ulgii imam, Khanibek had “insulted the traditions of our Kazakh ancestors” and undermined the teachings of other imams (Arman). In the face of criticism and accusations of “Wahhabism,” Khanibek now keeps his rhetoric inside his own private mosque.

Despite this incident, Hussein mosque retains popularity in the local community. Established in 2002, it is a religious center for locals who would otherwise have to walk a quarter mile to the Central Mosque. Around thirty people come each week for *zhuma namaz*, and up to seventy come for *Tarawih namaz* during Ramadan. Interviews with informants who went to the mosque, however, revealed that they prayed and gave alms there more because of its convenient location than out of subscription to Khanibek’s rhetoric. Most informants said that they felt equally comfortable giving alms or praying at any mosque, depending on which was closest.

Khanibek’s thinking was likely more influential on his students, as demonstrated by the case of Kulpynai, whose experience of “double consciousness” was discussed in the last chapter. She began studying at Hussein mosque after her brother encouraged her to take a short class there, and through her education she came to see the religious practices she had learned from her mother and grandmother as inferior versions of a “true Islam.” In particular, Khanibek’s condemnations of feminine “immodesty” led her to wonder, “Can I call myself a Muslim if I do not care to wear a headscarf?” This statement is a testament to the influence of Khanibek’s ideas. In a culture where most women do not wear headscarves and most religious professionals assume that all Kazakhs are Muslims by virtue of ethnicity, Kulpynai’s question is a significant departure from the *status quo*.

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

Nurlan, the imam of a mosque on the other side of both the Khovd River and the ideological spectrum, offered a very different narrative of life history and religious teachings from Khanibek. At the age of 71, the avuncular imam of Khaji mosque was the only imam informant to claim a connection to the pre-socialist *Ulama* class, and—significantly in terms of life-course theory—the only imam in Ulgii to have lived as an adult under both socialist and democratic governments. His father, a *molda* who had made *Hajj* before Mongolia's alliance with the Soviet Union, was killed in the purges of 1938, the same year that Nurlan was born. Raised on stories of his father and grandfather's clerical past, Nurlan nevertheless thrived under the communist system and had a long career as a math and music teacher in the small community of Bayanlog.

When governmental change led to the relaxation religious restrictions in 1990, Nurlan wanted to learn more about the religion for which his father had been killed. With the help of his uncle, also trained before the purges, he began learning Arabic and studying the Qur'an, adding scriptural knowledge to his uncle's traditional interpretations and his mother's domestic religious practices. After saving his money and studying for years, he opened Khaji mosque—so named in honor of his father's accomplishment of making *Hajj*—in 1994 in a building connected to his own home. Beginning with a handful of students from the neighborhood, his mosque and *madrasa* quickly gained popularity, requiring him to find volunteer teachers in order to accommodate the extra students. In total, Nurlan claimed to have taught over five hundred students, creating a large social network. The imam of Gumiz mosque, the only other mosque on the less-developed north side of the Khovd River, was a former student of his.

Though Nurlan emphatically expressed his desire to remain independent, his ideological positions exemplified a flexible combination of traditional and new ideas, and he denied having any conflict with the MIA. Unlike most other imams, Nurlan continued to advocate traditional practices such as amulet making and Islamic numerology (which he demonstrated during an interview). His view on veiling, expressed in the statement, “Kazakh women should wear modest clothing, but they only need to wear a headscarf if they are praying or studying in a mosque” was also less strict than that of other imams. Nevertheless, he incorporated new elements into his teachings, condemning fortunetellers, alcohol, and cigarettes as “bad influences.” International discourses also contributed to his thinking, and he had taken courses on religion in Turkey in 2004 and 2006.

Nurlan stood out among imam informants not just because of his unique history, old age and staunch independence, but also because of his ability to integrate local traditional discourses of Islam with transnationally normative ideas; in almost every way, he was the counterpoint to Khanibek’s inflexible normative standards. The disjuncture between the two men’s viewpoints was not a simple question of “local” versus “universal,” however. Nurlan’s family roots connected him to over a century of local Islamic knowledge, yet he was also strongly influenced by Turkish Islamic discourse. Even his family history calls into question the conflation of locality and tradition: his father, who went on *Hajj* in the 1920s, had clearly been connected to international discourses of Islam.

Moreover, while Khanibek aspired to universality, his views hardly represented the consensus of the worldwide Muslim community; the other imams of Ulgi, educated in many other countries, regarded his teachings as extremist. The circumstances leading

Chapter VIII: Imams and Authority

to his hard-line resistance to local practices were also not purely “scripturalist,” and were rooted in family, local and historical traditions. Khanibek’s grandfather, who inspired him to study in Saudi Arabia, secretly prayed *namaz* and *Ayat* until his recent death at the age of 96, and likely studied under *moldas* like Nurlan’s father and grandfather.

Conclusions: Dynamic Networks of Authority

The new form of religious authority represented by imams and mosques is highly influential at every level of religious life in Bayan-Ulgii, from intangible religious self-conceptions to concrete ritual forms acted out on a daily basis. In comparison to socialist-era religious authority, which was spread out among family elders, *moldas*, *baqsis*, and women in the domestic sphere, new religious discourses are also remarkably consistent and connected to broader discourses. Particularly as a result of the oversight of the MIA, the picture of Islam presented in Bayan-Ulgii’s mosques—both urban and rural—is in many ways fairly uniform. Moreover, given the commonality of educational trajectories, age, gender, and foreign education of most imams in the study, the individuals presenting said discourses appear to be similarly consistent.

This vision of homogeneous authority, however, is too simplistic to adequately describe the many social roles of religious experts within their communities, and ignores the fact that political or ideological orientation is only one factor in the “lived Islam” of most Mongolian Kazakhs (Asad 2009; Khalid 2007). The community situations of mosques are distinct and vary between rural areas and even neighborhoods within the same city, as do the networks that frame the everyday religious experiences of most people. In order to provide services, activities, and education, imams tap into local social

networks, acting at local and personal scales and tailoring actions to fit the needs of particular groups and social situations.

While such work directly or indirectly brings the religious lives, practices, and self-conceptions of community members into alignment with transnational discourses, imams are hardly impartial agents for the delivery of a unitary transnational “scripturalism.” Though relatively consistent within the province, the discourses that the MIA promotes integrate local and national ideas of religious life and identity. Even within the circle of independent mosques, conservative clerics like Khanibek who condemn local religious forms are a minority, outpaced in terms of popularity by imams like Nurlan who integrate a variety of discourses while still appealing to students and the wider Islamic community.

Finally, though almost all religious authorities in Ulgii are male and official religious discourse and practice is (and historically has been) highly gendered, Altingul demonstrates that women and men can both have influential voices in modern Mongolian Kazakh Islam. Altingul and other religious authority figures show that, for religious professionals as well as laypeople, “Islam is never a clear given; it is what Muslims make of it” (Khalid 2007, 202).

Chapter IX

Individual Dimensions of Piety, Networks, and Life Course

The preceding chapters have addressed many dynamics of everyday Islamic life in Bayan-Ulgii, outlining approaches to identity and learning, pious practice, and religious authority. With the exception of the last chapter, these discussions were necessarily aggregative, utilizing the entire informant pool to focus on a larger community/regional scale with occasional reference to individual case studies. One primary argument of this thesis, however, hinges on the idea that religious experience ultimately depends on the integrative “nexus” of the individual and the family/micro-scale networks in which individuals take part (Kaiser 1991).

With this in mind, this chapter provides a descriptive cross-section of the religious experiences of informants as expressed through narratives, opinions and thoughts collected during fieldwork. These informants have been chosen as representatives of demographic and social categories that influence religious experience—specifically age, gender, and geographic (urban or rural) location—and the subsequent case studies are organized around these three categories. The first section begins with the cases of two young people, a pious young man from Ulgii (Shokan), and a rural girl whose college education brought her into contact with new religious networks and ideas (Mairagul). Next, the “intermediary” demographic category of middle-aged people is considered through the eyes of a rural herder (Zhanik) and a secular urban professional woman (Gulzhan), followed by the narratives of Gulzhan’s elderly mother Alia and her rural age-peer Serik. Finally, many themes are brought together through an examination of the role of social networks in a case study spanning three generations in a single rural family.

Children of Post-Socialism: Shokan, Mairagul, and their Age-Peers

Of the people interviewed in this study, those who grew up in the democratic period were the most likely to be religiously active, to receive formal Islamic education, and to be oriented toward new, official religious discourses. Groups who pray *namaz* in mosques are composed primarily of young men, and young men and women attend classes at *madrasas* with increasing frequency every year. Moreover, although interviewing informants under that age of eighteen was not possible for legal reasons, observations of classes in rural and urban mosques, as well as conversations with imams, revealed that children are taking an increasingly active part in Islamic education.

In this context, Shokan, an eighteen-year old recent high school graduate from Ulgii, stood as an exemplar of broader trends. Like many families in Bayan-Ulgii, his was at once close-knit and transnationally divided; his older brother, sister, aunts and uncles lived in Kazakhstan but stayed in contact with him and his parents in Ulgii. This fact was integral to the formation of Shokan's religious ideas and orientations. As a boy, Shokan recalled going to rural family shrines with his parents and grandparents, who he said had prayed there regularly during socialism. With his family, he also participated in other traditions including sacrificing a sheep on *Kurban Ait*, getting amulets from *moldas* for good luck, and going to *baqsis*. No member of Shokan's family received formal Islamic education, however, until his older brother and sister moved to Kazakhstan in 2005 and studied in an Almaty *madrasa*.

Through their calls, letters, and visits, the teachings and ideas that Shokan's siblings brought to the family network set off a process of religious change that was quintessentially transnational and intergenerational. At their behest, his parents stopped

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

going to the “sinful” *baqsi* and started to give alms at the mosque. Shokan became even more involved with “the true religion of Kazakhs,” taking classes at the Central Mosque and beginning to pray *namaz* five times daily in 2006. Though the family members with whom he shared this newfound piety were thousands of miles away, many of his same-age friends also started praying at the same time, influencing each other’s pious practice through peer networks that crosscut family lines and contributed to the rapid increase in young men praying *namaz* that imam informants observed.

Shokan’s religious experience, rooted in local traditions and also steeped in national and transnational rhetoric, reflected many scales. On the national scale, he wanted to study Islam because “Islam is our Kazakh religion; our ancestors were Muslim, and you have to be Muslim to be a Kazakh.” Despite his attachment to universalizable ideas of Islamic morality—he expressed distaste for the “indecent” of European women’s dress—he said that his Kazakh identity was primary. Shokan even asserted that it was the duty of all Kazakhs to move to Kazakhstan, their national *and religious* homeland—an indication of the continued strength of discourse that posits Islam as a subset of nationality (Montgomery 2007). His other religious ideas aligned closely with those of his teachers at the Central Mosque, emphasizing performance of the five pillars, abstinence from alcohol, and wearing a headscarf for women. He also remained engaged with the religious ideas of his parents’ generation, asserting that the most important aspects of Islam “for Kazakhs” were “staying clean/pure [*taza*], being honest, good, and reliable, and helping the poor.” Moreover, he was committed to the continuation and augmentation of family practices of shrine visitation, teaching his parents to read *Ayat* and praying for his ancestors every Friday.

Shokan's experiences and opinions are not representative of all young men in Ulgii, however. Baluan, a college-educated informant from Ulgii in his mid-twenties who worked as a taxi driver, demonstrated that personal preference is a key factor in religious life. Baluan's family was very involved in local religious traditions; his grandfather, who prayed *namaz* during communism, sent him to study at the Central Mosque in 1993 when he was in elementary school. Though he was knowledgeable about "official Islam" and the five pillars as a result of this education, Baluan was very secular in most aspects of his life, criticizing the idea that all Kazakhs should be Muslims, and saying that only "religious people" had any obligation to perform religious practices, wear the *hijab*, give alms, or abstain from alcohol. Nevertheless, he did self-identify as a Muslim because of "family history," and made time to visit family shrines, of which he was very proud.

Family history was also important for the religious understandings of Mairagul, a twenty-one year old translator and English teacher from the Khalkh Mongol-majority town of Bulgant. In that ethnically mixed context, the fact that her grandmother and parents maintained practices such as shrine visitation during socialism was a matter of great family and ethnic pride, and her parents taught her what they knew about "the religion of Kazakh people" from a very young age. They also encouraged her and her brother to seek formal Islamic education as soon as Bulgant's mosque was built in 1998. Such education was especially important for her brother, who later lived as a boarder at Khanibek's Hussein mosque for two years when their parents sent him to high school in Ulgii. During this time, he internalized many of the imam's ideas, beginning to pray *namaz* five times a day and (unsuccessfully) trying to convince his parents and sister to stop visiting shrines.

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

Mairagul stayed in Bulgant for high school and fulfilled a more traditional female gender role by staying with her parents—a decision that informed her religious perspective. She and her parents took short classes and gave alms at the mosque but most of the religious practices they engaged in were traditional, like sacrificing a sheep on *Kurban Ait*, staying awake on the 27th night of Ramadan, and visiting family shrines. Her family also continued to visit *baqsis* despite her brother's advocacy, using rhetoric of locality and tradition to defend a practice handed down from “our Kazakh ancestors.” At home, her grandmother taught her “to pray for ancestors [at shrines] and ask them to give you good luck and forgive your sins” and instructed her on domestic rituals like lighting candles for the dead—traditional feminine religious knowledge that factored into her perspective on religion. Though Mairagul did not wear a headscarf except while praying or entering a mosque, she valued “purity” and “modesty” in dress as markers of Kazakh ethnic and religious identity with which she differentiated herself from Khalkh Mongolian friends. One of those friends, she recalled, had recently converted to Christianity—something that she considered acceptable for Mongolians but beyond the pale for Kazakhs.

Ethno-religious identity remained important to Mairagul when she attended Khovd University to study English. While at college, her involvement with a Kazakh student organization brought her in closer contact with official Islamic discourse as she and her Kazakh friends explored an aspect of their “national culture”—another example, like Shokan's, of extra-familial peer networks influencing religious activity. With this group of Kazakh students, Mairagul began to fast during Ramadan, pray *zhuma namaz*, and give alms more frequently. In the words of Kunsuslu, a former classmate of

Mairagul's, "we became more religious [in order] to learn what made us different from Mongolians." Both young women continued to engage with these new practices after graduating and moving to Ulgii, and both also continued praying for assistance from ancestors and visiting fortunetellers. Like all the young informants interviewed for this project, Mairagul and Kunsuslu found unique ways to balance traditional and family perspectives with rapidly changing discourses of religion.

Middle-Aged People: Straddling Two Eras

In Bayan-Ulgii, nowhere is the importance of life-course and age in religious preference more evident than in the divide between young adults and their parents' generation. While men and women who grew up in the increasingly religious decades of the 1990s and 2000s are the most well-represented demographic in nearly every aspect of Islamic piety, those who grew up during communism, but whose adult and professional lives coincided with the post-socialist period, are the least well-represented. With the notable exception of imams, few middle-aged informants performed more than one or two religious activities. Though almost all recognized value in the piety of older and younger family members, most had not formally studied Islam, and many stated that they would make time to learn about and perform religious acts when they got older. This response evoked the age-dependent religious roles discussed by many informants as well as other scholars (Privatsky 2001; Abramson & Karimov 2007; Kertzer 1991).

Zhanik, a forty-year old herder from the rural town of Noorbayan, exemplified many of the tendencies of this "intermediary generation." Looking to his elderly father and young relatives as religious role models, he remained personally uninterested in religious practice. His family engaged in few religious activities other than shrine

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

visitation when he was growing up, and he only began to sacrifice sheep on *Kurban Ait* and give livestock alms in the early 1990s. Since then, his level of involvement in religious practice changed little, though his father, a retired 75-year old herder, studied at the mosque in the late 1990s and had been deeply involved in new discourses of Islam ever since.

Zhanik respected his father's piety, saying that he would also pray when he got older, and would send his children to the mosque in the meantime. Nevertheless, he saw his current religious obligations in general, traditional, and moral terms—being “pure and correct,” not drinking, and being “honest.” Several of his nieces and nephews in Ulgii also studied at a mosque, and he saw their activities as positive but not obligatory. Studying Islam, in his view, was a generationally specific activity for young and old people; at his age, he was too busy working to be involved with religion.

Togzhan, another rural herder in her late thirties, also found herself disconnected from the religious activities and discourses of older and younger family members—a divide enhanced by her social position. She had several children and was preoccupied with domestic tasks that left little time, in her estimation, for the type of official, consciously pious acts that her younger relatives learned about in mosques. Still, she looked to her grandmother, who had “carried the family with her prayer” during communism, to learn about shrine visitation and traditional domestic rituals.

This more traditional approach was evident in the religious activities in which Togzhan mentioned participating—organizing circumcision celebrations (*sundet toi*) for her sons, marriage (*neke toi*), and giving her sons their first haircuts—which were entirely domestic and highly gendered. Her “traditional” piety, however, did not imply

disconnection from new discourse and authority. She had her sons circumcised at the local mosque (where she later sent them to study), and she and her husband had given alms during the *Kurban Ait* feast for at least ten years—acts that tied her and her family materially and financially to wider religious discourses.

While religious life differs considerably in urban and rural areas, a generational divide between middle-aged people and other age groups was observed both in Ulgii and in the countryside. Gulzhan, a 45-year-old English and Russian teacher from Ulgii, confirmed this point. Raised in a large family in Ulgii, she did well in the Communist education system, studying Russian in Ulaanbaatar, St. Petersburg, and Irkutsk before the breakup of the Soviet Union. Even though her mother Alia secretly prayed *namaz* throughout her childhood, Gulzhan did not recall learning about religion or engaging in religious practices before 1990. Only when restrictions on religious life were eased did Alia teach her children about her views on religion, taking them to the fortuneteller and praying at shrines “to give thanks and get good luck.” Apart from her mother, Gulzhan’s family network was unique in that no relatives, even of the younger generation, had studied at a mosque. For her extended family—unlike, for example, Shokan’s—transnational orientation did not inform adoption of new religious norms.

Also unlike other middle-aged informants, Gulzhan expressed no interest in becoming more pious in her old age, seeing her mother’s religiosity in terms of personal preference rather than generational obligation. She appreciated her mother’s prayer and took her advice on religion—beginning to celebrate *Kurban Ait* and give alms starting in 2006—but did not feel the need to do more. Though she considered Islam an essential part of being Kazakh, in her view religion was mostly a question of tradition, identity,

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

and family practices; it was good for “religious people” to wear headscarves or avoid alcohol, but for her it was enough to give alms, pray at shrines, and make sure her son wore an amulet when went to study in the United States. Though her situation and life experiences differed from many other middle-aged people like Zhanik and Togzhan, her priorities did not: “we have a lot of work, and don’t have time [to pray].”

Gulzhan’s mother, on the other hand, had just the opposite problem. After spending her whole professional career as a pharmacist in Ulgii, she now found herself living with her husband, children, and grandchildren on a farm in northern Kazakhstan—a situation that afforded her ample time to integrate her traditional religious understandings with new teachings.

The Elderly Generation: Dynamic Role Models

Scholars have long considered the older generation integral to the continuation of both religious and secular social structures (Durkheim 1995; Geertz 1968). On account of the social upheaval and break in continuity of religious knowledge represented by communist religious repression, and the rapid societal changes of the last two decades, the idea of straightforward transmission of religious knowledge from old to young is only partially tenable in modern Bayan-Ulgii. In the pre-socialist period, considerable evidence suggests that elderly (primarily male) experts were extremely influential in religious discourse; even under socialism, older men and women were responsible for the continuation of religious life in whatever restricted or secret forms it took. Currently, however, young people are the dominant group in public, official religion. Many of the area’s most influential religious figures are under forty years old, and teach Islamic ideas to people decades their seniors. Despite this change, the following cases offer

compelling evidence that the older generation retains an important and active role in religious life in both urban and rural areas.

Gulzhan's mother Alia, whose story was discussed in the last section, maintained one of the few direct connections with pre-socialist official Islamic knowledge in Bayan-Ulgii, and her influence on her children represents a relatively direct transmission of knowledge from old to young. She was born into a family of religious experts, and her maternal uncle, an imam, was killed in the purges shortly after her birth in 1937. Luckily, her other family members and parents were able to escape persecution and became successful herders under the *negdel* system, allowing them to teach their daughter about Islam in a textbook case of rural, pastoral life "facilitat[ing] the retention of cultural knowledge" (Finke 1999, 118). She retained this knowledge when she went to school in Ulaanbaatar to study pharmacology, and continued praying *namaz* daily and performing domestic rituals in secret for decades. With the fall of communism, as previously described, she began to impart this knowledge on her children.

The contextual changes of the post-socialist period profoundly shaped Alia's piety and that of her family members (Kertzer 1991). In the late 1990s she began giving alms after taking a class at the Central Mosque, and also convinced her children to do so. An even more important element of her encounter with new, official Islam, however, was her acquaintance with Altingul and the Muslim women's publication *Inabat*. An inveterate amateur poet, Alia had poems on religious and social issues published in the magazine even after she moved with her family to Kazakhstan. Her perspective in these pieces highlights the interconnections and contradictions of religious life in modern Bayan-Ulgii: A Kazakh elder and transnational migrant, she contributes local traditional knowledge to

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

public discourse on religion and women's issues through the means of a magazine published by an authoritative religious organization run by foreign-educated imams.

While Alia's story highlights important themes in the generational dynamics of religious knowledge, as well as the importance of life experience in integrating religious discourses at the personal level, it is in many ways a deviant case. The experiences of Muratkhan, a retired rural herder from Bauerhus *soum*, are likely more typical. Like Alia, his rural childhood brought him in contact with many religious rituals; though his parents did not teach him to pray in Arabic, the whole family engaged in various shrine practices, sacrificed sheep on *Kurban Ait*, and hosted feasts on religious occasions for as long as he could remember. Unlike Alia, however, he was less involved in new religious discourses. He prided himself on maintaining Muslim traditions, and considered Islam an absolutely essential element of Kazakh identity, but his interaction with the mosque consisted entirely of giving livestock alms during Ramadan with his friends. When prompted, he could not identify even one of the five pillars, though his almsgiving meant that he had completed at least one.

Despite this apparent apathy with respect to newer and official teachings, Muratkhan remained an important figure in the religious life of his family. He taught his children and grandchildren what he perceived as the moral attributes of good Kazakh/Muslim life, stating, "Kazakhs are Muslims...they must be pure, clean, reliable, and trustworthy." Like most elderly respondents, he was not protective of his role as a religious teacher, and encouraged younger family members to study at the mosque. While his adult sons and daughters did not take that advice, they did send their young children to the Bauerhus mosque.

Figure 16: A photo showing the size and generational diversity of a rural Mongolian Kazakh household (Werner 2009).

Three Generations in Bauerhus: A Concluding Case Study

The case studies in the previous three sections vary greatly along the lines of age, gender, and location. The contextualization that was required to describe each case, however, shows that a picture of individual religious experience is incomplete without understanding the interpersonal relationships and local-scale networks in which the individual plays a part (Kertzer 1991, see figure 16). This observation supports a primary argument of this thesis: social phenomena operating at different scales are inherent in the local-scale dynamics of religious life. Given that the identification and exploration of interpersonal networks are strengths of the stratified snowball-sampling method, the following case study considers the implications of interconnectedness, tracing multi-

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

scalar, multinational, and multidirectional flows of knowledge, influence and experience in the narratives of three men of different generations in a Bauerhus family.

The first of these informants was Saparzhan, a horse breeder and herder in his late sixties who had lived his whole life in Bauerhus *soum*. He had killed a sheep on *Kurban Ait* each year for as long as he could remember, and had hired *moldas* to pray *Ayat* for his ancestors, but, like Alia, he avoided teaching his children about religion during communism. Unlike Alia, however, the influence of a younger family member, not the remembered practices of his elders, encouraged him to become more involved in religion. Though he had wanted to learn more about religion as he got older, he did not do so until 2003 when his grandson, who studied at a *madrasa* while pursuing an economics degree in Turkey, brought him a copy of the Qur'an with both Kazakh and Arabic text and told him that in order to be a "good Muslim" he should begin praying *namaz* and fasting during Ramadan. Saparzhan quickly took his grandson's advice to heart.

Though most of Saparzhan's religious knowledge was new and transnational rather than local, learned from the Turkish-educated Bauerhus imam and his own Turkish-educated grandson, he integrated his new piety with the traditional roles of an elder. Though unsuccessful in getting any of his adult children to pray *namaz*, he nevertheless used his authority as the head of the household to get his whole family to give alms at the mosque and participate in mosque-based *Kurban Ait* rituals. He also encouraged his grandchildren to study at the mosque and taught them the moral principles "not to steal or lie, drink alcohol, or disrespect older people." Remarkably, his siblings—most of whom lived in Kazakhstan—had begun to study Islam after he told them about his grandson's advice. This case is particularly interesting because it

highlights the transnational and intergenerational flow of religious ideas within one family network—from grandson in Turkey to grandfather in Mongolia, and thence from grandfather to grandchildren in Mongolia and to elderly siblings in Kazakhstan.

Saparzhan's Turkish-educated grandson remained in Turkey and was thus unavailable for interviewing. A conversation with his 20-year old brother Khanmurat, however, revealed more layers of complexity within this religious family network. A first-year geography student at Khovd University, Khanmurat had first begun to study religion at the Bauerhus mosque in 2008 when his brother convinced his parents—who themselves remained uninterested in studying religion—to send him there. At college, he became involved in the same Kazakh student organization as Mairagul and Kunsuslu, and ended up boarding at the Khovd mosque. Upon returning home for the summer, he joined forces with Saparzhan to convince his father Sultan, the director of the local boarding school, to begin giving alms at the Bauerhus mosque.

The final informant in this study was the 31-year old herder Muratbai, Sultan's brother and Saparzhan's youngest son. Like the youngest sons of many traditional Mongolian Kazakh families, he was kept at home to help his father and mother after finishing grade school, and now works as a herder and part-time maintenance worker at Sultan's boarding school. Living with his wife and two young children in a *ger* just outside Bauerhus, Muratbai demonstrated that strong connections with pious family members do not necessarily translate to large changes in religious practices or attitudes. Like his eight siblings, Muratbai did not pray *namaz*, but he considered "Muslimness" an important part of his identity and hoped to send his children to study at the mosque. He also recently began to sacrifice sheep on *Kurban Ait* at the behest of his father and

Chapter IX: Individuals and Networks

nephew. His understanding of Islamic norms was also heavily influenced by ideas presented by Saparzhhan and Khanmurat, and he said that his nephews and father were “better Muslims” than him. According to Muratbai, his older brother Sultan also recognized the piety of older and younger family members as superior to his own; when Khanmurat and his brother came home from their studies, Sultan hid all the alcohol in the house and stopped drinking with his friends as he usually did.

The cases of Muratbai, Sultan, Saparzhhan, Khanmurat, and Khanmurat’s brother exemplify the transnational, interconnected quality of familial religious dynamics—even when considering only the perspectives of the male half of one family. While the details in this example are particular, broader trends in results suggest that the multi-scalar connections it makes are not; the vast majority of informants, irrespective of gender, age, and geographic location—had at least one religiously educated family member who had brought them into contact with new religious ideas in the last few years. Even as individuals performed different personal, familial, and social religious roles, connectivity and dynamism were universally prevalent in the narratives of informants.

Chapter X

Conclusions: Special Cases and General Truths

Constructing a coherent and descriptive view of Mongolian Kazakh religious life is a difficult task fraught with practical and theoretical challenges, but the observations produced from the endeavor can be valuable and insightful. As this is the first study to focus specifically on the religious situations and experiences of Mongolian Kazakhs—and one of only a few academic investigations to consider this understudied population—it has been necessary to balance ethnographic descriptiveness with analytical rigor. Moreover, this project is necessarily interdisciplinary; though rooted in the geographic idea of scale, it has drawn on theoretical constructs from social theory, anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. Bringing together these perspectives in a single detailed case study, this project seeks to document the intersection of local experiences and complex multi-scalar processes, endeavoring, “[by] painting on Lilliputian canvasses with what we hope to be delicate strokes...to stumble upon general truths while sorting through special cases” (Geertz 1968, 4).

To structure this investigation, three guiding questions were asked. The first question was broadly descriptive, asking about the characteristics of religious practices, discourses, and authorities in Bayan-Ulgii and how they have changed in recent years. The second was analytical, and focused on a smaller scale, considering the effects of these changing situations on the religious identities, practices, and experiences of individual Mongolian Kazakhs. Finally, the third question was comparative, asking how the tendencies represented in the ethnographic data compared to those of other Central Asian countries. Having examined the “special cases” with which these questions were

Chapter X: Conclusions

addressed, this chapter concludes with a reflection on “general truths” reflected in the “delicate strokes” of the ethnographic data.

These “truths” are, of course, anything but concrete or absolute. The broadly generalizable conclusions of this investigation have more to do with process than fixity, and connectivity, dynamism, and complexity occupy the theoretical center stage. Indeed, given the demonstrable importance of processes at every spatial scale across many years, the canvas upon which religious life in Bayan-Ulgii is painted seems far from “Lilliputian.” While some scholars see the “resurgence” of a single unified Islam in post-socialist Central Asia or a dichotomous split between “high” and “low” Islam, the experiences of informants support a far more complex reality in which competing voices and discourses operate in a tangled web of interconnections and influences (Huntington 1996, Gellner 1992, Foucault 1978).

Scale and Social Change in Local Religious Life

In analyzing changing religious practices and identities, a few general trends can be seen both in the narratives of informants and the observations of researchers. First, almost all informants took for granted the unitary nature of Muslim and Kazakh identity, a national-scale conceptualization of religious ascription that had great currency at the community and individual levels (Asad 2009; Privatsky 2001). In part because of the idea that ethnicity and religion were linked (a hugely important part of life and identity for this minority community, and a concept actively promoted during socialism), Mongolian Kazakhs tended to be amenable to increased involvement with new, “official” religious discourses, activities, and ideas. This tendency, echoed in the rapid (re)adoption of public religious practice by much of the population, militates against the idea that

“transnational” and “local” Islam are *conflicting* interests (Gellner 1992; Montgomery 2007). New foreign-educated religious elites are, however, unquestionably the most important influence in the social fabric of Mongolian Kazakh religion. While many Mongolian Kazakhs, particularly in rural areas, maintain practices frowned upon by such elites, even “traditional” Kazakhs have integrated new nationally and transnationally oriented practices and ideas into private, public, and family religious life.

With respect to religious practice itself, private, public, mosque-based, and shrine-based activities were the primary practical modes by which informants interpreted the idea of piety. While some groups, such as young men, exhibited a preference for what Geertz might call “scripturalist” Islam, (upon which previous scholars of Islam in Bayan-Ulgii have exclusively focused) most people were primarily interested in community or interactive activities like *Kurban Ait* and family shrine visitation (Geertz 1968). Judging from the testimony of lay and imam informants, practices like *namaz* have grown rapidly in popularity in most areas, but for most individuals the most important religious practice in mosques is almsgiving. Nevertheless, even the “traditional” or local practices that were passed down through socialism, like shrine veneration and circumcision, have gone through processes of change and alignment with the agendas and influences of transnational religious authorities similar to those seen in other countries (Alonso & Kalanov 2008, Khalid 2007).

Moreover, individuals influenced by authoritative discourses who refrain from drinking, pray *namaz* daily, and complete the five pillars are widely recognized as “good Muslims” and “religious people,” indicating that their vision of orthopraxy carries a great deal of popular currency. Even middle-aged people who live out a vision of

Chapter X: Conclusions

“Muslimness” rooted in the “low-key” moral ideals of *taza jol* send their children to mosques in order to provide them with knowledge of their “national heritage”—ironically imparted by imams educated in Turkey and other foreign countries (Baluan, Privatsky 2001). This tendency indicates a shift in Islamic education, as in pious practice, away from the family sphere and toward mosques—a change that has radically altered the roles of older people and women as sources of religious and cultural knowledge (Finke 1999).

The Individual as Integrative Nexus: Identity, Positionality, and Networks

This discussion of the changing orientation of religious practice and discourse leads to the second question about the integration of influences at the individual level—the answers to which significantly complicate the (nevertheless broadly significant) idea of a shift from local Islamic discourses to more transnational ones. Perhaps the most important conclusion of this discussion is that, no matter what broad tendencies of authority and discourse exist, religious experience is ultimately lived and contextualized at the individual level, and is dependent on individual factors. Even foreign-educated imams who promote transnational ideologies and opinions are almost all originally from Bayan-Ulgii, grew up in a specific late-socialist milieu, and maintain religious ideas firmly rooted in ethno-nationalist and local associations. Moreover, the situations and discourses of new religious authorities, even within the MIA, differ subtly but significantly from each other, creating a patchwork of widely recognized religious ideas rather than a single monumental “scripturalist” discourse (Geertz 1968).

Age, gender, and life-course are influential factors in the way individual Mongolian Kazakhs approach these ideas. The historical milieux of formative individual life experiences, as Kertzer asserts, are significant, as are gender and age-specific roles

and expectations passed on through the generations (1991). Generational roles, however, are rapidly changing in modern Bayan-Ulgii, where political freedom, transnational migration, Internet connections, cell phones, trade, and access to international religious and social discourse have radically altered the fabric of society. Nevertheless, this new context highlights the continued importance of gender and life-course; people who grew up after socialism inhabit very different religious worlds from their parents. The differences between urban and rural places in terms of religion also speak to the importance of context; consider, for example, the differences between the religious life of Bauerhus before its mosque was built in 2004 and that of Ulgii, where *Hajj* groups were being organized as early as 1991.

Geographic context, age, gender, and other factors are also mediated through the omnipresent lenses of individual agency and social networks. At a time when transnational migration is increasingly common, social and familial networks can span vast distances, bringing even rural herders like Saparzhhan into contact with Turkish and Kazakhstani discourses (Barcus & Werner 2007). In such networks, knowledge and influence flow in every direction as older people learn from younger family members and vice-versa. Through networks, Mongolian Kazakhs routinely come into contact with new religious and social understandings, epitomizing the concept of multi-scalar connectivity and bringing broader trends directly to bear on the details of everyday life.

Dynamics of Religious Life in Comparative Perspective

After considering the multifaceted, shifting, and connected qualities of Islam in Bayan-Ulgii, a final question can be asked: “how does everyday religious life here compare to rest of Central Asia?” While acknowledging that religion everywhere is

Chapter X: Conclusions

contextualized and lived in at least subtly different ways, the answer to this question appears to be “surprisingly closely.” To begin with, most Mongolian Kazakhs have regular contact with at least one family member in Kazakhstan, and are involved, like most Turkic Central Asians, with religio-national discourses that conflate the ideas of nationality and Islam (Barcus & Werner 2007). As noted in chapter three, the religious history of Kazakhs in the Altai region differs from that of other groups because of their historical isolation from urban Islam in the pre-socialist period, but it shares many common threads, such as the importance of shrine veneration and the popularity of domestic religion and festivals. Though Mongolia was not part of the Soviet Union, the policies pursued by its communist government were also remarkably similar with respect to religion; public expressions of Islam were limited, circumscribed, and nationalized, making religion a domestic phenomenon that fell under the purview of older people and women (Finke 1999).

In the modern era, the adoption of new Islamic practices and ideas has also followed a similar pattern to the rest of Central Asia. There as elsewhere, the fall of socialism witnessed the immediate introduction of Turkish, Saudi, and other foreign funding for training local young men in (often disparate) international religious discourses (Alonso & Kalanov 2008, Montgomery 2007, Khalid 2007). Like elsewhere, transnational ideas have met a generally warm, though locally contextualized, reception among people for whom “Muslimness” in some form is an integral part of national identity. Additionally, dynamics like the problematically termed “re-Islamization” of shrines have been prevalent in Mongolia, with more involved orthopraxis such as

completion of the five pillars and adoption of the *hijab* gaining priority only slowly and among select, mainly younger, sub-sections of the population (Montgomery 2007).

Islam in Bayan-Ulgii, however, differs from other Central Asian countries with respect to national-level policies and their ramifications. In contrast to states like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and even Kazakhstan, the Mongolian government allows almost complete religious freedom, requiring the registration of religious institutions but imposing few limits on their actions (Khalid 2007, U.S. State Department 2007). While anecdotal evidence from some informants suggests that at least one prominent Mongolian Kazakh politician has provided financial support for the MIA, even that central organization has nowhere near the hegemonic control of Uzbekistan's state-sponsored Muftiate, for example (Khalid 2007). Interestingly, while some states justify control over religious expression with rhetoric of "anti-terrorism," there is no evidence of militant activities utilizing religious rhetoric in Mongolia—casting further doubt on the fears of writers like Rashid and Huntington who warned of "Islamic militancy" in "uncontrolled" Central Asian religious environments (Rashid 1994; Huntington 1996).

Recommendations for Future Research

In the final estimate, this investigation has been successful at describing the manifestations of multifaceted, interpersonal and multi-scalar religious phenomena at a local scale and applying these descriptive findings within a contemporary, highly relevant theoretical framework. Even before analysis, this study's data were ethnographically valuable, being the first systematic documentation of post-socialist religio-cultural changes in Bayan-Ulgii. Interpreting these findings in a deliberately anti-essentialist theoretical structure that accounted for the importance of complexity, connectivity, and

Chapter X: Conclusions

dynamism made them more broadly applicable to scholarly conversations about religious life as a socio-cultural phenomenon. From this standpoint, several recommendations can be made with respect to future ethnographic work in Bayan-Ulgii and social scientific approaches to religion in general.

This project's uniqueness is in many ways its downside; future investigations of Islam in Bayan-Ulgii will be able to make better comparisons and more directed analyses by building off existing work and allowing the consideration of change over time between studies. The study was also limited in terms of time and ethnographic technique. Ideally, any future treatments of this subject should involve more time in the field and familiarity with the Kazakh language in order to minimize misunderstandings related to translation and better accommodate insider perspectives and narratives.

More specifically, several questions about Mongolian Kazakh religious life remain unanswered and would benefit from future work. In particular, informants repeatedly identified the importance of rural shrines and sacred places, yet a detailed study of such places, which have received much attention in literature on Central Asian Islam, was impossible (Abramson & Karimov 2007). Future projects might also benefit from more thorough participant observation of popular religious events like *Kurban Ait*, and perhaps investigations of domestic or affective piety such as those conducted by Privatsky (2001). With respect to religious authority, which seems only likely to increase in importance, future work could productively focus on the specific ideological and organizational tendencies of the MIA and its interaction with independent imams in Ulgii. These are only a few suggestions; the possibilities for further research, in the event that funding should become available, are practically endless.

This project's approach and findings are not necessarily limited to Bayan-Ulgii, and have the potential to be applied more broadly within the social scientific study of religion. At first glance, geography and religion seem like unlikely bedfellows. This project has shown, however, that the theoretical constructs, spatial and scalar focus, and interdisciplinary breadth of geography can be productively applied to investigations that might otherwise fall under the domain of anthropology of religion. Moreover, by utilizing a framework that takes into account the complexity of social dynamics in terms of scale and connectivity, a theoretical understanding of religious life has been achieved that is considerably more complex and descriptive than previous investigations of religion in Central Asia. Many other ethnographic or even theoretical treatments of religious change in post-socialist contexts have tended to essentialize "great" and "little" traditions, thus constructing a dichotomy between the local and the global that does not exist, and "fixing" interaction between the two to little descriptive effect (Alonso & Kalanov 2007, Abazov 2007, Gellner 1992, Geertz 1968).

This paper has attempted to synergize discourse in religious ethnography with other discussions in the social sciences through a single thorough case study. In a postmodern world, dichotomies and essentialist ideologies tend to be difficult to support in the face of detailed data (Privatsky 2001). This investigation has found flaws in discourses that overemphasize the unity of Islam as a cultural category, and also in those that seek to portray different "local Islams" as totally distinct (Huntington 1996, Asad 2009). People in Bayan-Ulgii are intimately connected to transnational religious discourses, yet their religious experiences are also locally and individually contextualized, and are always seen through the lens of national identity. Within some disciplines, this

Chapter X: Conclusions

assertion is hardly novel; nevertheless, given the frequently-voiced fears, even in academic circles, that “pan-Islamic extremism” will unite all Central Asians irrespective of local culture or nationality, such sophisticated thinking seems far from prevalent (Rashid 1994, Khalid 2007). With this problem in mind, it is hoped that this thesis may encourage future scholars of religion to consider the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration with geography and the other social sciences.

Appendix A

Schedule of Lay Interview Questions

- (1) Do you consider yourself to be a Muslim?
 - A. If not, do you belong to another religion, or are you a non-believer?
- (2) What do you think are the primary obligations that all Muslims have?
- (3) What Islamic practices, rituals, or celebrations do you take part in?
 - A. Do you recite namaz? If so, when did you start to do this?
 - B. Do you give alms? If so, when did you start to do this?
 - C. Do you fast during Ramadan? If so, when did you start to do this?
 - D. Do you slaughter a sheep during *Kurban Ait*? If so, when did you start?
 - E. Do you circumcise your sons? If so, when were they circumcised?
- (4) Are you affiliated with a mosque?
 - A. What mosque do you go to, and how did you pick that mosque?
- (5) Do you visit local shrines?
 - A. Where are they? How far away?
 - B. When do you go? What do you do when you are there?
 - C. What does it mean to pray “Ayat”?
 - D. Do you think it is necessary to go to your ancestor’s grave after seeing them in a dream?
 - E. Tell me about the last dream you had about an ancestor. What was the dream about? Did you visit the shrine/grave afterwards?
 - F. If it is important for a person to visit a grave after seeing an ancestor in a dream, what do people do when they migrate to Kazakhstan?
- (6) For Kazakhs, what is the proper way to bury somebody who has died?
 - A. Do you think it is important to be buried in your birthplace?
 - B. Are women usually buried with their own ancestors or with their husband’s ancestors?

Appendices

C. If somebody from Mongolia dies in Kazakhstan, how does the family choose a place to bury the body?

(7) Have you ever visited a traditional healer in order to get an amulet or for any other reason?

A. If so, when? Why?

(8) Have you ever visited a fortune-teller (*baqsi*)?

A. If so, when? What happened?

(9) How has the way people practice Islam in Bayan-Ulgii changed in your lifetime? How is the situation better now?

(10) Do you do more Islamic practices than your family members?

(11) How have you learned about Islam?

(12) Have you or any of your close relatives studied Islam?

A. Where and when?

(13) In your opinion, how do you think that Muslim girls and women need to dress? What kind of clothing do you think is appropriate? What kind of clothing is inappropriate?

(14) Does being Muslim affect your decision to drink alcohol?

(15) In your opinion, is it necessary to be a Muslim in order to be a Kazakh? Why?

(16) Do you consider yourself first to be a Muslim or first to be a Kazakh?

(17) Would you feel more comfortable being a Muslim in Kazakhstan?

(18) Do you think it would be easier to practice Islam in Kazakhstan?

Appendix B

Schedule of Imam Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your mosque?
 - A. What is its name?
 - B. How many imams are there?
 - C. When was it built?
 - D. How was it financed?
2. Can you tell me about the people who come to your mosque?
 - A. How many people come to *zhuma namaz* and regular *namaz*?
 - B. What age and sex of people come most frequently?
 - C. How has the group of people that come to your mosque changed in the last few years?
 - D. Why do people come to your mosque and not another mosque?
 - E. Do people in your congregation go to multiple mosques?
3. Tell me how you decided to become an imam.
 - A. Where did you study?
 - B. How did you pay for your studies?
 - C. Were your relatives supportive of your decision to be an imam?
 - D. (OLDER PEOPLE) did you want to be an imam during socialism?
4. How do you think the way Islam is practiced in Bayan-Ulgii is different from how it is practiced in other Muslim places?
5. What Islamic practices should Muslims in Bayan-Ulgii do that they currently do not?

NOTE: In most imam interviews, supplementary contextual questions were asked in addition to those listed above.

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