

# *Ruh* or Spirits of the Deceased as Mediators in Islamic Belief: The Case of a Town in Uzbekistan

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## INTRODUCTION

Among Muslims in Central Asia, there is a shared custom during which a banquet is held involving the sacrifice of animals to Allah and the dead. At the end of the banquet, some chapters of the Qur'an are recited to comfort the spirits of the deceased. Usually, a portion of the prayers is specifically dedicated to these spirits; the following is a typical example of the kind of prayer that is offered: "may the spirit of XX (the person's name) be content." The words that are used to refer to these spirits vary by region, but they are usually derived from the Arabic word *ruh* [spirit]. Throughout this region, *ruh* are generally believed to be influential in people's earthly lives, and the banquet functions as a vehicle that allows people to make contact with *ruh*. During the ritual, many people ask *ruh* for protection or happiness.

One academic from the time of the Russian Empire, Chokan Chingisovich Valikhanov, considered these *ruh* rituals to be remnants of the pre-Islamic faith of Central Asians. Valikhanov believed that, because these kinds of rituals involved individuals asking the *ruh* of their ancestors for salvation, they were examples of the persistence of pre-Islamic ancestor worship among Muslim nomads in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> However, Soviet ethnographers later found that rituals concerning *ruh* were also being conducted among sedentary Muslim people. For example, Elena Mikhailovna Peshchereva described how potters in a settler society held a ritual banquet, at which dishes and candles were offered to the *ruh* of their deceased masters and passages from the Qur'an were read.<sup>2</sup> Peshchereva, together with her colleagues Gleb Pavlovich Snesev and Olga Aleksandrovna Sukhareva, regarded this practice as an example of the ancestor worship that persisted among communities who engaged in hereditary crafts.<sup>3</sup> These researchers concluded that these "vestiges" of ancestor worship had little to do with "true" or "orthodox" Islam, and they predicted that these

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- 1 Ch. Valikhanov, "Sredy shamanstva u kirgizov," "Tengri," in Ch. Valikhanov, ed., *Izbrannye proizbedeniia* (Alma-ata: Kazakhskoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1958[1862]), pp. 148–154, 177–178.
  - 2 E. M. Peshchereva, *Goncharnoe proizvodstvo Srednei Azii* (Moskva, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1959), pp. 362–363.
  - 3 G. P. Snesev, *Relikty domusul'manskikh verovaniy i obriadov u uzbekov Khorezma* (Moskva: Nauka, 1969), pp. 122–123; O. A. Sukhareva, *Islam v Uzbekistane* (Tashkent: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1960), p. 31.

practices and beliefs would disappear from modern society. However, these beliefs have persisted strongly to the present day; indeed, even if the rituals are related to ancestor worship, the persistence of these rituals among the Muslims in Central Asia has yet to be satisfactorily explained. In all the research conducted during the Soviet era, the issue of the meaning of the ritual for the participants – how the ritual is interpreted and what functions it performs – was completely ignored. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, several anthropologists, who have engaged in field research in this area, have been examining these issues and attempting to understand the importance of the ritual. Here we will conduct a brief examination of these studies.

In Bruce Privratsky's study of religious activity among the Kazakhs in the city of Turkistan (2001), he finds that despite the anti-religious campaigns of the Soviet regime, many people have continued to perform rituals that center on the *ruh*. The Yasawi Shrine, where the great Sufi Ahmed Yasawi ([?]-1166/7) was laid to rest, is located in modern day Turkistan; before the Soviet era, it was a major religious center in Central Asia. However, as a result of the anti-Islamic campaign, which began in 1927, all mosques in the city of Turkistan were closed. Privratsky found that most Kazakh people in the city in 1999 had not yet re-learned their Islamic traditions to any great extent; few people prayed in mosques, and most of the inhabitants felt that their Islamic practices were "less pure" because of the previous seventy years of state-imposed atheism.<sup>4</sup>

He reports that, in this context, two kinds of rituals related to *ruh* were conducted as the main religious practices by Kazakh people in the city. The first ritual is referred to as "Thursdayness," because it is mostly performed on Thursdays, when people in the region believe that spirits of the deceased return. This ritual is also known as *iyis shuğarū* [produce the aroma] and is an example of a private ritual that continued during the Soviet era. In Soviet times, people were not permitted to pray to Allah openly, but many people continued their religious practices at home, where, usually on Thursday, they made fried pastry using fat from livestock and recited some chapters of the Qur'an, praying for peace for the deceased and for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The second ritual, called *as* or *as berū*, is a ritual that is conducted on a much larger scale. People perform this on the seventh, fortieth, and one hundredth days following a funeral. Several animals are slaughtered, and hundreds of guests are fed. Despite criticism from the Soviet regime that this ritual was wasteful, it persisted throughout the city. After these feasts, participants listen to recitations of the Qur'an and pray that the ancestral spirits will be content, that the meal and the Qur'an will "touch" them, and that the family will be blessed because of the merit of the meal they have provided. Privratsky insists that these *ruh* rituals remind Kazakh people of their nomad ancestors,

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4 Bruce Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 75.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 128–132.

who are believed to have been close friends of great Sufis, and claims that, by ensuring a connection with these ancestors, these rituals represent a genuine reproduction of Muslim identity, despite the fact that most individuals seldom engage in other “pure” Islamic practices.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1990s a Japanese anthropologist, Setsuko Yoshida, has been conducting important field research in the village of Kalatar (a pseudonym) in northern Kyrgyzstan. According to her research, people in Kalatar converted to Islam in the seventeenth century and, despite the fact that most lived a nomadic life and seldom prayed collectively in fixed mosques, there was clear evidence of the presence of some mullahs [Muslim clerics] in the town.<sup>7</sup> When the Soviet regime forcibly promoted sedentarization and collective cattle-breeding and farming in the 1930s, these mullahs were forced to abandon their practices, and most Islamic practices, such as holding services daily, public fasting, and recitation of the Qur’an, were banned.<sup>8</sup> However, people continued to hold rituals to soothe the *ruh* in the form of funerals, memorial services for the deceased, and two Islamic grand festivals (*orozo ayt* and *kurman ayt*). In spite of the prohibitions of the ruling regime, a significant number of livestock were slaughtered during these rituals “to show their respects” to God and the *ruh*, and also to guests. It is said that the recitation of the Qur’an that is conducted after these feasts has a positive effect on the deceased, because the taste of the meal is able to “touch” the *ruh*, and the ritual contributes to the maintenance of peace. Thus, according to the participants, stability in life can be secured through the performance of this ritual, even though the slaughtering of livestock itself might bring temporary economic instability. Moreover, Yoshida found that the participants in the ritual generally did not want to endanger themselves by engaging in anti-governmental activities. Yoshida concluded that people engaged in this ritual in an attempt to ensure that they could live a stable life within the Soviet system, rather than as a means of attacking it.<sup>9</sup>

The above two cases illustrate how significant *ruh* rituals were – and are – for many Muslim inhabitants in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan during and after the Soviet era. It is clear that, regardless of the origin of these rituals, the custom of cooking dishes from slaughtered livestock and remembering the *ruh*

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6 Ibid., pp. 141–147.

7 Setsuko Yoshida, “Kirgizstan hokubu nouson no mosque kaisetsu: Chūō Ajia Islam fukkou ni kansuru chousa houkoku [About a newly opened mosque in a village of Northern Kirgizstan: A report on Islamic resurgence in Central Asia],” in K. Matsumoto, ed., *Reports on Religious and Commerce Networks of Chinese Muslims and Their Islamic Resurgence* (Tokyo: K. Matsumoto Office, 2008) (orig. in Japanese), p. 188.

8 Setsuko Yoshida, *Chūō Ajia nōson no shinzoku nettowāku: Kyrgyzstan, keizaiikō no jinruigakuteki kenkyū* [Kinship networks of a farm village in Central Asia: An anthropological study of the transition economy in Kyrgyzstan] (Tokyo: Fūkyōsha, 2004) (orig. in Japanese), p. 247.

9 Ibid., pp. 227–251.

has been central to the lives of Muslims in the two regions.<sup>10</sup> However, because of the scarcity of detailed ethnographic data on Central Asia in the 1990s, both the studies mentioned above treated rituals with similar ones in very remote Muslim societies, such as in North Africa and Southeast Asia, or with ancestor cults in China. Neither study succeeded in clearly demonstrating Central Asian regional distinctions of the phenomenon. This tends to give the impression that they might be very local and minor religious practices among nomads or ex-nomadic people. Thus, some crucial issues on the role of the *ruh* in Central Asia have yet to be discussed and examined. For instance, do the *ruh* also play a significant role among settler Muslims in the region? What do the participants assume are the mechanisms and the extent of the *ruh*'s power during the ritual? How do they interpret the influence of the ritual on their lives? What function or role do the *ruh* play in the context of the relationship between God and a believer? To answer these questions, we need to conduct a detailed examination of *ruh* rituals in other regions in Central Asia, including settler societies.

This article examines all of these issues, using original ethnographic data, which I obtained in Rishton, a town in Uzbekistan, predominantly between 2002 and 2003. The evidence strongly suggests that *ruh* plays a role that is no less essential in the lives of sedentary Muslims in Central Asia than it is among nomadic or ex-nomadic Muslims. Then, the notion that rituals concerning *ruh* are merely a vestige of ancestor worship or a pre-Islamic faith is far from satisfactory. Instead, this study was based on the assumption that in order to understand how *ruh* function in this region, it is essential to explore the way in which people interpret the meaning of these rituals and how they regard them as compatible with Islamic belief. The aim of this research was to study the lives of post-Soviet Muslims "on their own terms."<sup>11</sup>

Rishton is a small town that had a population of about 30,000 in 2001. It is located in the south edge of the Ferghana Valley, where the fertile lands have encouraged agrarian societies to settle since ancient times. Rishton is famous as one of the main centers of pottery in Central Asia. It was known as the center of the blue pottery of the Ferghana school during the nineteenth century. During the Soviet era, pottery manufacturing was forcibly collectivized, but it continued to be the main industry of the town. Today it has been privatized, and thousands of the inhabitants of the town are engaged in this craft.<sup>12</sup> Most of the residents in the town are Tajik or Uzbek. Both national communities have

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10 A Japanese anthropologist Toko Fujimoto also points out the importance of *ruh* among Muslims in northern Kazakhstan (Toko Fujimoto, "Kazakh Memorial Services in the Post-Soviet Period: A Case Study of the Feast of Sacrifice in a Northern Kazakhstan," *Slavic Studies* 55 (2008), pp. 1-26 (orig. in Japanese, with English summary)).

11 Johan Rasanayagam, "Introduction," *Central Asian Survey* 25:3 (2006), p. 231.

12 Haruka Kikuta, "A Master Is Greater Than a Father: Rearrangements of Tradition among Muslim Artisans in Soviet and Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," in D. C. Wood, ed., *Economic Development, Integration, and Morality in Asia and the Americas* [Research in Economic Anthropology 29] (UK: JAI Press, Emerald, 2009), pp. 89-122.

very similar lifestyles. As settled Muslims of Central Asia, intermarriage between them is quite common, and most of the inhabitants are bi- or trilingual, speaking Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian. The Soviet regime seriously oppressed a large number of devout Muslims here, especially in the 1930s. It prohibited the use of the Arabic alphabet and possession of the Qur'an, closing almost all the mosques in the town, and made teaching atheism at school compulsory. These policies considerably damaged the Islamic belief and practices of the population. Those who wanted to attend the Friday prayers had to go to other cities such as Kokand and Margilan, and this prompted a sharp drop in the number of people attending Friday prayers. Many residents began to drink alcohol – usually hard liquor, such as vodka – and some even began to eat pork. Although most Muslim inhabitants continued to circumcise boys and recite the Qur'an at various life-cycle events secretly at home, anecdotal episodes suggests that, in the Soviet era, young people seldom observed the daily prayers and annual fasting, which are the basic duties of every Muslim. This situation began to change in the late 1980s, when anti-Islamic policies were relaxed. People began to rebuild mosques on each town block, and a madrasa and several private classes were established, where the Arabic alphabet and elementary Islamic tenets were and continue to be taught. Various books and small pamphlets carrying Islamic teaching appeared at storefronts in the bazaar. Many of the inhabitants continue to drink a significant amount of vodka, but the habit of eating pork appears to have declined and the practice of attending daily prayers and observing the annual fasting seem to be on the rise among the population.

I carried out on-site research in Rishton mainly during the period from 2002 to 2003. I stayed with an ordinary family and interviewed about 100 people in the town in the Uzbek language. Besides conducting interviews, I was also a participant observer in numerous religious activities conducted by the Muslim inhabitants of the town, and I have made several additional follow-up visits since 2003.

### THE XATIM-QUR'ON RITUAL

The Soviet ethnographers Peshchereva and Sukhareva reported that the Uzbeks and the Tajiks believed that a living person had *jon* [life] and *ruh* [spirit], and that *jon* was lost after death while *ruh* remained.<sup>13</sup> My research suggests that this is also true for Muslims in Rishton today, where *ruh* is also known as *arvoh*. Originally, *arvoh* is derived from the plural form of the Arabic *ruh*, but most of the inhabitants of Rishton do not recognize this difference today; instead, they regard the two words as synonyms. Most inhabitants tend to focus on *ruh* or *arvoh* during two rituals called *xatim-qur'on* and *is chiqar*. Almost all of my informants reported that these rituals were conducted throughout the So-

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13 Peshchereva, *Goncharnoe proizvodstvo*, pp. 361–362; Sukhareva, *Islam v Uzbekistane*, p. 31.



viet era. According to them, even most of the members of the Communist Party in the town held the ritual, pretending that they were secular family festivals. Let me first examine the ritual *xatim-qur'on*.

The original intention of the *xatim-qur'on* was the recitation of all of the chapters of the Qur'an. However, in the actual performance of the ritual, usually only some parts of it are recited, and the recitation usually takes around an hour. Usually, the host of the ritual invites more than ten people, of whom some will be mullahs. Sometimes, especially large *xatim-qur'on* are held, where dozens or hundreds of guests are invited and fed. The organization of such a banquet is such a significant undertaking that relatives and neighbors all cooperate to organize it. First, men and women guests are led to different rooms, where the host presents them with various dishes, including those cooked with sacrificed meat. After the banquet, a mullah recites the Qur'an. During the recitation, the chapter known as *Yā Sīn* is read, because it is believed to have very strong power, and the people in the room listen to it with reverence. Sometimes, at this time, the host places new tea, candies, salt, water, and so on in the room, so that these may obtain some blessings (*baraka*) from the recitation. These items are then believed to have healing powers.

After the recitation, prayers are said, the content of which vary according to the purposes of the ritual. If the ritual is held as a memorial service for the dead, prayers for their peace are offered; these rituals are held on the third, twentieth, and fortieth days after the funeral has taken place, called *ma'raka*, *yigirma*, and *qirq*, respectively, but they can also be referred to in general as *xatim-qur'on*. The participants believe that the *ruh* of a person returns to this world forty days after death and that reciting the Qur'an will help it adjust and rest in peace. They say that the *ruh* only comes back to this world on Thursdays and Sundays after the fortieth day following the funeral, and, after several decades, the *ruh* will only visit its descendants during two Islamic grand festivals (*hayit*).

Muslims in the town also performed *xatim-qur'on* during celebrations, such as weddings and circumcisions, or at the start of a new business. In this *xatim-qur'on*, the happiness of a young couple, or the happiness of the infant boy, or the success of a project are wished for in the prayers. Even when no specific occasion calls for this ritual, many Muslim residents try to perform this ritual at least once a year to show gratitude to God. Generally, two prayers are offered during these kinds of *xatim-qur'on*, and the participants believe that the recitation of the Qur'an in these rituals will bring them religious merit, known as *savob*, which – during the first prayer – they try to direct to a certain *ruh*. Here is an example of a typical prayer of this kind:

*Mana shu o 'qigan savobini shu yerda o 'tganlarning ruhlariga bag 'ishlaymiz.*

[We send the religious merit of this recitation to the *ruh* of the deceased here].

In addition to “the *ruh* of the deceased here,” the deceased parents of the host, the “owner of this place (*shu yerning egalari*)” and “Muslims who died here”

(*shu yerda o'tgan Muslumonlari*) often become the subjects for the recitation, and are mentioned in the prayer. After the announcement of the *savob's* purpose, the prayer is recited. Although this prayer is dedicated to Allah, it is said that the *ruh* who are mentioned in the first prayer can help the host by asking Allah for mercy, and that the satisfaction of *ruh* is believed to bring good fortune (*omad*). Sometimes, the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim saints (*aziz-avliyolar*) are also mentioned in the prayers. Several elders explained to me that this was because they were in closer positions to God and their prayers were more influential than the prayers of ordinary Muslims.

An *imom* [the person who is in charge of a mosque and guides services] in his late 50s, Zafarjon Kodirov (pseudonym), explained to me that *savob* can help people enter into heaven, achieve their objectives, and that it can benefit the participants' ancestors, if the descendants direct the *savob* by prayer. The following is his explanation:

*Savob* is gained by a good deed. It can be saved up like money in a bank. The recitation of the Qur'an, especially in *xatim-qur'on* generates significant *savob*. (...) Also, *savob* raises the possibility of achieving one's objectives.<sup>14</sup>

Mr. Kodirov has worked as an *imom* for more than ten years, and he often preaches to the inhabitants of Rishton. Although he learned his Islamic knowledge almost entirely in Rishton from the *imoms* that preceded him, people respect him as an honest man with sufficient religious knowledge. After he had elucidated *savob* for me, he then talked about one old man who had recently held the *xatim-qur'on*, because he felt his death was approaching. According to the *imom*, the man thought his children would not pray for him after his death, so he tried to save up *savob* for himself by conducting the ritual.

### THE IS CHIQAR RITUAL

Another ritual that concerns *ruh* in Rishton, is called *is chiqar*. *Is chiqar* means "emitting the aroma" in Uzbek. In Tajik, this ritual is known as *būy taft*, which means "hot aroma." The terms "*is*" and "*būy*" refer to the delicious smell of meat or animal fat, and "*is chiqar*" literally means to cook dishes that emit the smell of meat or animal fat when the pot is heated. However, people in the town do not use this expression simply for cooking; it is used exclusively to refer to the ritual where a greasy dish like pilaf is cooked and some chapters of the Qur'an are read out. In most cases, the recitation is dedicated to the *ruh*.

There are three major occasions when *is chiqar* is held. The first type of occasion is the memorial service for the deceased, which is intended to be held on Thursdays or Sundays. On this occasion, the participants usually cook pilaf (*osh*) or other dishes that use plenty of animal fat, such as fried pastry. These dishes are then eaten all together with household members and some neigh-

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14 I conducted this interview at the house I stayed in Rishton on May 23, 2003.

bors. After the meal, the oldest person in the family or a person who has significant knowledge of Islam recites some chapters of the Qur'an. At the end of the recitation, she or he then says a prayer for the peace of the *ruh*. A typical example of this kind of prayer is as follows:

*Bu savobni shu yerda o'tgan ajdodlari va o'tganlarning ruhlariga bag'ishlaymiz.  
Ruhlar shod bo 'lsin.*  
[We send this religious merit to the *ruh* of the ancestors and the deceased here.  
May the *ruh* be content].

The participants listen to this prayer with their palms open and held up at chest-level. They then ask the *ruh* for help, saying "*Ruhlar bizni quvvat-madad qilsin.*" [May the *ruh* help us.] The prayer is generally concluded with the phrase "*Olloh akbar*" [Allah is great], and – when this is said – those present pass their hands over their faces. This sequence of prayer is called *duo*.

The *imom* who was mentioned above, Mr. Kodirov, told me that *ruh* sometimes came back to the place where the person died or lived, and that their descendants should conduct the ritual of *is chiqar* and recite the Qur'an in order to satisfy and feed the *ruh*:

A *ruh* becomes lean without prayers and recitations of the Qur'an dedicated to it by its descendants. A hungry *ruh* even comes down to this world to seek its descendants. It can be satisfied with prayers because, for a *ruh*, prayers are like food.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, the prayer used on this occasion is dedicated mainly to the ancestors of the hosts. Although there is no explicit prohibition on the recitation of others' names, in most cases, during this ritual, paternal ancestors are recalled. For example, a widowed woman in Rishton told me that a prayer for the peace of her late husband would have to be requested by her son and his family (the son, his wife, and his children) in the ritual because they are successors of her husband; she herself can only offer a prayer for her father-in-law and mother-in-law and not for her husband because she is not regarded as his descendant.

The second reason why this ritual is held is related to dreams. The *is chiqar* ritual is performed when a dead family member (usually one of the grandparents or parents) appears frequently in the dreams of a relative. When a dead relative appears in a dream, this is interpreted as a sign of the *ruh* demanding the ritual or warning of impending dangers. For example, during my stay in 2002, a man in his twenties saw his grandfather in a dream for three days running. This was taken as a sign to hold the ritual, and he conducted *is chiqar* with his family. They slaughtered a rooster and invited several neighbors to the meal. An old male neighbor recited some chapters of the Qur'an, and they prayed for his dream to be transformed into goodness and peace for his grandfather. The participants believe that if the ancestors are satisfied by the ritual, future dangers can be avoided, because the ancestors will ask Allah to prevent these dangers.

15 I carried out this interview at Mr. Kodirov's house on September 27, 2004.



In the above two cases, the ritual is held by members of one household and their neighbors, and – mostly – the prayers are dedicated to the *ruh* of the hosts' ancestors. In contrast, the third occasion that calls for this ritual is different. The third occasion centers on potters and blacksmiths, and they conduct the ritual for the *ruh* of their dead masters and their guardian saints, which are known as *pir*. A typical example of the prayers offered in this situation is as follows:

*Pir-Ustalarmiz madad-quvvat qilsin.*

[May the guardian saint and our masters protect us].

This context is clearly distinct from the previous two occasions we have discussed, as it is clear that these masters are not always remembered as the ancestors of the hosts. Although there are some families who have engaged in pottery for centuries, there are practically no hereditary-limited crafts or jobs in the town.<sup>16</sup> One elderly blacksmith told me that they held *is chiqar* two or three times in a year for their guardians and old masters. Other potters in Rishton reported performing *is chiqar* once a month in the national pottery factory during the Soviet era. Several other elderly masters of pottery testified that they or their fathers had slaughtered a hen every month during the Soviet era, dripping its blood on the kiln, after which they had a meal with their coworkers and prayed to the *ruh* of their *pir* and their deceased masters for success in their work. In this period, almost all potters in the factory were Muslims of the town, and Russians seldom interfered with their studios, which meant that no one accused them of violating the Soviet policy of atheism by conducting this ritual in the workplace. Although it became economically more difficult for most workers to hold a big *is chiqar* after the factory was closed, many potters continue to perform it at least once every few months.

Besides these regular examples of *is chiqar* among potters in Rishton, many also report holding the ritual when troubles occur in their workplaces. For example, some potters reported that, from time to time, kilns repeatedly fail to bake properly for no apparent reason. When this happens, it is regarded as a good reason to hold *is chiqar*. Usually a hen is slaughtered and cooked at the pottery studio. A sheep is regarded as a far better offering, but people rarely sacrifice one, because they are so valuable. After the slaughter, some drops of the blood of the sacrificed animal must be dripped on the kiln. After the meal, people pray for the satisfaction of the *ruh* of their masters and of other deceased people who spent time during their lives at their studios. The following is a typical prayer in this situation:

*Shu yerda o'tganlar va ustozlarmizning ruhlari shod bo'lsin, ishimiz yursin.*

[May the *ruh* of the deceased here and our masters be satisfied and may our work go well].

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16 Peshchereva wrote that even among potters in nineteenth-century Rishton, there were many apprentices whose masters were non-relatives (Peshchereva, *Goncharnoe proizvodstvo*, pp. 344–346).

One master, who was fifty years old, told me that his grandfather used to slaughter a hen at the kiln every time he fired it, because he did so only a few times a year and therefore needed the baking to be successful each time. He also told me about one particular occasion when his grandfather performed *is chiqar*. When his grandfather placed his unbaked products on the ground to dry them, a dog chasing a cat ran over them and all of them were broken up. In response to this he said, "It seems our *pir* doesn't like my work. I must do *is chiqar*." He sacrificed a sheep and held a big *is chiqar*. The grandfather seemed to hold a deep belief in the power of the *pir*. His grandson reported him as saying, "I'm sure that the *pir* have intentionally disturbed my work, or such troubles would never occur." I have heard from several other potters that work trouble was caused when they offended the *ruh* of the *pir* and their deceased masters or when a bad spirit (*jin*) came to their studios. They believe that by reciting the prayers of *is chiqar*, the *ruh* will be soothed, or the bad spirit will be satisfied by the blood of the livestock and go away; the work should then go well again.

However, these ideas were not found to be consistent throughout the Muslim community in the town. When I mentioned to a *xo'ja* [a person who claims descent from the prophet Muhammad], who was famous for his deep Islamic knowledge, the potters' practice of feeding *jin* with blood, he laughed and denounced it as mere superstition. He said the main purpose of *is chiqar* should be to dedicate sacrifices to God and soothe the spirits of the deceased. Furthermore, some informants who are devout Muslims had some doubts that the *is chiqar* ritual itself was a genuine Islamic practice, because there is no mention of it in the major Islamic literature.

Indeed, according to the reports of my informants, some people believe that *is chiqar* can be used as a way of communicating not only with *ruh* but also with other mysterious beings. In addition to soothing *jin*, for some, *is chiqar* is a particular ceremony that is conducted by *kinnachi*, local healers, who remove the evil eye (*kinna*). It is widely believed in this region that if an individual is envied by other people and the object of widespread staring, the person may get *kinna* and have headaches. *Kinnachi* cure these headaches by patting the sufferer while reciting particular phrases and some verses from the Qur'an.<sup>17</sup> In theory, both men and women can be *kinnachi*,<sup>18</sup> but in Rishton now most of them are women and almost all of their clients are women, because most of men regard the practice as a superstition.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes, the line of *kinnachi*

17 For more details about recent *kinnachi*, see Johan Rasanayagam, "Healing with Spirits and the Formation of Muslim Selfhood in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N. S.) 12 (2006), pp. 377–393.

18 Actually two women who were in their 50s and 70s told me that there were some great male *kinnachi* in the town some decades ago.

19 However, an old *kinnachi* woman told me that the works of *kinnachi* were guaranteed to be Islamic. According to her, the grandchild of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, once suffered from a headache and asked God for the remedy. God told him to go to the *kinnachi* and to give them some money for the reward.

is hereditary, and many receive the same guardian and helper spirits as their parents had; these spirits are known as *momolar* [female spirits] or *bobolar* [male spirits]. Those who do not become *kinnachi* hereditarily are usually obliged to engage in this work after suffering from a disease without a known cause. In this case, they promise to become *kinnachi* in exchange for recovery from the disease; they then begin to cure people's headaches. However, there are adverse effects for those who cure others of the evil eye, which means that *kinnachi* have to hold *is chiqar* once every three to five years to purify themselves from the adverse effects. This ceremony is also called *surpani yangilash* [renewing the pastry fabric]. In this version of *is chiqar*, they light three candles in a bread oven and put wheat flour on a *surpa*, a pastry fabric that is used for rolling dough. Three candles are said to be the offerings to guardian spirits. Then they cook pilaf using the spinal fluid of the sacrificed animals, and invite some guests over for the meal. After the dinner, they recite the Qur'an and offer special prayers.

These examples make it clear why there has been disagreement about the Islamic legitimacy of *is chiqar*. However, when this research was conducted, these disagreements did not seem to have done much to reduce the popularity of the ritual; the practice of *is chiqar* was found to be widespread and deeply rooted among Muslims in Rishton regardless of their age and sex.

### ANALYSIS

I will now move on to analyze the *ruh* and the rituals that surround them. First, we should clarify how the people in Rishton evaluate the extent and the mechanism of *ruh*'s power on their lives, by comparing with the case of Turkistan in Kazakhstan by Privratsky with that of Kalatar in Kyrgyzstan by Yoshida. The belief that the deceased have power to intercede and assist the living is widespread and common in all three cases. In all of the locations, the general view of the believers is that a *ruh* will be content, if the participants (in most cases, its descendants) conduct the ritual regularly; the contentment of the *ruh* is directly responsible for ensuring the participants' lives would be calm and happy. Privratsky found that among the Kazakhs in Turkistan *ruh* were believed to bring peace among their descendants if they were satisfied, but they did not dare to punish their descendants, even if they were forgotten.<sup>20</sup> Yoshida reports that in northern Kyrgyzstan in the pre-Soviet era, deceased ancestors were believed to have the power to protect their descendants from harm; however, the perception of their power appears to have shifted somewhat, as now most of her informants reported that they can only contribute to the maintenance of peace.<sup>21</sup> In Rishton, *ruh* are considered to behave a little more actively; most informants believed that the *ruh* have a certain power to

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20 Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, p. 138.

21 Yoshida, *Chūō Ajia nōson*, pp. 288–290.

cause problems or protect people from accidents. For example, Peshchereva, who researched Rishton's pottery industry between 1948 and 1950, recorded that many potters were afraid that angry *ruh* could curse them.<sup>22</sup> Some potters in Rishton today also report fear of offending *ruh* because doing so can bring trouble in their work. Nonetheless, in Rishton, a *ruh* is generally thought to be gentle rather than severe. Many people report that *ruh* have come a long distance to appear in a dream, in order to warn an individual of danger. They report that, while God decides fate, danger can be avoided by performing the *ruh* ritual, which then prompts a benevolent *ruh* to pray to God for mercy. In Rishton, the evidence suggests that people do not offer prayers to *ruh* out of fear, but because they expect these prayers to bring good fortune.

How, then, do people in Rishton understand the mechanism that explains how *ruh* affect their lives through the ritual? Let us consider the explanation of *Imom* Kodirov. He explained the influence of *ruh* on people's lives in terms of the concept of *savob* or religious merit. According to him, *savob* is earned by performing good deeds, and *savob* can be saved up. If one has a significant amount of *savob*, it becomes easier for him/her to enter heaven. An individual who has *savob* is also more likely to achieve their objectives. It is believed that the recitation of the Qur'an during the *xatim-qur'on* ritual accrues a significant amount *savob*; therefore, people conduct this ritual before big events such as weddings or before beginning a new business. For many in Rishton, the living person is connected with God and *ruh* through this *savob*. The participants dedicate the *savob* of the ritual to the *ruh*, and the *ruh* in turn become intermediaries between believers and God, and intervene to ensure their happiness. We should understand this mechanism in terms illustrated in the figure below. As we can see in this figure, first, an individual conducts *ruh* rituals and dedicates the *savob* earned in these rituals to a certain *ruh*. Then, the *ruh* offers up a *duo* [prayer] to God asking that God might see fit to grant that person's wish. This wish will then be fulfilled if God sees fit to be in favor of the request and gives a *baraka* [blessing]. Thus, it is clear from this model that *ruh* themselves are not subjects of worship, but are in fact situated between God and the believer, and provide intercessional roles.

These ideas of *savob* and the intercessory role of *ruh* are not the unique views of a single individual in Rishton. They are widely shared among ordinary Muslim inhabitants in the town. For example, many craftsmen reported the belief that keeping one's skills and profits to oneself is not good for one's *savob*. Instead, a master should teach his/her skills and share some profits with apprentices so that they, in turn, will dedicate *savob* to their master in the future. People also say it is their duty to dedicate *savob* to their departed parents or masters; in fact, they often hold *is chiqar* for this purpose. Although it is expensive to conduct *xatim-qur'on*, most of the Muslim inhabitants try to perform

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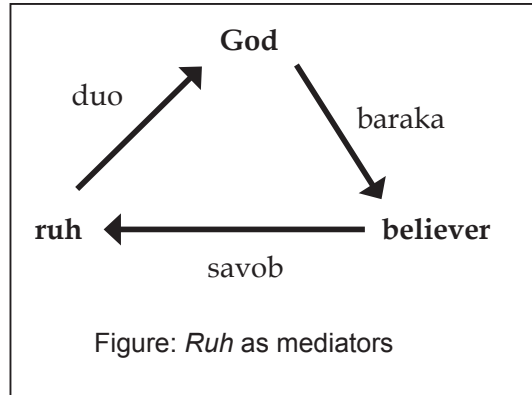
22 Peshchereva, *Goncharnoe proizvodstvo*, pp. 362–363.

it at least once a year to pray for the peace of the deceased and ask for intercession.

With this function in mind, it is important that we ascertain the extent to which this concept of *savob* and its usage prevailed in other places in Central Asia. According to Privratsky, the word “*saūap*,” which is used to refer to religious merit, is mentioned by some people in Turkistan.<sup>23</sup> In one case, it is used

in exactly the same way as it is in Rishton. In this report, a person who held a “Thursdayness” ritual offered a prayer and attached the merit generated from this prayer to a certain *ruh*, in the following prayer: “I devote this meal and its merit to the spirits of my father and mother.”<sup>24</sup> However, in his monograph, Privratsky did not explore the extent to which this word is used and had penetrated into the town very extensively. In the case of the Kalatar village, Yoshida did not record the presence of the concept of religious merit in her account. This suggests that further research will be necessary, if we are to better understand the ways in which people elucidate how *ruh* operates, and how it links with the concept of the religious merit.

As Yoshida reported in the case of the Kalatar village,<sup>25</sup> it is also generally believed among the inhabitants of Rishton that if more people join in the prayer, the probabilities of winning God’s favor are greater. This notion of accumulative effects is expressed in a well-known saying in Rishton: “many people’s prayers affect much (*ko’pning duosi ko’p*).” We can also point out that here there are some assumed hierarchies in terms of how *ruh* conduct their intercessory role. As we have examined in the case of *xatim-qur’on*, the prayers that are offered by the people who are closer to God are regarded as more effective than the prayers offered by ordinary Muslims, and the *ruh* of many famous Muslim figures are, in fact, often mentioned in the prayers. In connection with this, *Imom* Kodirov told me that a Muslim should sit turning his face toward a city rather than toward a mountain when he was making a prayer, because prominent Muslim scholars or good devotees were more likely to live in cities, and their *ruh* could assist one’s prayers. He concluded this tale with the following phrase: “we can benefit from the prayers of saints, leaders, masters, and people who are closer to God than ordinary people (*Biz avliyo, pir-ustozlar, Xudoga yaqin bandalarning duolaridan foydanar ekan*).”<sup>26</sup>



23 Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, pp. 135–136, 144, 157, 169.

24 *Ibid.*, p.135.

25 Yoshida, *Chūō Ajia nōson*, pp. 204, 230.

26 I conducted this interview at Mr. Kodirov’s house on September 27, 2004.



The concepts of propitiation and how this prompts a hierarchical effect has been the frequent subject of theological debates on Islamic legitimacy in many Muslim societies. In Uzbekistan, such discussions often appear over the issue of pilgrims (*ziyorat*) to mausoleums or shrines of saints.<sup>27</sup> However, I did not find anyone who expressed strong dissent about the validity of *ruh*'s intercession during my research in Rishton. *Ruh* rituals generally do not attract much public or official attention, and they are rarely questioned in terms of their doctrinal appropriateness in the town; this is probably because rituals concerning *ruh* are generally conducted only within a household or amongst close neighbors and kin. This is in contrast to the widespread debates prompted by pilgrimages to local mausoleums in this area, which had been a major social phenomenon even in the Soviet era.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it seems to me that the explanation of *savob* satisfactorily justifies the role of the *ruh* as intermediaries between the believer and God for most of the inhabitants, at least for now. There are, however, some doubts and different interpretations on the purpose of the *is chiqar* ritual among the population. It will be worth making a final survey of this ritual to understand these interpretive conflicts.

Among the Muslim inhabitants in Rishton, there is general agreement regarding the aim of *xatim-qur'on*; it is performed to generate *savob* and to comfort the *ruh* by reciting the Qur'an. However, there are several different interpretations of who or what *is chiqar* is directed at and how precisely it operates. Some of my informants explained *is chiqar* as a way of communicating not only with *ruh*, but also with other spirits like *jin* and *momolar*. It appears that the ritual predominantly functions as a circuit that delivers religious merit and prayers to *ruh*, but it can also provide a means of soothing and making contact with various spirits. The role of *kinnachi* and their *is chiqar* apparently resemble Turkic and Mongolian shamans and the séances that they perform throughout Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it seems clear that the origin of *is chiqar* may well be pre-Islamic, and that this origin may be distinct from the origin of *xatim-qur'on*. Privratsky also suggests the roots of *is chiqar* (*iyis shuğarū*) and *xatim-qur'on* (*qatim quran*) in Turkistan as distinct.<sup>30</sup> However, understanding the origin of these rituals does not help us understand precisely why these rituals continue to be practiced today. Indeed, many Muslims in Central Asia continue to view these rituals as decent Islamic customs handed down from

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27 David Abramson and Elyor Karimov, "Divided Faith: Trapped between State and Islam in Uzbekistan," in J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca, eds., *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, "Who Owns the Shrine? Competing Meanings and Authorities at a Pilgrimage Site in Khorezm," *Central Asian Survey* 25:3 (2006), pp. 235–250.

28 Maria Eva Subtelny, "The Cult of Holy Places: Religious Practices among Soviet Muslims," *The Middle East Journal* 43:4 (1989), pp. 593–604.

29 V. N. Basilov, *Shamanstvo u narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Moskva: Nauka, 1992).

30 Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, pp. 138–139, 145.

one generation to the next. Thus, it is essential that we understand what the participants are trying to achieve by conducting the ritual. In the case of Rishton, the ritual is conducted in a general sense to earn blessing from God, which can then help the believer achieve his wishes. In other words, for most of the inhabitants, these rituals are conducted to help convince *ruh* to intercede with God; for participants in the ritual, the origin and theological legitimacy of the communication method is irrelevant. The *is chiqar* ritual has for generations of Muslims in Rishton been regarded as a proper means of communicating with supernatural beings, including *ruh*, *jin*, *momolar* and *bobolar*, and it can be performed more casually and at a lower cost than *xatim-qur'on*. The inhabitants of the town not only pray directly to God; they also rely on *ruh* to intercede when the believer wishes to ask God for mercy. *Is chiqar* is regarded as one of the most primal means for contacting *ruh*, because its efficacy has been historically proven. I believe that this is why the ritual has continued to be regarded as so deeply important to the inhabitants of Rishton up to the present day.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has described and analyzed two *ruh* rituals – *xatim-qur'on* and *is chiqar* – in the Uzbek town of Rishton and compared them with similar rituals in two other places in Central Asia. Although the Soviet era was an oppressive time for religious practice in this region, these rituals continued to be practiced throughout those years, and they are still deeply embedded and play a central role in the lives of many Muslims in the town. These rituals depend on the notion that the living person is connected with God and *ruh* through religious merit known as *savob*. According to this ideological underpinning, the *savob* of a ritual should be dedicated to *ruh* so that *ruh* in turn can petition God to help fulfill the participant's happiness. *Ruh* can act as agents of support to help ensure peace in their descendants' lives and warn against forthcoming disasters. Clearly, *ruh* are not subjects of worship. Rather, they are situated between God and the believer, and they are able to deliver messages, wishes, and prayers from the believer to God. The *is chiqar* ritual may have originated in the pre-Islamic séance ritual, but today it is accepted as a traditional and effective way to contact various spirits. The Islamic concept of *savob* helps justify its dogmatic legitimacy.

As the research makes clear, *ruh* and the rituals concerning them have been central to the lives of sedentary Muslims as well as nomadic people. We cannot ignore these aspects of Central Asian Islam, if we are to understand the character of the faith in this region. Indeed, the concepts of *ruh* and their rituals will benefit from further comparative research. The concept of religious merit, how this concept relates to *ruh*, and how this relationship justifies the Islamic legitimacy of the rituals should be used as keys for these future comparisons. Moreover, this understanding may also be used to further understand how the growing volume of Islamic knowledge that has emerged in Central Asia after

the collapse of the Soviet Union is influencing people's understanding of the interceding role of *ruh*. This should also be explored in further research.

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