

## Stepping onto Sacred Ground

### The *mazar* in Uyghur day-to-day life

#### Saints and holy places in Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>

Like most Turkic peoples, the vast majority of the Uyghur people are Muslim and belong to the Sunni branch of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Islam is a contributing factor in Uyghur identity and is manifested in daily life by a number of regulations on food, observation of religious holidays and life cycle celebrations.

As elsewhere in the Muslim world, the tradition of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) to the shrines of Muslim saints<sup>3</sup> is a widespread practice among the Uyghur. In

1 The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is situated in the north-western part of China and covers approximately one sixth of the nation's territory. Xinjiang is a huge area of 1.6 million square kilometres and is usually divided into three main areas: the Tarim Basin, the Dzungarian Basin and the Turpan Depression (Rudelson 1997: 17). While the Uyghur constitute the chief ethnic group in the area, the region is widely multi-ethnic in its character. Besides the dominant Uyghur and Han populations there is also a substantial population of Hui (Tungan) who are Chinese speaking Muslims. Among other important ethnic groups are the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Mongolian and Tajik (Rudelson 1997: 22–3).

In the years 2006, 2008 and 2009 I have visited approximately 20 mazar in Xinjiang, China as part of preparations for an MA thesis at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies at Stockholm University. This article builds upon these findings. I would like to express my thanks to Äsäd Sulaiman and family, Rahilä Dawut, Jun Sugawara and Devin DeWeese. I also want to mention the great help I have received from various students at Xinjiang University and my other Uyghur friends.

2 The Uyghur language belongs to the Qarluq branch of Turkic languages and bears strong similarities with Uzbek.

3 In Western sources the Islamic holy places of pilgrimage have quite often been referred to as the resting places of saints. It is perfectly in order to use this word if one is aware of the etymological nuances between a Christian saint and the Muslim counterpart. Svat Soucek points out that in Islam, unlike in Christianity, there is no canonization process and subsequently no canonization of saints (Soucek 2000: 38). Within the same discourse, Julian Baldick claims that a significant number of words have wrongly been translated into English as 'saint'. Nevertheless, the concept of *wali* 'God's friends' exists (Baldick 1989: 8).

the same way as with many peoples in Central Asia, the Uyghur also call these shrines *mazar*.<sup>4</sup> Some of these *mazars* attract pilgrims from the whole region, while other shrines have a more local flavour. Regardless of their size the *mazar* have in common that they serve the day-to-day needs of the people that are spread across the land in what John Renard so eloquently has expressed as a formation that may be looked upon as a ‘sacred geography’ (Renard 2008: 188).

One could lay out a detailed map of Islamdom, from Morocco to Malaysia and from Albania to Zanzibar, just by plotting out sites made holy and famous by friends of God.<sup>5</sup> Connected by routes that pilgrims have used over many centuries, these destinations form an expansive network of devotion, social interaction, and trade. (Renard 2008: 187.)

When setting out to explain the popularity of the *mazar* in Central Asia, a popular explanation has been the historical economic and logistical difficulties involved in performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. The *hajj* was, and is still today reserved for a limited number of people who have been able to afford it, or who have obtained the necessary permits to set out on this endeavour. However, this is just one reason out of many that can give clues to the popularity of this practice, since pilgrimage to Muslim shrines is not isolated to Central Asia. It is a strong element in other Muslim societies, too.

I would like to begin this article by addressing one important point—the frequent claim by Muslim reformers, travellers in the region and Christian missionaries,<sup>6</sup> that shrine pilgrimage would be an alien concept in ‘true’ Islam. The American scholar Devin DeWeese importantly points out that, although ‘Islamic literature’ and ‘actual practice’ through the centuries include numerous examples where shrine visitation of saints has been defended (DeWeese 2002: 317) it has been under attack by those who claim to represent what they deem to be so called ‘true’ or ‘pristine’ Islam (Renard 2008: 1–2).<sup>7</sup>

4 Arabic *mazar*, ‘place to visit’ (Harris & Dawut 2002: 102).

5 Renard uses this expression to describe both prophets and saints in the Islamic tradition.

6 Swedish missionaries were active in Xinjiang between the years 1892–1938. See Hällzon (forthcoming) about Swedish missionary views on *mazar* pilgrimage. For more information, see *På Obanade Stigar* (1917).

7 The notion of sainthood, shrine pilgrimage and veneration of saints has been challenged by Muslim reformist groups such as the Wahhabi, who wish to ‘disassociate Sufism from Islam’ (Heck 2006: 152). Wahhabism originated in Saudi Arabia with

In this context scholars such as Devin DeWeese, Marcia Hermansen (2005), and Bruce B. Privratsky (2001) have importantly pointed out that some of the Muslim reformists who preach what they deem to be ‘true Islam’ are a ‘vocal’ minority among Muslims (DeWeese 2002: 317). I argue that this situation is true for Xinjiang as well, although the region is by no means untouched by these movements (see Waite 2007).

Is there a universal Islamic doctrine? Bruce Privratsky has convincingly argued that before the advent of reformist thought in the Muslim world, those that proposed a universalistic Islamic system constituted a minority. Citing P. H. Vrijhof and Jacques Waardenburg (1979: 367) he writes that once ‘normative Sunni Islam was less known and (wide)spread than today’ (Privratsky 2001: 10). In this context Privratsky suggests that historically, ‘local Islam’ with its local fetures has been the norm rather than the exception in Muslim societies across the world (Privratsky 2001: 10). Also Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper (1987) have observed the tendency among scholars to assume that Islam is an exclusive and universalistic faith. They write that this narrow hypothesis has been preferred by ‘orientalists and theologians’ (Tapper & Tapper 1987: 70) alike, who have invested their ‘focus on the nature and explicit meanings of a presumed unity of orthodox beliefs and practices, dismissing ‘popular’ Islam as peripheral, unimportant, incorrect’ (Tapper & Tapper 1987: 70).

In foreign reports, shrine pilgrimage has frequently been described as a specifically female practice, which merely plays a marginal role in society’s daily affairs. I suggest that it is not unlikely that the exclusion of women in the mosque has enhanced this notion.<sup>8</sup> In a report from 1917 the Swedish female missionary Sigröd Högberg (1917a: 221) writes: ‘(B)y performing the prescribed prayers at home, since women are not allowed to enter into the mosque, and by praying and weeping at the saintly shrines, they believe that they are gathering a good merit in the presence of God.’<sup>9</sup>

the Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab (1703–87) (Lapidus 1988: 673).

- 8 In this context scholars such as Martin van Bruinessen have discussed the problems associated with the common notion of *ziyarat* as ‘a typically “female” practice. . .as opposed to the formal “scriptural” Islam of the mosque, which is allegedly the domain of men’ (van Bruinessen 2005: 3).
- 9 Swedish missionaries from the Swedish Covenant Church were active in Xinjiang between the years 1892–1938. See Hällzon (forthcoming) about Swedish missionary views on *mazar* pilgrimage.

The above-described situation may also be observed today. When I visited the Imam Asim Maziri in Khotan in 2008 there was a sign posted just outside the mosque, which read that women were not permitted to enter. While this only referred to the mosque, women were permitted at the adjacent *mazar* ground. Ildikó Bellér-Hann informs that in Xinjiang a traditionally male prerogative has been to pray at the mosque and to perform the communal prayers for the dead and also the traditional funeral rites at the cemetery (Bellér-Hann 2007: 135 and 2001: 15).<sup>10</sup>

Since the 'real religion' is assumed to only take place in the mosque, scholars of religion have frequently assumed that (Muslim) women's religious life must be un-Islamic or at least be 'tainted' with extra-Islamic 'superstitious' influences. Literature that deals with Islam in Central Asia has frequently described female religious practitioners as uneducated and prone to engagement in rituals which are supposedly rooted in 'pre-Islamic tradition' (e.g. healing rituals at the mazar). In Soviet ethnographic scholarship, for example, it is often claimed that many popular Muslim practices were derived from 'shamanism' or pre-Islamic practices.<sup>11</sup> A similar view is expressed in contemporary Chinese (Uyghur) scholarship. Deniz Kandiyoti and Nadira Azimova discuss one of the Soviet ethnographers G. P. Snesev:

Snesev argued that the decay of orthodox Islam had left untouched the diverse complex of religious ideas and practices that existed alongside Islam: animism, magic, the cult of ancestors, the cult of saints and their graves (*mazar*). He presented women as the 'preservers of survivals' and the bearers of a special 'female religion.' (Kandiyoti & Azimova 2004: 328.)

10 Ildikó Bellér-Hann informs that in Xinjiang a traditionally male prerogative has been to pray at the mosque and to perform the communal prayers for the dead and also the traditional funeral rites at the cemetery (Bellér-Hann 2007: 135 and 2001: 15).

11 Some of these Soviet trained scholars have published works in English. See, for example, Poliakov 1992 and Basilov 1992. In this context I believe that Bruce G. Privratsky's description of Kazak Muslim life is also accurate as a description of Muslim life among the Uyghur of Xinjiang: 'Muslim customs among the Kazaks are an integral experience of the Muslim life and a local version of the Islamic cultural synthesis, rather than as a survival of shamanism or a shamano-sufic hodge-podge. Like other "world religions," Islam is more likely to be strengthened than weakened when it is contextualized in local forms and thought processes. Without this departure from positivist, doctrinal understandings of Islam, Islam in Kazakhstan cannot be understood or even properly identified.' (Privratsky 2001: 237.)

Devin DeWeese has pointed out that the notion of pre-Islamic survivals ‘still prevails in the scholarly treatment of Central Asian religious life’ (DeWeese 2000a: 478).<sup>12</sup> As a response to the common assumption of Islam in Central Asia as a repository of a pre-Islamic past, DeWeese convincingly argues:

I believe that. . .we may properly shift our attention from the possibility of identifying pre-Islamic “survivals” to the more firmly grounded, and more instructive, process of exploring adaptations of phenomena that can be considered pre-Islamic only in the most crude and ahistorical sense; for what we see of them is their Islamized transformation, which in turn signifies not a mere “survival” but a more dynamic process that potentially entails reclassification, infusion with new content, and/or ritual invigoration, all within a conceptual framework defined and shaped by Islam and by shared expectations rooted in Muslim communal affiliation. (DeWeese 2000a: 487.)

### Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri

My first personal visit to a *mazar* took place in the summer of 2006. The place of my ‘pilgrimage’ was the cave *mazar* of Tuyuq Ghojam,<sup>13</sup> also called Ashab-ul-Kähf, located close to the oasis town of Turpan in eastern Xinjiang. Turpan is famous for its fruit production, especially seedless sweet raisins. It is also located in the second deepest depression in the world; only the Dead Sea is located further beneath sea level (Rudelson 1997: 97).

The cave at Tuyuq is intimately coupled with the story of the Seven Sleepers. In the Christian tradition this story is known as the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* and treats of seven men who fled from the Roman emperor Decius (alt. Daqianus, approx. 250 AD) whom they had opposed when he had or-

12 I was earlier somewhat influenced by this ‘school of thought’ myself—something which I now have revised. This approach has been expressed in reports by a number of Soviet trained academicians but also by Western scholars. Devin DeWeese uses the term ‘Sovietological school of thought’ not only to describe the position usually made by Soviet trained scholars like G. P. Snesarev, Sergei Demidov, Sergei P. Poliakov and others, but also by those Westerners who were inspired by their writings, for example, Alexandre Bennigsen who readily accepted their analysis of religion. See, for example, Bennigsen & Wimbusch 1985. For a critical survey, see DeWeese 2002.

13 Alt. spelling is Khojam. Part of this the description from Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri is found in Hällzon 2008. For more information on this shrine, see Dawut 2001: 201–9.

dered them to worship him and also recant their Christian faith. In their exile they took refuge in a cave where they slept for some hundred years.<sup>14</sup> The story is also found in Islam. The Qur'an reads in sura 18, verse 18:

Thou wouldst have deemed them awake, whilst they were asleep, and  
We turned them on their right and on their left sides: their dog stretch-  
ing forth his two fore-legs on the threshold (<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/quran/18.htm>).

The famous English explorer Aurel Stein<sup>15</sup> described the Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri and the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus in his book *Innermost Asia* with the following words:

Since the many Buddhist shrines and monastic retreats in the gorge were finally abandoned as a result of the victorious spread of Islam, local worship has maintained itself with equal tenacity and success by placing the well-known Muhammadan version of the legend of the 'Seven Sleepers' at the much-frequented *Mazar* of Asahab-Kahaf immediately below the mouth of the gorge (Stein 1928: 614).

When visiting the site in the year of 2006 I witnessed a number of women who were praying with the local *shäykh*. As is the case in other places in Central Asia, the *shäykh* is commonly responsible for supervising religious rituals and the maintenance of the *mazar*. He/she also works in such fields as being a teacher, helping to facilitate family problems, healing of sickness and being present at life cycle rituals such as circumcision, weddings and funerals (Lapidus 1988: 235).

The shrine at Tuyuq consists of a small *gümbüz*<sup>16</sup> with a narrow tunnel that leads to the holy cave. After receiving a blessing the women crawled through the underpass and started to perform a loud *zikr*<sup>17</sup> in the cave (Hällzon 2008:

14 For more information on this shrine and the story (stories) connected with it see Wei & Luckert 1998, Dawut 2001, and Sayrami 2007.

15 European explorers such as N. M. Przhevskii, Albert Grünwedel, Paul Pelliot, Albert von Le Coq, Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin were active in the region (Jarring 1979: 237).

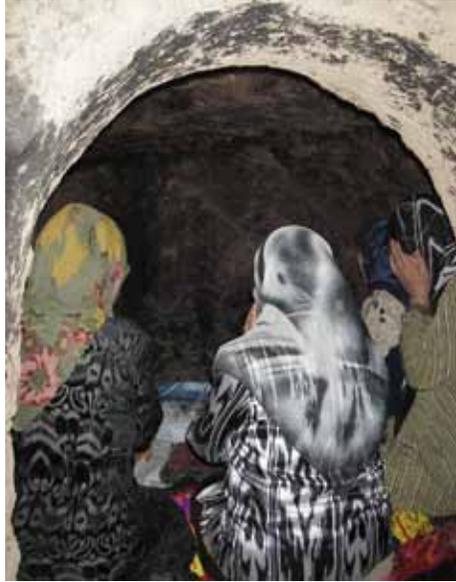
16 A domed structure often erected over the shrine.

17 *Zikr* (alt. spelling *dhikr*) is the central ritual in Sufism. Lapidus writes that 'Recitation of the Quran, *dhikr* (the remembrance of God and repetition of his name), litanies and meditation coupled with the struggle to subdue bad impulses and to suppress

232). The *zikr* is a method which includes special techniques of breathing and posture. It can be performed silently, *Zikr Jahri* and *Zikr Jali*, or out loud, *Zikr Khafi*, and sometimes even with accompaniment of musical instruments such as drums (Soucek 2000: 37; Lapidus 1988: 816). Repeating the phrase *La Ilaha illa Llah* ('There is no God but Allah') the women wagged back and forth in a rhythmical pattern (Hällzon 2008: 233).

'The method was to think of God to the exclusion of anything else, and could consist of a seemingly unending repetition of the first part of the Shahada, *La Ilaha illa Llah*, or of God's name in its many variants such as the pronoun "Huwa" ("He" in Arabic), meaning God' (Soucek 2000: 37.)

My Uyghur friends informed me that the woman in the cave who was responsible for leading the prayers and *zikr* bore the honorary title *büwi*.<sup>18</sup> *Büwi* is the Uyghur title given to women who are considered to be well versed in the Qur'an and other Islamic matters. It is also a title given to female saints. Rachel Harris and Yasin Muhpul (2002) inform that in Uyghur society the *büwi* are responsible for activities at funerals where they perform rituals reserved for the female sphere. In this context they work as mourners. Another sphere of activity pertaining to the *büwi* is 'healing and exorcism rituals', commonly known as *khätmä*, that are performed 'in people's homes.' The *büwi*



Women performing a *zikr* in the cave at Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2006.

inner vices were thought to free the deepest capacities of the soul and to prepare it for the vision of God' (Lapidus 1988: 110).

18 The counterpart to the *büwi* is found among other Central Asian nationalities. In Uzbekistan for instance she is called *otin*. Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004: 333) describe the *otin* as a woman who has a sound education in Islamic matters (including sacred written material), and who teaches and deals with issues regarding the female community. In the same way as the *büwi* the *otin* is also present at life cycle events as birth, marriage and funerals and also at religious celebrations.



Votive sweater at Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2006.

also sing at the popular *mazar* festivals. (Harris & Muhpul 2002; Harris & Dawut 2002: 108–9.)

### Making a vow

The *gümbüz* at Tuyuq is surrounded by a large number of graves of various sizes. The bigger tombs generally belong to rich and influential people in society. As a striking contrast to the dry and somewhat monotonous brown shades of colour that dominate the landscape there was upon my visit an abundance of colourful *lata-puruch* ('rag') and *tugh-äläm* ('flag') on the site. *Lata-puruch* is the name given by the Uyghur to the rags that are found lying on the ground and *tugh-äläm* are rags which are attached to a kind of long pole which is stuck into the ground (Hällzon 2008: 232).<sup>19</sup> The rags and other

19 The *tugh* found in Southern Xinjiang are somewhat different from the ones in, for example Turpan (Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri) in the eastern part of the region. For instance, in the Khotan area the sticks are decorated with stuffed animals such as sheep or chickens. In southern Xinjiang it is also common to see with flags of varying colours attached to long poles at the *mazar*. According to Jarring these big rods (*tugh*) are brought to the *mazars* to serve the purpose of keeping away *jin* (evil spirits)

objects left at the *mazar* are an expression of prayers and wishes and vows, which are expressed by the pilgrims during the *ziyarat*.<sup>20</sup> At the international workshop on *mazars* in Ürümchi 2008, my colleague, Professor Rahilä Dawut brought forward the fact that in Turpan it is quite common that women go to the *mazar* to make a vow. If the vow is a wish for a child, the parents will return to the *mazar* after the child has been born and give the *shäykh* some locally produced product such as fried fruit or cotton, and sometimes even money.<sup>21</sup>

One such *mazar* is the Anijan Ghojam Maziri, which is located in Ayding-köl, close to Turpan. It is a very popular *mazar* among Uyghur women. The shrine is coupled with the story of a woman with long hair<sup>22</sup> who came to Turpan from Arabia in the sixteenth century to engage in religious matters. Her name was Ashchan. When she died she was buried at the spot where the shrine stands. Years later the people in the area built her a tomb in order to honour her. Women come here to pray for offspring and the tradition is that the ones that are blessed return to the *mazar* to give thanks to the saint (Dawut 2001: 227–8).

(Jarring 1935: 351). Jarring explains: ‘Pilgrims consider it commendable to tear strips from their cloaks and to hang them up at the shrines. The wind makes the rags and cloths flutter and flap, and thus the evil spirits (*jin*) hovering round every grave are driven off’. (Jarring 1935: 351.)

- 20 For a similar account, see Tyson 1997. In other parts of Xinjiang, such as in the Ghulja (Ili) area, one may come across miniature cradles at the holy places. These cradles can be found both on the ground and hanging from the trees. Another common feature at *mazars*, or in their vicinity, are holy trees covered with tie-ons. In some parts of Xinjiang it is common to find small stones put together as a symbolic stove together with some weed or grass, which in turn symbolize firewood. Two stones tied together mean that one wishes to find a partner. If one makes a symbolic arrow (which is common in Yengisar and Yarkand counties of Kashgar) and puts it at the *mazar* it means that the arrow ‘will hit the heart of one’s beloved’ (Dawut 2008: 3; personal observation 2008).
- 21 Anne Betteridge writes about the vows of women in Iran. Here the obligation to fulfil the vow is annulled if the vow is not realized. In those circumstances the women may make a new vow (Betteridge 1989: 104). In a similar fashion Fatima Mernissi writes about women visiting shrines in Morocco: ‘She will give him a gift or a sacrifice only if he realizes her wishes, not before’ (Mernissi 1989: 115). When writing ‘him’ Mernissi is referring to the saint. In other cases it happens that the pilgrims ask the *shäykh* to give a name to the child. To return to the same *mazar* and give thanks to the *shäykh* is more common in the Turpan area than in Southern Xinjiang, where it hardly ever occurs (Dawut 2008).
- 22 Long hair is considered to be a sign of beauty in women in Uyghur society. Bellér-Hann (2002: 71) writes: ‘Ideally an Uighur woman should grow her hair as long as possible. Long hair symbolising femininity is traditionally associated with good luck.’

## The holy shrine

The objects in on and around the *mazar* are often perceived to possess miraculous powers. In short, the pilgrims believe that the powers of the saint have been transferred to the objects at the holy places (Dawut 2007: 152).<sup>23</sup> As we have seen in the preceding section, a widespread practice at *mazars* is to leave votive offerings such as a *lata-puruch* or *tugh-äläm*. In his work on *mazars* in Turkmenistan, David Tyson (1997: 11) reports that it is a common practice to leave an object which belongs to a sick person at the shrine. The personal belongings can be toys, pacifiers or clothes. The pilgrims hope that the sickness will leave the ill person and stay with the object instead. I suggest that it is not unreasonable that this practice can be applied to a Uyghur context as well. For example, when I visited the Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri in 2006, I found a sweater among other votive offerings which, judging from its size may have belonged to a 'sick' child.

The holiness of the *mazar* also affects food prepared there and many *mazars* include facilities where food is prepared (Tyson 1997: 14; Kehl 2004: 1).<sup>24</sup> Upon visiting Qäys Ghojam Maziri located in the oasis town of Qumul (Chin. Hami), which is a *mazar* frequented by Uyghur and Hui,<sup>25</sup> my Uyghur friends and I were invited to share polo<sup>26</sup> with the Hui pilgrims who included both women and men.

The main reason for cooking at the *mazar* is to honour the saint of the shrine. Food which is cooked at the *mazar* is holy food. It is eaten during a pilgrimage and shared with other pilgrims. This is considered to be a holy deed. The food prepared at the *mazar* also serves as a means to make bonds be-

23 Rahilä Dawut reports from the Ordikhan Padishah Mazar, where some of the pilgrims who are sick bury themselves in the sands near the site, since they believe that the ground has beneficial powers that stem from the holiness of the saint which is buried there (Dawut 2007: 152; for an account from Turkmenistan, see also Tyson 1997: 9).

24 While it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss all the important aspects of the role of food in various Uyghur rituals—both domestic and those related to *mazars*—I recommend Bellér-Hann 2001.

25 The pilgrims with whom I met at Qäys Ghojam Maziri belonged to the Muslim Hui ethnic minority. In Xinjiang the Hui are called Tungan. The Tungan share their language with the Han Chinese. What distinguishes them from the Han Chinese is their Muslim religion.

26 *Polo, pilou* or *pilaw* is a staple dish in Central Asia that has some regional differences. The main ingredients are rice, carrots, onion and mutton.

tween members of the community (Tyson 1997: 14; Dawut 2007: 152; Harris & Dawut 2002).

### Säydikhan Ghojam Maziri

For most Uyghur communities daily life in the countryside is centred on farming and animal husbandry. In the Uyghur language *dehqan* means farmer and pilgrims come to the Säydikhan Ghojam Maziri to pray every spring before planting their crops and also in autumn at harvest time (Dawut 2001: 210). It is feasible that this event works as a way to strengthen existing bonds within the community where everyone is more or less dependent on a good harvest. As we can see from the following report the tradition of visiting the *mazar* at these occasions does not appear to be limited to Xinjiang:

(A)t a large site (Ismamut Ata) in Turkmenistan's north-eastern Dashhowuz province, we witnessed a mass *hudaiyoli*<sup>27</sup> just prior to the spring (cotton) planting. As the caretaker explained, each spring on the first day of planting and each fall just prior to the harvest, members of entire state farms come on their tractors and trucks to gain the blessing of the saint in their endeavor. (Tyson 1997: 14.)

Most *mazars* are coupled with a written story (*täzkirä*) or *riwayät* (oral story) about the origin and founder of the shrine. The purpose with these stories is not only mere entertainment but the stories also serve the purpose of reinforcing communal identity and Islamic values. The *riwayät* coupled with Säydikhan Ghojam Maziri is about a man called Said Dehqan or Säydikhan (Said, the farmer) who in the same way as the local peasants was a farmer, too. Thus the farmers identify themselves with the founder of the shrine.

One time long ago there lived a man called Said Dehqan. One day when Said was in the south western part of Turpan he came across an area where springs were abundant. Although it was not very far from where he lived it was a place where no man had set foot for a very long time. *Said Dehqan* reckoned that this would be a good place for farming and returned home to his village where he collected his belongings, farming equipment and food supplies to return to the place with the springs.

27 Tyson writes that a *hudaiyoli* means 'the path of God' (Tyson 1997: 14).

Here he began to sow his crops. He worked hard and also constructed an irrigation system. In fall the harvest was plentiful and he enjoyed the fruit of his hard labor. Sometime later Said Dehqan decided that he would return to his home in the village to spread the good news about the area. He managed to persuade some people from the village to follow his example and move to the new place to engage in farm work. Gradually more and more people followed suit and a community evolved. One day Said Dehqan suddenly passed away. The people buried him on an elevated place and constructed a beautiful *gümbüz* in his honor. With the test of time the shrine became more and more popular and people came from far and near to pay their respect to Säydikhan. (Dawut 2001: 212.)

I visited this *mazar* in the company of a Uyghur friend in 2008. We spoke with a family consisting of mother, child, baby, father and mother-in-law, who had come to the *mazar* with their little baby daughter who was ill. These pilgrims appeared to be poor peasants and had arrived to the *mazar* on a small carriage pulled by a donkey. After talking for a while and explaining the cause for their visit to the *shäykh*, the following short ritual took place: Initially the *shäykh* sat silently looking into his open palms. After this he took some water from a small cup that he gently sprinkled three times on the baby girl. It is most probable that the water that the *shäykh* used came from the holy spring, close to the *mazar*. After this the *shäykh* and the pilgrims prayed together. They all looked into the open palms of their hands as if reading the holy book. After praying together the pilgrims and the *shäykh* simultaneously performed the symbolic ritual movement of cleansing over the face. A standard Muslim practice performed on the example of the prophet and also observed elsewhere. ‘Kazaks. . . open their hands automatically when an elder begins to say a blessing [e.g. at the end of a meal], and then brush their faces when the blessing is done, a habit justified on the example of the Prophet Muhammad’ (Privratsky 2001: 21–2).

During the course of the ritual the oldest woman also paid the *shäykh* a small amount of money by leaving some money on the carpet where they were seated. The *shäykh* did not take the money until after the ritual was finished. He concluded by recommending the pilgrims to go down to the adjacent spring and wash the child there.<sup>28</sup> While the ceremony was being performed the

<sup>28</sup> At the Säydikhan Ghjam Maziri there is a spring which is situated at the rear end of the *mazar* in an area full of thick vegetation. In the same fashion as at other *mazars*

old man and the boy had waited outside the walls surrounding the courtyard. Only after the *shäykh* had finished praying with the mother, mother-in-law and the baby, did the male family members enter the courtyard to join the others.

### Sögäl Ghojam Maziri

The following chapter is about a Saturday afternoon in August 2008, which I spent with a Uyghur friend at the Sögäl Ghojam Maziri. The Sögäl Ghojam Maziri is found in the neighbourhood of Üzümchilik which in contrast to the busy straight streets of downtown Turpan is a traditional Uyghur town quarter (*mähällä*), with dusty narrow streets shaded by rows of tall poplar trees. *Sögäl* means ‘wart’ in Uyghur and the pilgrims who come to this *mazar* consider the mud found here to have beneficial qualities against warts and other skin problems.

Although most *mazars* have a male *shäykh*, at this *mazar* a female *shäykh* is in charge. Whereas this is an unknown practice in southern Xinjiang (personal communication 2008) there are some *mazars*, predominantly in the eastern area of Xinjiang where this is the case.<sup>29</sup> During our visit I observed



A female *shäykh* is in charge at Sögäl Ghojam Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2008.

in this area, the pilgrims have in a symbolic gesture attached small pieces and strips of cloth in bright colours (*puruch*) to some of the trees and bushes. This *mazar* is popular among women and they often come to wash themselves in the spring water, which they believe has curing abilities. (Dawut 2001: 211; see also Tyson 1997 for a similar account from Turkmenistan).

29 Interestingly, reports from other parts of Central Asia confirm that the phenomenon with female *shäykh*s is not isolated to Turpan. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi reports from the Khorezm area of Uzbekistan that some *shäykh*s ‘some of whom are women, regard themselves as the true guardians of the site having inherited title and function by virtue of their lineage’ (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006: 244).

that the *shäykh* was not veiled but instead only carried a headscarf, which was tied rather loosely. Her clothes were simple, too.<sup>30</sup> My personal insights gave me reason to believe that the duties of the female *shäykh* are very similar to her male counterpart. She lives in an adjacent house, greets the pilgrims, performs and instructs the pilgrims (male and female) in how different rituals should be carried out.

## Entering the shrine

Before entering a short tunnel equipped with stairs that lead to the building with its typical dome (*gümbäz*) where the saint is buried, one must set down the right foot first. Here the symbolic expression ‘stepping onto sacred ground’ is valid in both a literal and practical sense. This appears to be standard Islamic practice elsewhere, too.<sup>31</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, under the entry ‘Muslim pilgrimage’ it reads: ‘Many pilgrims follow the practice of setting out from home on the right foot, a symbol of good omen and fortune. Similarly, it is auspicious to enter mosques, including the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, on the right foot and depart on the left’ (Martin 2005: 7156.)

Inside the *gümbäz* of the Sögäl Ghojam Maziri there was a tomb draped with a large piece of cloth (*yopuq*). The small room was dark and the only sunlight that was allowed to enter into the shrine came through a small opening in the ceiling. On one side of the tomb there was a place where I observed that pilgrims had lit small sticks of incense (*küjä*).<sup>32</sup> There was also a small kind of candle. In eastern Xinjiang these candles are commonly called *jin-chirag* (demon lights) and are made of a small piece of cotton that is soaked in a type of oil or other inflammable liquid and lit at the graves of the saints. It is com-

30 A similar pattern may be observed in other parts of the world. In an article called ‘The Controversial Vows of Urban Muslim Women in Iran’, Betteridge writes that while male religious authorities can be recognized by their exterior appearance (robes and turbans), female religious experts do not dress differently from ordinary people (Betteridge 1989: 103).

31 Reporting from Kazakhstan Bruce G. Privratsky writes that a ‘young pilgrim said his spiritual teacher (*ustaz*) had taught him also to greet the spirit of the saint with the *Assalam aleikum* (Peace be upon you) and to enter the shrine with the right foot first, a custom from the mosque tradition’ (Privratsky 2001: 171).

32 At the Säydikhan Ghojam Maziri my friend and I met a man who belonged to the Hui group. When he lit some incense (*küjä*) at a designated area of the *mazar* we asked him what the purpose of this was. He replied that ‘the fragrance is so sweet that it attracts the angels’ (personal communication 2008).



*Jin-chirraq* and incense at Sögäl Ghojam Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2008.

monly believed that this practice will help keep away evil spirits and protect against the ‘evil eye.’<sup>33</sup>

When I visited this *mazar* in August 2008, there were, during the course of 2–3 hours in the afternoon, three Uyghur groups of pilgrims and one group, which consisted of people belonging to the Hui nationality, who came to pray at the *mazar*. The groups included adult women, men and children. The first persons to arrive were a young mother and her young daughter, who, judging from her shaved head, must have been around five or six years old.<sup>34</sup>

They entered the domed structure where the *shäykh* invited them to pray. They all held their hands in the ‘reading position’, which is common practice among the Uyghur when praying. After praying they did the movement of cleansing over the face. The *shäykh* then faced the tomb and greeted the saint by saying ‘Assalamu-eleykum’ (‘Peace be upon you’) (Privratsky 2001: 171). After this she said ‘Bismillahir-rahmanir-rahim’ (‘In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful’) (Privratsky 2001: 124). In the next part of the ceremony the *shäykh* bent down towards a pit, which was located at the far end of the tombstone and gathered some of the beneficial mud with her hand. The mother showed the *shäykh* the position of the child’s ailment, which was located close to the ear, and the *shäykh* smeared some of the mud on the afflicted area. As the final part of this ritual she first touched the walls of the sanctuary and then the tombstone; and then she brushed against the child again as if to transfer the powers of the shrine to her. She concluded by stroking the child’s face and hair and then they engaged in prayer again. The very

33 For more info on the ‘evil eye’, see Jarring 1979–80.

34 Among the Uyghur and other Central Asian people it is common practice to shave the heads of young children so that their hair may become strong and beautiful.

last symbolic move made by the *shäykh* was to bow gently in the direction of the tombstone. This whole ritual took less than three minutes.

The second group to arrive on this Saturday was quite a large family, which consisted of a father, mother, two sons and two daughters. They were all dressed quite casually; the father wore a short sleeved white shirt while the mother had a short sleeved blouse and a skirt. It appeared to me that the mother and the daughters were more 'dressed up' than the boys, who wore casual sport-style clothing. It was interesting to see that before entering the shrine, the parents instructed the younger children how to enter with their right foot first. However, none of them removed their shoes when entering the *mazar*.

In the same fashion as the first visitors, these pilgrims also lined up in front of the tomb and waited for the *shäykh* to commence the ritual by saying 'Assalamu-eykum'. After having given this greeting to the saint, the *shäykh* collected holy mud from the round pit in the ground and smeared it on the afflicted place of the first pilgrim. Mud was also taken from the walls of the *mazar* and placed on the pilgrim's afflicted limb. The same procedure was repeated various times until everyone in the group had been tended to. All of the pilgrims prayed together. After finishing they lifted their hands to perform the symbolic ritual of cleaning over the face. The whole procedure was done quite swiftly and afterwards the pilgrims gave the *shäykh* a symbolic amount of money. They exited the *mazar* without turning their backs on the saint's tomb.

A bit later another group of people arrived in the *mazar* and a somewhat different ritual took place. This group had travelled all the way from the city of Ürümchi to visit the *mazar*. The *shäykh* went outside to greet the pilgrims, touching the hands of the women but not the men's. The men wore the traditional Uyghur skullcaps called *doppa*.<sup>35</sup> The women were modestly dressed, but not veiled.

The *shäykh* and the pilgrims proceeded to the shrine where they sat down together on the floor and engaged in prayer. One of the men took the lead; he started to recite the Qur'an in a melodic way while the others sat quietly.

35 The brimless skullcap *doppa* is the most obvious marker of Uyghur ethnic identity and is also demonstrated in state propaganda. In a picture from the book *Oasis Identities* (Rudelson 1997) two seemingly identical families are depicted on a billboard. The only way to distinguish the ethnicity of the two families consists of two facts. The Uyghur family has two children, thus reflecting the Chinese government's supposed position regarding family planning and minorities. Whereas the Chinese are only allowed to have one child, the minorities are allowed to have two children. The second difference is the fact that the Uyghur man on the picture has a *doppa* and the Chinese man does not. (Rudelson 1997: 106.)

This ceremony was significantly longer than the former ones and was different structurally, too, since it did not include any utilization of the mud.

The last group to arrive this Saturday afternoon was a group consisting of Hui pilgrims. For the first time that day I was turned down when asking the pilgrims if it would be permissible to join them. They apparently did not want me to take pictures either. Similarly to the other pilgrims their visit was short. They entered the shrine and approximately ten minutes later they left the area.

## Islam and healing

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the *mazar* serves as a venue for ‘healing.’ Many reports on *mazars* also note the pre-dominance of women. I suggest that this might have led to the widespread and quite general assumption that women are interested in healing while men are not.<sup>36</sup> In a report from 1917 the Swedish missionary Sigrid Högberg writes:

The saintly shrines are popular among women. The infertile pray there that they may receive the fruit of life, the rejected pray that their men shall love them again; and those who do not have a husband pray that they will be provided with one. (Högberg 1917a: 221; see also Gustafsson 1917: 227–8.)

The notion that women are only interested in, or even worse, confined to a ‘superstitious’ domain (the *mazar* and the home) where healing takes a central position *vis-à-vis* the ‘real’ theological dimensions practiced by men (at the mosque) is quite common. It has been implied that ‘real religiosity’ is not so overtly concerned with issues dealing with health and childbearing. Moreover, within the context of categorization of ‘orthodox’ and ‘popular’ religion, scholars have often suggested that the above-described issues coupled with healing should be separated from ‘real religious motives’ (DeWeese 2002: 319). This way of looking upon things has been questioned by Devin DeWeese who argues that:

The basic language of distinguishing ‘religious’ from ‘non-religious’ motives for the performance of religious rites obviously begs the question

36 For a discussion, see Sered 1994: 118.

of what a religious motive is. Is it one based somehow in theology, for example in hope of heaven or fear of hell? Is it one rooted in altruism or selflessness? Is it a motive that is solely 'spiritual' in its understanding? If so, then we have implicitly cut off the social component that was supposedly our focus. If we so etherealize religiosity that we exclude a desire for health, economic success, fertility, or social harmony and camaraderie from the range of motivations that can be labeled 'religious', we have demolished or devalued much of what makes religious practice interesting throughout the world. (DeWeese 2002: 319.)

In consonance with the notions, described above, of 'un-Islamic' practices, some contemporary Muslim voices have expressed the opinion that some techniques of healing would be alien to Islam. As a response to this Marcia Hermansen points out in a paper about Islamic healing in America (2005: 408) the wide range of healing techniques used by Muslim spiritual healers who, according to her, range from 'Sufi *pirs*,<sup>37</sup> traditional religious scholars, or practitioners of occult arts (*amils*)' and some of these healers 'proffer types of spells such as amulets or prayers' (Hermansen 2005: 411). She explains also that 'mainstream Islamic practices' such as the *zīkr* or reciting of the *Qur'an* are widely utilized by Muslims as a healing method (Hermansen 2005: 411).<sup>38</sup>

In the Uyghur scholar Rahilä Dawut's book, *Uyghur Mazarliri* (Uyghur Mazars) there is an illustration of this. The caption coupled with the photo reads: *Mazarda kesälgä demidä qiliwatqan shäykh* ('The *shäykh* of the *mazar* breathing on a sick person') (Dawut 2001: 195).

The practice of healing by breathing on the patient appears to be a standard practice among Muslims elsewhere too. Bruce G. Privratsky writing on Islam among the neighbouring Kazakh people says:

[T]he technique of healing by reciting the Quran and breathing on the patient is a standard practice of Muslim folk healers everywhere, as is the Islamic version of the humoral theory of diet and disease with which it is wedded in practice (Privratsky 2001: 243-4).

37 *Pir* is a title commonly given to Sufi leaders.

38 Associating the *zīkr* with health is also confirmed in a report by Harris and Dawut where an informant claimed that the reason for his grandfather reaching the age of 120 years was because he had practiced the *zīkr* every week of his life (Harris & Dawut 2002: 108).

Marcia Hermansen points out that there are also other forms of belief which are often classified as ‘folk belief’, but which may be legitimate—as in the case of belief in the evil eye, which gains legitimacy by virtue of the fact that it is mentioned in the prophetic tradition. Likewise, she brings attention to chapter 113 of the Qur’an, which ‘mentions the evil of women who blow on knots (cast spells)’ (Hermansen 2005: 411).

[T]he prophet Muhammad recommended certain phrases or litanies to counter this. Therefore, many of these practices have a religious legitimacy, although local traditions certainly embellish them. . . . [Therefore it] is difficult to characterize the techniques of spiritual healers as ‘folk’ as opposed to ‘official’, although some of their beliefs and practices may be criticized by contemporary Islamic literalists. (Hermansen 2005: 411).

### ***Mazar säylisi***

The pilgrims from Ürümchi who visited the Sögäl Ghojam Maziri informed us that they were on a pilgrimage tour. That basically meant that they were on a round trip visiting many *mazars* in the area including the shrine of Sögäl Ghojam. The tradition of visiting multiple *mazars* in sequence is quite common among Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This tradition is in some cases considered as being equally important as performing the *hajj* (personal information 2008). This does not, however, have to be understood as a negation of the importance of the *hajj*. Although the following quote by Privratsky refers to the Kazak, I propose that the same is true for the Uyghur people as well: ‘When the Kazaks call a local pilgrimage site a second Mecca, it is an identification of the place with Mecca, and of *ziyarat* with the *hajj*, not a competing claim’ (Privratsky 2001: 244).

I have learned that, as a consequence of tougher official policies regarding religion, it is rather common to use the pretext of going on vacation when one is, in fact, actually off to visit *mazars* (Ürümchi Workshop 2008). Visitation to *mazars* can be performed quickly, as described above, or it may go on for days, or for months. Sometimes the pilgrims actually have travelled a long way to see their saint, as in the case of the people from Ürümchi, while other visits are short and merry and seem only to substitute a short break in daily routine. Such short visits are called *mazar tawabiti* (worship) (Harris & Dawut 2002: 102). The Uyghur scholar Rahilä Dawut has noted that some of the smaller *mazars* have no set date for pilgrimage (while other *mazars* have

fixed periods for visitation that often coincide with the saint's death). Some of these annual events are known as *mazar* festivals (*mazar säylisi*; pilgrimage) and attract tens of thousands of people simultaneously. (Dawut 2007: 151; Harris & Dawut 2002: 102.) One example is the annual Ordikhan Mazar festival that takes place in Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar.<sup>39</sup> It is an event which includes participation by both young and old men and women. The people all have very different motives for performing the *ziyarat*: 'Old men come to pray; young people come to the Ordam to have fun and look for potential partners; women come to make a wish to the saint for a child' (Dawut 2007: 152).

These religious festivals serve both as *mazar* and bazaars and function as important focal points in a number of ways. Dawut reports that at the festivals food 'stalls are set up' (Dawut 2007: 153) and a wide range of activities such as cock-fights, wrestling, tightrope walking, 'goat tussling' and music are performed (Dawut 2007: 152–3).<sup>40</sup> The *mazar* festivals (*mazar säylisi*) serve a multitude of purposes. Importantly they serve as meeting points for people both on the communal and personal level and people that normally do not have a chance or cannot meet due to geographical distance or cultural taboos concerning, for example, courting get an opportunity to exchange contacts here.<sup>41</sup> Young people are attracted to the *mazar* because it is a place where they can identify a potential partner to marry. Dawut points out that the festivals thus serve as 'breathing spots' in 'the monotonous lives of the peasants' (Dawut 2007: 153).

In a big city such as Ürümchi, men and women can be friends and meet in a relatively unrestricted manner. However, in the countryside casual encounters between persons of the opposite sex, unless they are married to each other or from the same family, is something rare. The life of women is centred

39 The Ordikhan Padishah Mazar is located in a remote place in the desert. Despite this, historically the *mazar* has attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims annually. This has been especially evident during the *mazar* festival, since during the rest of the year the area tends to be quite isolated (Dawut 2007: 152–3). For more information, see Gunnar Jarring: *The Ordam-Padishah System of Eastern Turkistan Shrines* (1935) and *Åter till Kashgar* (1979). Purportedly this is the resting-place of Ali Arslan Khan who was the grandson of the Uyghurs' first Muslim king, Satuq Bughra Khan (Dawut 2007: 150).

40 For a report on aspects of music, ritual and *mazars* see also Harris & Dawut 2002.

41 The festive atmosphere at the Ordam bears resemblance to shrine visitation in other parts of the Muslim world. Mernissi tells us that in Morocco young men go to the shrine in summer for picnics. Boys and girls dress up, old people go to pray, old and young generations intermingle. (Mernissi 1989: 112–14.)

on family duties often performed together with other women. However, at the annual *mazar* festivals people find a temporary break from day to day restrictions and from expectations on the gender issue. 'Arguably the festivals eliminate occupational, gender, age, and regional differences, and improve relationships between people of different regions, promoting unity, understanding and cultural exchange' (Dawut 2007: 153). Here we can discern how a broad term application of the well-known 'Turnerian' term *communitas* could be applied (Turner 1969: 131–65). The *mazar* festivals serve not only as places where a transformation of everyday routine takes place but also a place where one can envision a sense of temporary 'equality'.

### The *mazar* festivals and economy

Dawut highlights yet another characteristic of the *mazar* festivals, which also affects whole communities: economy. In many cases the *mazars* are, mostly due to inaccessibility, only frequented occasionally during the rest of the year. Therefore, the festivals serve as an appreciated break in daily routine and also as an opportunity to gain some extra money. (Dawut 2007: 153.) References from other parts of the Muslim world display similarities with the Uyghur *mazars*.

Literature on the subject shows that shrine complexes throughout the Islamic world may serve as, especially in rural areas, localized, communally run entities to which other religious institutions such as mosques, etc. are often attached. Pilgrimage to the sites brings with it then an impetus for religious communication and many times social and economic exchange (McChesney 1991, cited in Tyson 1997).

Furthermore, the specific local nature of the site acts to contribute to the creation or at least definition of communal identity and its concomitant boundaries (Tyson 1997: 2).

In some places, such as the Imam Asim Maziri in Khotan, which is a *mazar* situated on the edge of the Taklimakan Desert, the local government has seen the potential economic benefits of the *mazar* festivities. In 1993 the local government spent 480,000 Yuan, which were used for an eight kilometres long road leading from Jiya Township to the Imam Asim Maziri. Money was also allocated to construct a water tower at the site. Today an estimated 20,000

persons visit the festival each year (Dawut 2007: 154). A similar supportive attitude towards 'religious tourism' as in Khotan can be observed in the oasis-town of Qumul (Hami in Chinese) in eastern Xinjiang. When visiting the Qäys Ghojam Maziri<sup>42</sup> in the summer of 2008, I observed that there was extensive construction work going on close to the *mazar* entrance. The *shäykh* appeared to be, overall, positively supportive of this measure, which most possibly would make the shrine more accessible.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the above-described supportive measures, the Ordam Padishah Mazar festival, which is the biggest shrine festival in Xinjiang, has been banned since the year 1997, which has led to the deterioration of the shrine. An ambiguous set of attitudes can be detected in this respect. Some local governments support shrine pilgrimage because of the economical benefits while others have closed local shrines due to the fear of rising religious extremism in the region (Dawut 2007: 154). Here we see that when it comes to shrine pilgrimage it is in some cases officially perceived as a feature of locally approved 'folk traditions' (Harris & Dawut 2002: 115) and thus allowed and even supported, as is the case with the Imam Asim Maziri festival. This situation of double standards is not limited to the festivals. In many parts of Xinjiang popular *mazars* such as Satuq Bughra Khan Maziri,<sup>44</sup> Apaq Khoja Maziri (Häzrät-i

42 Qäys Ghojam Maziri is located in the southwest part of the oasis town of Qumul. The local people simply call the shrine 'Ghojam Mazar'. This *mazar* is popular among both Uyghur and Hui pilgrims.

43 The Qäys Ghojam Maziri appears to be a part of the city of Qumul's tourist development strategy since it, together with the Altunluq (the tombs of the Uyghur kings), was included in a tourist guide provided at the hotel I was staying at 2008. As an attempt to illuminate the government's 'support' of Uyghur 'cultural life' some well chosen elements of Uyghur culture have been highlighted as national heritage (when they are not contradicting state policies). Among important historical Uyghur figures who have received official support can be mentioned Uyghur historic scholars such as Mahmud Kashgari (in Opal) and Yussup Khass Hajip (in Kashgar) and musicians such as Amannisakhan (in Yarkand) and even Islamic figures such as Apaq Khoja (in Kashgar). This attempt to support 'cultural tourism' can also be observed in Turpan (Imin Wang, the Mazar Aldi Village in Tuyuq, Qäys Ghojam Maziri and Altunluq in Qumul and so on). At these *mazars* it is nowadays often necessary to buy a ticket to get inside, a fee which often is set at a price which exceeds what the common pilgrim can afford (Dawut 2007: 157). For more information on the impact of religious tourism and mazars, see Dawut 2007.

44 Satuq Bughra Khan is portrayed as the first Uyghur King to accept Islam and subsequently make it into state religion. Jarring writes that that Satuq Bughra Khan was born in the year 944. His conversion took place when he was twelve years old (Jarring 1979: 133). See also Dawut 2001: 1–6.

Apaq),<sup>45</sup> Mahmud Kashgari Maziri,<sup>46</sup> Yusup Khass Hajip Maziri<sup>47</sup> and the *mazar* of Amannisakhan<sup>48</sup> have become the locus of the tourist industry. However, in other places in Xinjiang, visitation to *mazars* has been placed within the category of ‘dangerous’ religious practice and thus condemned (Harris & Dawut 2002: 115). Harris and Dawut have importantly pointed out that ‘the fate of the mazar tradition has rested to a certain extent on definitions’ (2002: 113). Referring to an article by Bellér-Hann (2001: 9), Harris and Dawut write about the ‘problematic nature of many popular ritual practices that fall between classification as “feudal superstition” and the politically neutral category of local “folk customs”’ in China (Harris & Dawut 2002: 113).

Official Chinese scholarship distinguishes some manifestations of local traditions (*örp-adät*) from religious practices. It defines the former as tolerable and even positive, since they contribute to the making of a colourful ethnic group within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), but denounces many religious practices as backward and negative, intimately connected to the legacy of feudalism which communism seeks to overcome (Bellér-Hann 2001: 9.)

- 45 Apaq Khoja’s real name was Hidayetulla Apaq Khoja and according to Jarring the name Apaq Khoja can be translated as ‘world emperor’ (Jarring 1979: 203). See also Dawut (2007) for a contemporary account. The Swedish scholar Gunnar Jarring writes that Apaq Khoja (d. 1694) was an administrative and religious leader and that Apaq Khoja was the first of the Sufi leaders commonly called *khojas* who ruled the region called Altä shähär (six cities). These cities included Kashgar, Yarkand, Kucha, Aqsu, Khotan and Uch Turpan.
- 46 Mahmud Kashgari is immortalized by his important contribution to world literature *Diwan Lughat et-Turk*, which is a compilation (dictionary) of Turkic dialects that he completed in the year 1077.
- 47 Yusup Khass Hajip is the eminent author of *Qutadgu Bilig* (‘The Wisdom of Felicity’) which is a didactic work written in verse (Soucek 2000: 92). Professor Äsäd Sulaiman has informed me that *Qutadgu Bilig* also can be understood as ‘The Wisdom of Royal Knowledge’ (personal communication 2009). See also Dawut 2001: 15–21.
- 48 The town of Yarkand is home to the tomb of Amannisakhan (1523–57), who is regarded as the mother of the Uyghur Twelve Muqam music tradition—a suite of music, which has been officially promoted as cultural legacy of the Uyghurs. She is enormously revered by the Uyghur people. The story goes that she was the daughter of a forester and was discovered by the second sultan of the Yarkand Dynasty, Sultan Abdureshid Khan (1533–60) when he was out hunting (Dawut 2001: 73). At this stage she was only thirteen years old. The Sultan fell in love with her singing and they got married. Unfortunately, Amannisa Khan died at young age when delivering a baby and only lived to be 34 years old (Harris & Muhpul 2002; Chun Shan 2006; see also Dawut 2001: 73; Haji 1990: 134).

Edmund Waite writes that starting in April 1996 with the ‘Strike Hard’ campaign the official attitude towards religion and religious movements in Xinjiang has become more observant than ever. The Strike Hard campaign was directed towards what was looked upon as ‘criminal and violent activity,’ where a direct connection could be observed between the fight against separatism in the area ‘which in turn was linked to unlawful religious activities’ (Waite 2007: 168, citing Dillon 2004).

The explanation given to these hard line policies has been the fight against Islamic violent groups that in Xinjiang are usually catch-termed *Wahhabi*.<sup>49</sup> Harris and Dawut (2002: 115) point out the irony in this, given that these religious groups strongly oppose pilgrimage to *mazars* as well as other religious practices that are commonly practiced by most Uyghur people. Thus there is good reason to question some of the local authorities’ knowledge of basic Uyghur religious practice (Harris & Dawut 2002: 115; Dawut 2007: 156). As Rahilä Dawut points out there is thus a ‘conflict between the government’s drive for eradicating “backwardness” and the desire to preserve and develop traditional practices as tourist resources’ (Dawut 2007: 161).

## Kuhmarim, Khotan

As mentioned earlier in this article, some *mazars* are visited all year, while others have fixed times of visitation. Such a *mazar* is Kuhmarim Maziri,<sup>50</sup> which is located in a scenic area on a mountainside overlooking the Qaraqash River. In late August 2009 I visited this *mazar*.<sup>51</sup> In Ürümqi a friend had

49 Following the tough policies of the Cultural Revolution a new liberal policy towards minorities was initiated in 1978. This meant more religious, linguistic and economic freedom for the minorities. In the case of Xinjiang the immediate result of this new policy was the opening of cross border trade, construction of mosques and production of literature and music. However, in the 1990s this liberal policy on the part of the government in Beijing was gradually abandoned (Waite 2007: 167–8). Following the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11 and America’s subsequent ‘War On Terror’ the Uyghur have been increasingly caught between official rhetoric and China’s own ‘war on terror’, and also in the Western media, where they have figured in the coverage of Guantanamo (Bellér-Hann 2007: 132).

50 Among the Western travellers writing on this shrine are F. Grenard, Aurel Stein and C. G. Mannerheim (Shinmen 2008). Kuhmarim Mazar has also been described in the works of contemporary Uyghur scholars. See Dawut 2001: 123 and Sulaiman 2006: 52.

51 Only two months had passed since the tragic outbreak of violence in Ürümqi on the 5th of July 2009. Initially I was going to attend a conference in Ürümqi organized by



Pilgrims leaving Kuhmarim Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2009.

told me that it was time for *mazar säylisi* in the Khotan region, so I decided to go there. In Khotan I met up with a young Uyghur student who happened to have *mazars* as his special research topic. I could not have found a better guide.

It was early morning when my Uyghur friend and I set out in a taxi that would bring us to the vicinity of the *mazar*. We reached the banks of the Qaraqash River. This was in a sense also the starting point of our pilgrimage, since it was from here that we would proceed on foot. The sun beat down from above and it was very hot. We soon abandoned the coolness of the life-giving river and turned onto a dirt road, which apparently was leading to the *mazar*. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but sand, gravel and dry rocks surrounding us—not a person in sight. We walked on for what appeared to be quite a long period of time, but suddenly, out of the blue, a horse and carriage with pilgrims approached us, and then another. We halted a solitary coachman and asked him if he would bring us to the *mazar*. He agreed to do so for a symbolic exchange of money and we hopped on. The pilgrims come from villages all over the Khotan area visit the Kuhmarim *mazar* in July and

the Xinjiang University and Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. However, due to the tense situation in Ürümqi, the conference was cancelled. I was hesitant whether or not I should go, but finally decided to proceed with my journey.

August (personal communication 2009). The visits preferably take place on Thursdays.<sup>52</sup> Bruce G. Privratsky informs that within ‘Muslim societies Friday begins on Thursday evening, as in the Jewish Sabbath tradition’ (Privratsky 2001: 130).<sup>53</sup> ‘Cross-cultural patterns of Muslim piety suggest that the source of “Thursdayness” is the Sufi tradition that Thursday is a propitious day for visits to the shrines of saints’ (Privratsky 2001: 130).

Far in the distance the shrine gradually became visible. When we arrived we understood that we were not alone. We were greeted by the *shäykh* who was busy reciting the Qur’an. He agreed to read parts of the second Sura of the Qur’an, also called *bakarah*, for us. Besides the *shäykh* there were some women and children who had arrived—an *aqsaqal*<sup>54</sup> was reciting the Qur’an, too. Long sticks (*tugh*) adorned the shrine. On some of the *tugh* earlier pilgrims had attached rags and pieces of cloth while some of the other poles had been decorated with a stuffed sheep (*tulum*).<sup>55</sup> I observed some small stones piled up close to the tomb and was informed by my friend that the pilgrims leave these stones as *ex-votos*. They symbolize the pilgrim’s desire to conceive or have a stable family.<sup>56</sup> We took a look around the *mazar* complex, which, besides the tomb included a place of retreat called *etikapkhana*,<sup>57</sup> a mosque

- 52 Prof. Āsād Sulaiman has provided me with the interesting information that the preference for pilgrimage on Thursdays stems from local Islamic traditions where the pilgrims believe that Friday starts after lunchtime on Thursday. This originates in the common opinion that Friday is ended after the communal prayers have been performed.
- 53 In the book *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*, Bruce G. Privratsky discusses the interesting concept of Thursdayness (*Kaz. peyshenbilik*) within the Kazakh religious tradition. Due to the limits of this article I will not elaborate on this further. For more information, see Privratsky 2001 and for a Uyghur perspective, see Bellér-Hann 2001.
- 54 *Aqsaqal* means an old ‘wise’ man. In the Uyghur language *aq* means white while *saqal* means beard, that is, white-beard. This is a common title given to elderly people who are to be treated with respect.
- 55 The sheep had been sacrificed and then stuffed with hay. This custom is a peculiarity for the Khotan area and is not found, for example, in Turpan or Qumul.
- 56 The desire to have a stable family is expressed by both male and female pilgrims. Uyghur friends have informed me that the pilgrims do not make vows in Khotan in the way they do in Turpan (personal communication 2009).
- 57 Devin DeWeese has informed me that the word *etikapkhana* ‘reflects the Arabic term *i’tikaf*, meaning seclusion or retreat; elsewhere it is more often called *khalvat-khana*, with the same meaning (personal communication 2010). It is a place of retreat for an assigned number of days. The pilgrim stays in this small building for at least three days to engage in the reading of the Qur’an and performance of the *zīkr*. The Swedish missionary David Gustafsson reports in the book *På Obanade Stigar* (1917) that ‘The



Tugh-Kuhmarim Maziri. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2009.

which formerly was used as a *khaniqa*,<sup>58</sup> the *shäykh*'s personal dwellings and a rather big cave with a narrow entrance which is reached by climbing up a ladder.

The name Kuhmarim (Snake mountain) stems from two separate words, which both are of Persian origin. *Kuh* means mountain while *mar* means snake (Dawut 2001: 123). According to C. G. Mannerheim's accounts a person called Khaji Kohmeri<sup>59</sup> who was pursued by enemies managed to find refuge in a cave which opened miraculously for him. The entrance to the cave at this point was so 'narrow that it was only in the shape of a serpent that he managed to enter' (Mannerheim 1940: 113). Mannerheim writes that the black colour he observed in the ceiling may be explained by the enemies' attempts to smoke Khaji Kohmeri out of the cave. Another interesting passage

most recommended for those who wish to receive help from the saints is to stay at the saintly shrines for a period of forty days. This period is dedicated for the reading of the Qur'an and other devotions.' (Gustafsson 1917: 228, my translation.)

58 *Khaniqa* is a Sufi lodge. I have learned that nowadays the Sufis in Khotan rarely meet at these places for their gatherings but that they tend to meet in private homes instead. For a historic missionary description of rituals at a *Khaniqa*, see Högberg 1917b.

59 The spelling in the original text is Khadsji Kohmeri (Mannerheim 1940: 113).

in Mannerheim's account is that he states that the people believe that Khaji Kohmeri dwells in the cave and that he reveals himself to the pilgrims who pray hard enough Mannerheim (1940: 113). A parallel in this context is the scholar Xijuan Zhou who in an article reports on a visit to the Tuyuq Ghojam Maziri where the custodian of the *mazar* told her that if one only believes strongly enough, it is possible to see the faces of the 'sleepers' on the walls of the cave (Zhou 2008).

During the short period of time we had been at the Kuhmarim Maziri more and more pilgrims arrived. Outside the cave a number of women had gathered. Among them there was a *büwi* woman with whom we talked. She kindly agreed that they would sing some religious songs for us.

The *büwi* woman sat down with some other women and started by performing a *hekmät*. A *hekmät* is a recitation of *Dīvān-i-hikmat*, which is poetry that usually is attributed to the Sufi master Ahmad Yasavi.<sup>60</sup> After having recited the *hekmät* she proceeded with a *hālqä*. The *hālqä* is recitation of various kinds of poetry including *Dīvān-i-hikmat*, which are performed in different musical styles. Although it was the month of Ramadan when we visited the *mazar*, the *büwi* woman made an exception and sang the *mäwlut* for us. The *Mäwlut Näbi* is normally sung to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mäwlut*), which is celebrated on the twelfth day of the third month of the Islamic calendar (personal communication 2009).<sup>61</sup> The other women joined

60 This common approach has been challenged by Prof. Devin DeWeese who writes the following regarding 'the mystical poetry known as the *Dīvān-i-hikmat*. At best, it is wrongly put forth as the central literary monument of the Yasavi tradition, to the virtual exclusion, which in any case remains largely unexplored (here I would add that the ascription of the *Dīvān-i-hikmat* to Ahmad Yasavi is almost certainly wrong in any meaningful historical or literary sense.' (DeWeese 2000b: 371.) For a deep discussion regarding Ahmad Yasavi, see DeWeese 2006 and 2000b.

61 Among the Uyghur this month is also called *Räbiyäläwwäl eyi*. A contemporary report tells us that a main activity performed during this event is to gather money for charity (Rakhman, Hämdulla & Khoshtar 2008: 182–3). This is also confirmed in historical sources. In a critical Swedish missionary report from 1917, which deals with the *waqf* institution the missionary Gustaf Ahlbert expresses his personal opinion. He claims that the original purpose of the *waqf* has been lost and the only time when the money is set aside for something that seems to resemble the original thought which was charity and the expansion of the faith is once a year when the prophet's birthday is celebrated. At this event the revenue from the *waqf* is used for a big feast where the Qur'an is read for the assembled (Ahlbert 1917: 235). He describes the event in the following manner: 'The whole district's population, both rich and poor is present. All of them are served food. The rich get it on a plate while the poor are served their food on the corner of their coat. Besides this, the lecturers receive some money for their trouble.' (Ahlbert 1917: 234.)



Women who have gathered outside the cave at Kuhmarim Maziri. Note the *büwi* woman on the far right. Photo © Patrick Hällzon 2009.

her with their voices in what to me appeared to be a very advanced rhythmic-cooperation and at moments they got very emotional and started to weep. The ethno-musicologist Rachel Harris has written considerably on Uyghur music including ritual music. In the following description from a meeting consisting of Sufi men I find that the commonalities with the female gathering described above are striking.

The Uyghur Sufi lodges maintain a unique musical tradition in their large-scale *zikr* rituals. The practice of *zikr*, found amongst Sufis across Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey, refers to the recitation of the names of Allah and Islamic saints. . . The ritual song hikmet is sung in a free metered falsetto, with a plangent melody. As the names and deeds of the saints, in this tradition the founder of the lodge and the subsequent generations of his disciples, are recited, the men attending the ritual weep. (Harris & Muhpul 2002.)<sup>62</sup>

62 In Uyghur society there are certain forms of behaviour which are normally looked upon as feminine. One example is weeping. Men in Uyghur society are not supposed to cry openly howsoever difficult the problem might be. A man who cries is perceived as weak and crying is associated with female behaviour. However, at the *mazar* crying is perfectly permissible and sometimes even encouraged (personal

When we were about to leave the *mazar* quite a number of pilgrims—men, women and children—young and old had already arrived to the *mazar*. Some had arrived by foot while others used donkey carts, motorcycles and cars. It appeared to me that they were quite many. I was, however, informed that this was indeed a rather moderate number of visitors compared to earlier years and by no means anywhere near the amount of visitors reported from elsewhere.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

My point of departure has been to try to describe the *ziyarat* as an integral part of Muslim life in the region.

The *mazar* serves as an important reference point in the day-to-day life of the Uyghur people. Regardless of whether it is a local place of worship or a shrine that attracts pilgrims from a larger geographical area, it is a breathing space where one may escape the hardships of everyday life. At the *mazar* the people have a saint with whom they can identify and be inspired.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper the prevailing picture often painted in scholarship of *mazar* pilgrimage has been that of a specifically feminine practice with limited and/or minor significance to society as a whole. I argue that both of these suppositions are incorrect. Although it goes without saying that Uyghur society has strict gender roles which also include the religious sphere, I would like to question the simple dichotomous assumption of male religious life as being important to society while the female counterpart would be of unimportance.

In addition, to simply suppose that *mazar* pilgrimage is uninteresting for men since they participate in mosque centred activities is to miss out on crucial aspects of Uyghur and Central Asian Muslim religious life. While I do recognize that women's religious life (around the world) is often focused on healing and domestic issues, I reject the assumption that men would be totally disinterested in these aspects, or that it would be considered alien to Islam by the wider community. Some religious activities are centred in and around

communication 2008; Ürümchi Workshop 2008; Harris & Dawut 2002: 106; Arabov 2004: 346). Conversely, there are examples of female reversals of behaviour at the *mazar* (Zhou 2008; Harris & Dawut 2002: 112).

63 A possible explanation is that my visit took place during the month of Ramadan and it is fair to suggest that people would be less inclined to go on pilgrimage when fasting.

the mosque, while others are performed in the domestic domain or at the *mazar*. The exclusion of women in one area does not necessarily have to mean exclusion or disinterest of men in the other. As this article has demonstrated, the *mazar* is a venue in which both men and women participate—both as participants and as religious leaders. It would be to minimize Uyghur religious life if we were to accept the facile explanation of the wretched Muslim woman who, due to her expulsion from the mosque, resorts to the *mazar* to engage in ‘peripheral’ and/or ‘un-Islamic’ healing activities that are not condoned by the rest of the community.

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