

Government Sanctioned Shrine Visitation in Turkmenistan

by

Dr. Emily Jane O'Dell

Dr. Emily Jane O'Dell
Columbia University
Department of Anthropology
1200 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10027
(201) 306-0874
ejo2114@columbia.edu

Kunya Urgench

*I have come on a pilgrimage,
I have come to greet,
My Kunya-Urgench is the history's ancient seat,
For five thousand years your kingdom lasted,
Valour and courage in battles you grasped,
Thou art the Turkmens' home, my Kunya Urgench.*

*Avicenna pondered here upon his lore,
Biruni left it for India's door,
Al Khorezmi lived here working science's raw,
Kubra defended you in spite his deadly sore,
My home, my country, my Kunya-Urgench*

*Mamun's minaret, the golden dome of thine,
Was a halo for sultans your holy shrine,
Sending your orders and letters with glory divine,
The kingdom of yours reigned in prosperous times,
The land of prosperity, my Kunya-Urgench.*

*I worship you making my bow,
The immortal glory Turkmens endowed,
Lending his troops in many rows
Courageous Jeleddin with fame bestowed,
The land of Gorogly, my Kunya-Urgench.*

*Three hundred and sixty noble kinsmen rest,
In this hold land of saints bequest,
Like Mecca for Turkmens the land of promise,
My gold, my pearls, my diamonds best,
Treasury of mine, my wealth Kunya-Urgench.*

*Measuring the zones of the Earth and Universe,
Zamabshary's ideas gave here birth,
Anushtegin's state bloomed reaching full growth,
Gutlug Temir's minaret their eyes' mirth,
Charming is your beauty, my Kunya-Urgench.*

*You have seen the remote old days,
The spirit of the ancient kingdom in thee strays,
The antique masterpiece of the human race,
Alluring every traveler's gaze,
Everlasting, eternal, my Kunya-Urgench.*

*Three hundred and sixty saints' place,
Makes your heart pure, brightens your face,
The Turkmens admire you, Saparmurat says,
The legend of Khur and Ghench come
to life with blaze,
The pride of Turkmens, my Kunya-Urgench.*

Emily Jane O'Dell

American Councils

Final Report

26 September 2011

Government Sanctioned Shrine Visitation in Turkmenistan

Shrine pilgrimage remains today, as it was in the Soviet period, the most popular and visible form of religious worship in Turkmenistan. Unlike the Soviet period, however, the government of Turkmenistan has actively and repeatedly endorsed the practice of shrine visitation. As in other Central Asian states, the political and religious authorities have publically supported the shrine pilgrimage to simultaneously promote a “national” and traditional form of Islamic practice and curb undesired Islamist trends which are portrayed as posing a potential danger to the stability of the state and the uniqueness of Turkmenistan’s national character. Due to the lack of attendance at mosques throughout Turkmenistan, shrines continue to offer a dynamic space which has the potential to offer an accessible public forum for both discussion and the practice of religious rituals in an environment that otherwise closely monitors public debate and discourse. At a time when the United States is currently promoting Sufism as an antidote to extremism throughout the world, especially in Pakistan and Egypt, it is essential that policymakers consider the example of Turkmenistan, where the political leadership has subtly and successfully promoted the veneration of local saints and shrine pilgrimages, while also insisting upon a staunch separation of mosque and state.

For this research, I visited all of the major shrines in Turkmenistan to record the rituals practiced at these shrines, interview those visiting the shrines about their pilgrimages, and highlight how shrine pilgrimage (*zjyarat*) and the beliefs underlying it play a prime role in

religious expression in Turkmenistan and create a unique and communal religious identity which is intimately tied by the authorities at the state level to the national project. Like other Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan's political authorities have sought to curb Islamist trends by promoting a vision of Islam that is concerned with the preservation of tradition. Similar to neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan's government has allowed Sufi practices such as the veneration of local saints and local shrine pilgrimages to flourish, and they have successfully contained any potential criticism of these practices by those subscribing to more fundamental forms of ideology. Turkmenistan's government has sought to keep Turkmenistan's "national" brand of Islam pure from outside influences, which are viewed as both a potential threat to the state as well as national and traditional religious customs.

From the state's own perspective, as articulated in Turkmenbashi's infamous *Rubnama*, Islam in Turkmenistan is an unusual blend of Sufi mysticism, orthodox (Sunni) Islam, and shamanistic and Zoroastrian practices. The veneration of shrines, which are generally tombs connected with Sufi saints, pre-Islamic deities, mythical personages, or tribal ancestors, continues to play a central role in the public performance of religious ritual in Turkmenistan today. Today, their folk holidays, customs, and traditions are still also infused with a number of pre-Islamic influences, such as shamanism and Zoroastrianism. Due to tight state control, or perhaps lack of interest, there has been no movement in Turkmenistan to introduce elements of *sharia* or to establish parties based on Islamic principles. The state promotion of religious beliefs and practices that are widely regarded as "national" traditions in Turkmenistan has sought to disempower Islamism by appealing to the nation's past and its cultural memory and disarm the secularly defined religious realm from being fertile ground for politicization.

It is important to note that the practice of shrine pilgrimage (*ziyarat*), which is at the heart of Islamic practice in Turkmenistan, is often criticized as being a Sufic innovation by

more fundamentalist Muslims who find rituals used to ward off the evil eye and appeal for healing or intercession from saints to be heretical. Despite the apparent and somewhat surprising lack of Islamist activity in Turkmenistan, the closed nature of society in Turkmenistan makes it challenging to know whether there is a significant presence or absence of Islamist groups.

The burial sites of Islamic saints, local rulers, learned scholars, warriors or pre-Islamic figures have always been popular sites of pilgrimage,¹ and many of them survived the Soviet period because they were thought to fall outside of the realm of “official Islam,” yet access to many of them was restricted nonetheless. During the Soviet period, all but four mosques were destroyed or turned into museums of atheism, the clergy was persecuted, religious literature was destroyed, and all Islamic courts of law, along with *waqf* holdings (Muslim religious endowments that formed the basis of clerical economic power), were liquidated. In the absence of these larger religious structures and communal sites of religious authority or instruction, local shrines became the true centers of religious life, and they have remained a prime feature of religious practice, ritual, and identity in Turkmenistan.

In the Turkmen media, and in the opinions of many Turkmen, pilgrimage (*zîyarat*) is part of a more expansive tradition and concept known as *hatîra*, which translates as “respect” or “honor,” and is used to refer to honoring and paying respect to one’s ancestors. *Zîyarat* was officially acknowledged by Turkmenistan's president Saparmîrat Niyazov (Türkmenbashi) as a dutiful expression of patriotism and an essential aspect of being Turkmen. Thus, this “sacred” practice or ritual has been promoted and framed as an

¹ Turkmen tradition also recognizes six non-Turkmen *öwlat* groups, which trace their lineage to the first caliphs of Islam. For instance, the progenitor of the *öwlat* group Ata is Gözli Ata, a Muslim saint with miraculous powers from the 14th century who came from Turkestan, a center of Sufi teaching, in order to carry his teachings into Western Turkmenistan.

integral component of Turkmen identity, and I observed many people who did not consider themselves religious at all perform gestures of sacred reverence when passing a cemetery in a car or while present at a shrine.

The former President Niyazov and the present President, Berdimuhamedov, have publically encouraged pilgrimage to the country's shrines, and even provided free accommodation for pilgrims in some circumstances. In 2009, citing fears concerning the spread of swine flu which were echoed by the religious boards of other Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan barred Muslim pilgrims from going on *hajj* to Mecca, and instead encouraged them to visit thirty-eight sacred sites across Turkmenistan, even though most of the sites had historical or cultural rather than religious significance.¹⁴ In fact, the government often forbids its citizens to make the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, but has organized in its place a tour of all the shrines in the country as an alternative. Thus, shrine pilgrimage in Turkmenistan has essentially been privileged by the state above the pilgrimage required by every Muslim to Mecca before he or she dies, for fear that pilgrims from Turkmenistan could be "corrupted" by foreign Islamic influences. The government has sent, however, sponsored a group of Turkmen pilgrims to visit the shrine of spiritual leader and poet-philosopher Magtymguly Pyragy and his father Azadi in the village of Aktokay in Iran's Golestan Province, which borders Turkmenistan. Magtymguly Pyragy (1733-97), the most revered Turkmen poet, promoted the idea of the unity and integrity of the Turkmen people. The traditional annual journey to Magtymguly's grave as a mark of respect is organized by the Turkmen government, in an event in which great thanks must be shown to President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov for making the pilgrimage possible. Therefore, Turkmenistan's government supports pilgrimages outside of the borders of the country, but generally only if the shrine is connected to Turkmen nationalism.

In recent years, many articles have appeared in state-sponsored Turkmen-language

newspapers and journals celebrating the country's tradition of pilgrimage and detailing the histories of specific shrines and the holy people to which they are dedicated. These discussions, however, often avoid the direct promotion of such practices as healing wonders by shrine custodians. It is virtually impossible, however, to purchase any reading materials on Sufism, other than the publications of Turkmenbashi which make occasional reference to various Sufi saints and shrines. I was, however, able to purchase a magazine on "Sufism" published by the Nimatullahi Order in Moscow in 2004. Nevertheless, this magazine drew the attention of a Turkmen border control agent on Uzbek border.

Turkmenistan fostered the Sufi tradition and incorporated it into the regime's larger nation-building project. In the poem quoted at the beginning of this paper, Turkmenbashi discusses the "three hundred and sixty saints" of Konya Urgench and says that Konya Urgench is "like Mecca for the Turkmen." He begins the poem that he himself has "come on a pilgrimage" to Konya Urgench to visit these holy and venerated shrines. In Turkmenbashi's book on Konya Urgench (2006), he pays homage to the "dervishes and explorers, who traveled around the world, opened the way to friendship and fraternity, by broadening societies' horizon of thought," in bringing Islam to Turkmenistan. In the *Rubnama*, Turkmenbashi pays homage to many saints from Central Asia and equates their healing breath with the fertile land of Turkmenistan, writing: "Like the breath of Gorkut Ata, Hoja Ahmet Yasawi, Bahauddin Naqshbandi, Nejmedin Kubra, Salar Baba, and Mane Baba, this, fertile and flowerful land is a remedy for thousands of ailments and problems" (Niyazov 2005: 78-9). Turkmenbashi also notes in the *Rubnama* that the vault of Kizbibi in Merv, the mausoleum of Mohammed bin Zeyd, and the mosque of Hodja Yusuf Hamadani all "embrace the national signs of Turkmen architecture" (Niyazov, 76). Thus, Sufis are celebrated for extending the reach of Islam in Central Asia, and their monuments are embraced as signs of a "national" architecture, even though they pre-date the nation by

several hundred centuries. In fact, Turkmenbashi also considers the shrine of Nejmeddin Kubra (1145-1221), which he calls the “a second Mecca for Muslims” (Niyazov, 26), to be a source of patriotism for the nation because of Kubra’s death at the hands of Mongol invaders in 1221 when he died with 360 of his followers. About his tomb, as well as the adjoining tombs of Sultan Ali, Piryar Veli. and Jamilijan, the favorite disciple of Nejmeddin Kubra, Turkmenbashi writes, “today, many centuries later, these four shrines represent a stable symbol of courage, inflexible will, unity and love for motherland of the revived Turkmen people, now passing through flight of spiritual revival and [our] cultural prime” (Niyazov, 94-5). This shrine remains immensely popular, for when I visited this shrine, I recorded a large number of pilgrims who prayed in groups of about twenty outside of the shrine before entering together.

In addition to promoting Sufism in the *Rubnama* and other literature, President Niyazov also arranged for the reconstruction of the mosque and mausoleum complexes, such as that of the twelfth-century Sufi scholar, Hoja Yusup Hamadani, one of the most important shrines Turkmenistan which even remained open during the Soviet period. Turkmenbashi called for these unique monuments, connected intimately with the history of the nation to be valued and preserved, unlike in the Soviet period when they were “undeservedly forgotten were not received proper attention” (Niyazov, 95). Thus, he set his campaign to restore these shrines in a national “duty” to “restore historical justice” and “to give the invaluable heritage of ancestors to the present and future generations of Turkmen” (Niyazov, 95). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that these sites are praised only as sites of exploitation for the national project, for Turkmenbashi also appealed to the spiritual nature of these sites in his defense and restoration of them. With regard to Kubra’s tomb, he said, “let this sacred monument serve forever our people as a stronghold of

spirituality and a symbol of unfading memory of ancestor's greatness" (Niyazov, 96).² While Turkmenbashi's writing is often ridiculed for being the musings of a meglomaniac dictator, these reductive analyses often overlook the spiritual dimension of his national project. In the *Rubnama*, he writes: "spirituality is the life's origin formula" for "all the ways begin with spirituality--if we want to have united nation we must unite them spiritually." Further, he stated that his task was "not only to preserve these monuments, but to reconstruct special atmosphere of high spirituality which bore these architectural masterpieces" (Niyazov, 95). Thus, Turkmenbashi went beyond just lauding these shrines for their national or patriotic importance, by invoking the spiritual atmosphere which gave rise to the holy people venerated at these shrines.

The *Rubnama*, which was so omnipresent under President Niyazov, holds less of an overpowering presence today in governmental discourse, yet students are still required to study it and imams are still obliged to display it in mosques. In open violation of *sharia*, or Islamic law, President Niyazov had passages from the *Rubnama* inscribed alongside passages from the Qur'an on the walls and minarets of the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in his hometown of Gypjak, which can accommodate 10,000 worshippers, yet the imam informed me that only about 80 men attend the communal Friday noon day prayer. The inscription above the main arch of this mosque reads: "*Rubnama* is a holy book, the Qur'an is Allah's book." Since coming to power in 2007, President Berdimuhamedov has gradually phased out the cult of Niyazov's quasi-spiritual guidebook for the nation, although its study remains part of the education curriculum. Just recently, President Berdimuhamedov announced his own plans to write his own sacred book for his nation.

² Turkmenbashi, while often ridiculed for being a meglomaniac dictator, was self-consciously aware of his project to use memory and the past for the sake of national pride, noting that "memory of the past is not just a stock of historical knowledge for us: it is a moral pivot, a cornerstone of our patriotism to identify ourselves as a single nation with the feeling of proper pride that is typical of a large family of peoples" (Turkmenbashi, 24).

While authorities in Turkmenistan, including the President, extol the historical and cultural significance of Sufi shrines and saints in the media and literature, Turkmenistan has not been as eager as Uzbekistan to co-opt shrines and present itself as the chief sponsor of traditions associated with the shrines. For instance, in my field-research in Uzbekistan in Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Karakalpakstan, it was abundantly clear that the government had taken control of numerous popular shrines, such as those of Zangi Ota (Tashkent), Baha ad-Din Naqshband (Bukhara), and Muhammad al-Bukhari (near Samarqand). This government presence is most visible through the numerous signs on the shrines describing the lives and miracles of each saint. While the government of Uzbekistan has gone beyond Turkmenistan in making its presence visible at the shrines, it is important to recognize that this trend of Central Asian republics bringing popular sites of pilgrimage under the reach of the state is not in any way particular to Turkmenistan and seems to be an attempt by these governments to claim these shrines as sites of national pride and a “national” brand of Islam to “sanitize” the state from other practices of Islam which are portrayed as more fundamentalist or extremist.

The shrines are most visible and popular place of religious devotion in Turkmenistan, as many of the mosques and madressas were destroyed during the Soviet period, and more recently constructed mosques are closely monitored by the state. Nevertheless, long before the Bolshevik Revolution, the Turkmen, like other nomadic peoples, preferred to pray in private rather than visit a mosque.⁵ While new religious institutions, such as religious schools and mosques, were built after the fall of the Soviet Union with support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Turkey, very few Turkmen attend prayers at the mosques, even though there is instruction offered in Arabic, Qur’an, and

hadith at some mosques.³ All “official” religious activity in Turkmenistan is overseen and monitored by the Council for Religious Affairs, which is composed of Islamic clerics and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Council also runs the Muslim Religious Board, which chooses and supervises all of the clerics in the country. Clerics who desire to become official clergy must be selected by the state and educated at official religious institutions. President Niyazov deported as many as 300 foreign Islamic teachers in 2000. In June 2001, the government closed the *medresseh* in the town of Dashoguz (sometimes spelled Tashauz), leaving only one institution in the country available to provide Islamic education--the theological faculty at the Turkmen State University in Ashgabat which has been incorporated into the history department.

While The Islamic clergy in Turkmenistan are largely under the control of the state authorities, Turkmenistan does not have a Council of Ulema (religious scholars) unlike the other Central Asian Republics. Furthermore, neither the Council on Religious Affairs nor the Grand Mufti issue fatwas. Currently, the highest ranking religious officials in Turkmenistan are: Charygeldi Seryayev, the Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs under President of Turkmenistan, Yalkap Hojagulyev, Grand Mufti of Turkmenistan, and Gurbanberdi Nursahatov, Deputy Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs. The situation in Turkmenistan with regard to religion and the clerical establishment has changed somewhat from the time of Niyazov, when all imams had to repeat an oath of loyalty to both the “fatherland” and the President after each daily prayer. In fact, in February 2000, an elderly imam, Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych, was arrested for “economic crimes” in response to comments he made for comments about Niyazov’s bizarre and grandiose religious requirements. Further, Orazgylych’s translation of the Qur’an was attacked by Turkmen

³ In 1987 there were only four functioning mosques in the Turkmen SSR, but by 1992 that number had risen to eighty-three, with another sixty-four mosques under construction.

authorities, who had all copies of the translation burned before sending him into internal exile and demolishing his home and its adjacent mosque in Ashgabat. Another notable conflict between the Mufitate and the secular authorities happened in 2002, when Turkmenistan's chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, objected to having passages from President Saparmurat Niyazov's *Rukhnama I* and *Rukhnama II*, his lengthy spiritual guides, inscribed on the walls of a new mosque alongside passages from the Qur'an. The President declared that he did not want Turkmen religious rituals to create disagreements among believers. Mufti Narullah ibn Ibadullah was arrested, convicted of plotting to kill the president, and sentenced to jail for 22 years. Today the religious clerics are even more controlled and monitored by the state, and essentially do not function on their own without state approval. The lack of an independent clergy in Turkmenistan gives more legitimacy to the power and accessibility of deceased saints at the shrines or are appealed to for healing, hope, intercession, and inspiration.

The vacuum of religious authority may not be felt profoundly in the hearts of religious practitioners, as traditionally, teachers of Sufi orders, or *ishans*, played a more influential role than the *ulema* (Muslim scholars) in Turkmenistan. Because the independent Turkmen tribes lacked Muslim *kadis* to judge cases in accordance with Islamic law, *sharia* only held influence in the sphere of family law, and was mainly just appealed to by mullahs at birth, circumcision, marriage and funeral ceremonies. Even today, knowledge about Islamic law is much lower than the knowledge of tribal customary law, or *adat*, passed down for many centuries. Without competing voices of religious authority, due to both state control and the legacy of Soviet policies against Islamic education and practice, the state sanctioned form of national Islam in Turkmenistan, which unabashedly promotes Sufi rituals and practices under the guise of national traditions, remains dominant and largely uncontested in the public sphere.

In my field research throughout Turkmenistan at a large number of shrines, I observed the continued popularity of pilgrimage by people from all sectors of society and by especially women. These holy sites continue to provide those who visit them with a sacred place in which to practice their devotion, to appeal for help (especially with regard to infertility and medical problems), to receive a spiritual blessing from the saint, and to express both their religious and national identities. These shrine complexes—some large enough to accommodate several hundred pilgrims at once—simultaneously satisfy the spiritual and cultural needs of pilgrims and serve as displays of power and pride on both the local and national levels.

At a time when the United States government is (largely clandestinely) supporting Sufism around the globe in a concerted effort to combat extremism, it may be wise to look at Turkmenistan's promotion of Sufi history and ritual. While Turkmenistan is often criticized for what it does "wrong" with regard to religion, perhaps it might be fruitful for policymakers to see what it manages to do "right" with its promotion of Sufism which falls directly in line with the current American foreign policy decision to support Sufis in unstable regions which are currently undergoing revolution. Furthermore, it is important to note that Turkmenistan's promotion of Sufi history and practices takes place within an environment of staunch secularism—a goal which also seems to line up with the current American desire for so-called secular "democracies" to rise to the fore in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Bibliography

- Algar, Hamid, 1976. "The Naqshbandi Order: A Preliminary Survey of its History and Significance," *Studia Islamica*, Vol 44.
- Ataev, T., 1989. "*Keramatli*" yerler zıyarat edilmegining sotsial-psikhologik sebäpleri ve oları yengip geçmegining yollari. Ashgabat.
- Basilov, V., 1970. *Kul't sviatykb v islame*. Moscow., 1975, O proiskhozhdenii turkmen-ata, in *Domusulmanskije verovaniia i obriady v Srednei Azii*. Moscow.
- Bennigsen, Alexandre and Broxup, Marie, 1983. *The Islamic threat to the Soviet State*. New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Bennigsen, Alexandre and Wimbush, S. Enders, 1985, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*. London, Hurst., 1986, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: a Guide*. Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press.
- Bohr, Annette. "Turkmenistan," in *Nations in Transit. Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia 2009* (New York: Freedom House, 2009).
- Demidov, Sergei, 1978. *Sufizm v Turkmenii: Evoliutsiia i perezhitki*. Ashkhabad., 1988, *Legendy i pravda o "sviatykb" mestakb*. Ashkhabad.
- DeWeese, Devin, 1994, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba, Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition.*, Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Blackwell, Carole, 2001. *Tradition and Society in Turkmenistan: Gender, Oral Culture and Song* Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Harrassowitz. Goldzhier, Ignaz, 1971, *Muslim Studies (Mubammedanische Studien)*. vol 2, edited by S.M. Stern. *Hudud al-Alam "The Regions of the World"*, 1982, (A Persian Geography 372 A.H.-982 A.D.) translated and explained by V. Minorsky, 2nd edition. London, Gibb Memorial Series.
- Khaidov, A. and Tuvakbaeva, M., 1986, "Keramatli yerler" khakinda, in "*Keramatli yerler*", *khakinda khakikat*, Ashgabat. *Materialy po istorii turkmen i Turkmenii* (tom 1), 1939, Moscow-Leningrad.
- Louw, Maria Elisabeth, 2007. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. London: Routledge.
- McChesney, Robert, 1991. *Waqf in Central Asia: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine, 1480-1889*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Poliakov, Sergei, 1992. *Everyday Islam: religion and tradition in rural Central Asia*. Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe. Tüliev, A., 1973, *Yashlar, ateizm, metbugat*, Ashgabat.
- Rashid, Ahmed, 1994. *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* Karachi: Oxford

University Press.

Strachota, Krysztof and Maciej Falkowski, 2010. *Jihad vs. The Great New Game: Paradoxes Of Militant Islamic threats In Central Asia* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, January 2010).

Vambery, Arminius, 1970. *Travels in Central Asia*. New York, Praeger.

Vasil'eva, G.P., 1954, Turkmeny-nokhurli, in *Sredneaziatskii etnograficheski, sbornik*.
Mosco Zhukovskii, V.A., 1894, *Drevnosti zakaspiiskago kraia. Razvaliny starogo merva*. St.
Petersburg.