

Title: When the Divine takes place in the city
Reflections on a fieldwork in Bishkek

*Maria Elisabeth Louw, Visiting Research Fellow,
Social Research Center, AUCA*

At a first gaze Bishkek hardly seems the kind of city you would settle in in order to study Islam. The fact that most of it has been built during the 20th century has given it a definite Soviet touch, while the years since independence have certainly also left their mark on it, leaving it today with a casino on virtually every street corner. As a visitor it may sometimes be hard to believe that what surrounds you is a part of the Islamic world. And according to many locals it is definitely not here that you should look neither for good ‘Muslimness’¹ nor for good ‘Kyrgyzness’², people’s morality being corrupted by the influence of modern city life and their lifestyle influenced by the great number of Russian Bishkek residents.

Similarly to the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz are commonly regarded as more superficially Islamized than for example the Uzbeks. Talking with people in Bishkek about their religion, the first thing they will often tell you, indeed, is that Islam has never had such a strong hold on Kyrgyz people, because Islam came to them relatively late, and because the Kyrgyz were traditionally nomads – as if Islam needed a place to settle in order to take place among people. While some people in Bishkek, young people in particular, are beginning to embrace a self-declared ‘religious’ identity, most people tend to define themselves as not very ‘religious’, associating, so it seems, the state of ‘being religious’ with religious fanaticism, with foreign, or Arab, kinds of Islamic orthodoxy seen as unfit for Kyrgyz people, with Uzbek people or with Kyrgyz people from the south of the country who, similarly to the Uzbeks, are considered religiously more conservative and orthodox – or alternatively with a superficial ‘religious’ lifestyle, which may be

¹ The concept of ‘Muslimness’ (*Musulmanchylyk*) is often used to denote the practice of Islam

² The concept of ‘Kyrgyzness’ (*Kyrgyzchylyk*) is often used for whatever customs and traditions are perceived to be characteristic of Kyrgyz people

fashionable, but which does not necessarily imply an intimate relationship with the Divine.

Kyrgyz people in Bishkek might define themselves, as well as their city, as not very 'religious'. Anyway, esoteric experiences – dreams, revelations, feelings and impulses perceived to be of some kind of Divine origin (either experienced directly or mediated by *køz achyks*, 'diviners', people who can see what others cannot see and who possess the ability to see into the future) – play an important role in many people's everyday social interaction and negotiation of moralities.

The veneration of sacred places - burial places or other places connected with Muslim 'saints', as well as springs, rocks and other peculiar sites in the natural landscape - has often been identified as the most important aspect of popular Islam in Central Asia. Such places are not to be found in the centre of Bishkek. However, the Divine also finds its place in Bishkek's urban landscape; among its casinos, bazaars, shopping centres, bars and advertising billboards; and also Bishkek's self-declared 'non-religious' population find themselves surrounded by signs from God which helps them drawing the contours of themselves, the trajectories of their lives; which help them create themselves as moral persons, or good Muslims; navigating in a moral landscape which confronts them with contradictory demands.

My research here in Bishkek focuses on esoteric experiences; the question of where and when the Divine takes place in people's apparently secular lifeworlds, the social significance of these Divine breakthroughs, the question of why they are not necessarily defined as belonging to the domain of the 'religious', and the question of which traditions of knowledge people refer to when they attempt to put their esoteric experiences into words.

In this paper I will put forward some initial reflections on where and when the Divine takes place in Bishkek. I hope the reader will bear in mind that these reflections are written in the middle of my fieldwork and thus should be regarded as arguments in-the-making.

When the Divine takes place in the city

In Bishkek, people frequently experience glimpses of the Divine in what might appear to the spectator as unimportant phenomena and strive to make them significant in everyday social interaction and reflections on what it takes to be a good person, a good Muslim. In images, voices and feelings experienced in dreams. In intuitions, sudden brain waves or impulses. In words they overhear in the street, which seem somehow meant for them. In difficulties in doing something they have planned – travelling somewhere, getting in touch with someone – which is perceived as a sign from God that they should indeed not do it. And so on.

This brings us into the sphere of what one could call everyday ‘esotericism’ or ‘mysticism’. More than 100 years ago, the American philosopher William James found the root and centre of religious experience in ‘mystical’ states of consciousness: States of consciousness ranking from such a common experience as a feeling of *déjà vu*, of having been somewhere before, seen a person before – to visionary experiences with a clear ‘religious’ content³.

What characterizes all such experiences is that they somehow defy expression; they need to be experienced to be properly understood. They are states of insights usually hardly reachable by rational understanding. They are transient, short. And the person undergoing such experiences feels him- or herself as passively being held by a superior power. The Divine *takes place* – shortly, but usually making a lasting impression on the person and sometimes drawing the contours of a new self for him or her.

If they are defying expression, there is nevertheless a cultural repertoire available to give some kind of expression to such experiences and make them socially significant. Balancing on the border between the private and the public, between the individual and the social, and being sites where a complex relationship between belief in fate and belief in the free will is unfolded, such experiences are focal points for people’s efforts to recreate themselves as moral persons and active agents, and reformulating social ties and commitments, in times of moral and social crisis.

Let me give an example.

³ James, William (1983). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Penguin Books

Dreams about the dead

A common esoteric experience is the experience of *ayan*, signs, from deceased ancestors, which people usually experience in their dreams.

Dreams play important roles in the lives of many Kyrgyz people and are taken very seriously. Dreams, or at least some dreams, are considered omens or signs ultimately sent by God, which can help people make the right choices in life if they know how to interpret them.

Of particular significance are dreams in which the spirits of people's deceased ancestors, *arbak*, reveal themselves. Also when the ancestors do not reveal themselves directly, people sometimes interpret voices, images and feelings experienced in dreams as *ayan*, signs from *arbak*. Such dreams are signs for people that their lives are connected with the afterlife of their ancestors – and more generally with the Divine dimensions of existence.

When the spirits of the deceased reveal themselves in a person's dream it is usually a sign that they pay attention to, and maybe have an opinion about, the life and conduct of that person. *Arbak* bring blessing to those who remember them and misfortune to those who forget them. *Arbak* remind people about things they have forgotten, scold them if they have done something wrong; warn them if they are about to make a wrong decision or confirm them that they are right, if they are in fact doing the right thing. They interfere with everything, from the most prosaic problems such as keys or phone numbers lost, to moral and existential dilemmas. And they play a central role in the way many Kyrgyz people practice Islam. Many people's relationship with the Qur'an, for example, is confined to occasions when a verse or two from the Qur'an is recited for their ancestors.

Dreams about ancestors cause reflection. For the dreamer they can draw the contours of a new self and become central episodes in his or her life history. And they can draw the contours of new relations between people, which can become real, if the dream is taken seriously by others; if the dreamer can convince others about the authenticity of the dream. Dreams about ancestors can be important factors when Kyrgyz people take decisions

Jildiz

Take Jildiz, as an example. Jildiz was a young newspaper seller in Bishkek with whom I talked one day during the autumn of 2006. Like so many others, Jildiz, who grew up in a small village, came to Bishkek in search for a better life; dreaming about becoming a cool business woman,

returning to the village in a fancy car and building a two-storied house for her family. However, after a couple of years Jildiz had not made it further than the newspaper booth, and her family back home was losing their patience with her. Rather than looking forward to becoming the first family in the village with a two-storied house, they were trying to make her give up her career dreams, come home and get married.

A couple of months ago, Jildiz told me, she nearly capitulated to the pressure: In the middle of the street she was forced into a car by four young men and driven to a house in the village where the family of one of the men were waiting, ready to receive her as their new daughter in law.

Although being the subject of intensive criticism and in principle being illegal *kiz ala kachuu*, ‘bride kidnapping’ is a common practice in Kyrgyzstan. The young man who has sought out a bride for himself will usually, with help of some friends, force her into a car and drive her to his home where his female relatives will seek to don her a white headscarf as a sign of the marriage. In order to secure that she does not escape they might place a *dastarkan*, a tablecloth with *boorsok* – small pieces of dough, which are deep-fried – on the threshold to the room where they keep her. There is a strong taboo against stepping on or crossing the *dastarkan*, which symbolises central Kyrgyz values such as hospitality and respect for the ancestors. If a girl nonetheless attempts to escape she will often experience that her family will reject her and convince her that she ought to stay in order not to bring shame on herself and her family for disregarding a Kyrgyz tradition. Furthermore, her reputation as a girl who has escaped after spending the night in a young man’s home may be an impediment in her future attempts to get married.

Jildiz did not want to move back to the village, and she did not like her kidnapper. She resisted his grandmother’s attempt to put a scarf on her head as a sign of the agreement of marriage. But doubt sneaked up upon her as it grew darker, and as the female relatives of the kidnapper tried to convince her that it would be a shame for her family if she escaped, and that she, in case she did, would never get married. In the end Jildiz fell asleep. Right before sunrise she dreamt that somebody came to her and asked her to look at herself. Jildiz looked at herself and saw that she was wearing a beautiful dress, but that she was not wearing any shoes.

When Jildiz woke up she had taken a decision. According to the Kyrgyz tradition of dream interpretation shoes are – for girls – symbols of marriage. She was not sure who it was that came in her dream, but she thought it might be her deceased grandmother, who often came to help her

in difficult situations. And when her grandmother drew her attention to her missing shoes it was an omen that the marriage would not bring her any good.

Like so many people in Bishkek Jildiz said that she was ‘not religious’. As she explained, she did not wear *hijab*, and she did not perform the five ‘pillars’ of Islam⁴. However, she considered herself Muslim, she believed in God and in the signs that a person attentive to them receives from God. It was first and foremost through dreams and other signs from God that the Divine took place in her life.

Jildiz had decided that she wanted to escape, but she would not be able to carry out her decision unless her family accepted it. When she had the opportunity to speak with her family she told them about her dream. They were moved, but not surprised. Things like that often happened in their family.

Although people succeed in convincing others about the authenticity of the dream, omens experienced in dreams are open to interpretation. Although the ancestors are always right, in principle, the omens they give the living are not always clear and unambiguous. Furthermore, in the Kyrgyz tradition of dream interpretation a very complex relation is unfolded between belief in fate and belief in the free will: In practice it is possible to affect what is about to happen, and people often seek to change the fate that they, in other situations, claim not to have any control of: by, say, reciting the Quran or pray to God when they wake up, or by seeking to forget the omen – proceeding from the idea that omens are not realized if they are deleted from the memory.

The family of the young man indeed tried to persuade Jildiz and her family to forget about the dream, deleting it from their memory and thus deleting its social import. However, Jildiz’s mother took this as an insult to *her* mother’s authority, pointing out that every sign her mother had given them had shown up to be true. Jildiz and her family, then, went home, read the Quran and made *boorsok*⁵ in honour of the grandmother – remembered the grandmother, but forgot about the wedding. And soon after Jildiz was back in her newspaper booth.

⁴ I.e. the profession of faith, the ritual prayer, the fast in the Ramadan month, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the giving of alms. In classical Islam these are duties for which each individual Muslim is responsible.

⁵ After dreaming about dead ancestors people will often read Quran and make *boorsok* for them. It is believed that *arbak* appreciates the aroma, which is produced when cooking *boorsok*. The process is indeed termed *jit chigaruu*, ‘to produce aroma’

Recreating existence

It is my hypothesis that the Divine takes place in people's lifeworlds – or, rather, that they are more attentive to Divine signs – when they experience a loss of agency or a loss of moral grounding of their agency.

As I have argued elsewhere⁶, the effort to create a balance between a sense of agency and a sense of belonging to a larger moral order is a fundamental dynamic force in human practice and one, which is indeed expressed in people's engagement with the Divine dimensions of existence in Central Asia. Just like people in Central Asia often seek out sacred places when the balance is broken – when they experience a loss of agency or find themselves at the margins of social and moral orders they identify with – the Divine often takes place among them in such situations.

Taking her dream seriously, letting it take place in her lifeworld, and interpreting it as the intervention of her grandmother, Jildiz found a way out of a situation in which she was stuck without knowing what to do, giving the morally dubious act of escaping bride-kidnapping a moral grounding, recreating herself as a moral being, a good Muslim girl, in a situation where her status as a good Muslim girl was indeed threatened: Because of the act of escaping bride-kidnapping, notably, but also because her way of living her life, trying to 'make it' in the city, increasingly conflicted with the way her family thought that she ought to live it.

More generally: engaging with esoteric experiences – which in their nature are always ambiguous, capable of signifying various things; which are signs of fate, but a fate it might be possible to change – people reflect on, and experiment with, different ways of remaking lifeworlds. They reflect on, negotiate and experiment with the question of which parts of reality are worth engaging in; which truths are worth sharing or believing in; what it means to be a good person, a good Muslim in present-day society.

Perspectives

My research is concerned with drawing a 'map', so to speak, of 'where' the Divine takes place in people's lives in Bishkek: a city where the social changes, which have taken place during recent years, as well as the general complexity of city life, confronts people with new kinds of moral dilemmas; a city, which, by most Kyrgyz, is understood as a place of opportunities, but also as a place of moral decay.

⁶ Louw, Maria Elisabeth (2007). *Everyday Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia*. London & New York: Routledge

A more general objective of my research is the attempt to explore moral reasoning from an anthropological perspective, to explore the question of how an anthropology of morality should look like. Proceeding from the assumption that the concern to constitute oneself as moral being (however defined) is a fundamental force in human practice, I wish to explore how people seek to constitute themselves as moral beings; how moral reasoning take place in practice, in situations characterised by changing and conflicting moralities, in situations of characterised by moral dilemmas.