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Traditional folk rituals and ceremonies as space for agency, power, and harmony for Uzbek women in Surkhandarya

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Abstract

The belief in healing practices in rural areas in Uzbekistan was historically and socio-culturally constructed through textual and oral narratives for centuries. The Islamification of Central Asia in the eighth century had an effect in creating new forms of Islamic practices, known as Mystical Islam, at the core of which women played an essential role in keeping ancient knowledge and holding on to archaic practices. Women are often symbolised as preservers of rituals and culture, and also the victims of patriarchal discourse. This research focuses on exploring the practice of Islam in part to deal with gender role-based factors, interpersonal relationships, and healing relationships by transforming identities and self-empowering individuals through divine intervention.

This thesis demonstrates how women exercise multi-dimensional empowerment by carrying out and participating in religious rituals. The research examines such ceremonies as *Ehson*, *Bibi Seshanba*, and *Mushkul Kushod*, whereby women socialise, share daily problems, and seek conflict resolution.

These practices and stories of women show how healers transform women's oppression, their suffering, and vulnerability to authority, agency, and empowerment, by creating a safe space for peace-building relationships. In socio-traditional discourse these religious practitioners, through different ceremonial practices, maintain moral order and promote traditional gender values, whereby they maintain peace in the communities.

The research aims to highlight the healing practices in Surkhandarya, which historically experienced diverse religious practices. The study seeks to demonstrate these women's spiritual possession as knowledge, agency, and space to deal with social norms and economic instability. These practices show interesting and varied traditions of alternative and spiritual healing that have undoubtedly influenced the contemporary folk medicine in the region. With this research, I try to make visible women's experiences in traditional-cultural discourse, where they reclaim their voices in a male-dominated society.

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Introduction

In this research, the first section emphasises the studies carried out by anthropologists on Islamic practices as the core of the Uzbek culture and national identity. This section specifically highlights the concepts of Islamic practices and women's roles in preserving these practices as an instrument of empowerment in a patriarchal society. Section two describes the aim of the research and the reason why the topic was brought into the academic realm. The next section is devoted to the methodology of the thesis, whereby I describe my methods of conducting interviews, and it provides some brief information about the research participants. The other section describes my position in the research as an additional voice of the women in Surkhandarya. Here I highlight the reason why I participated in the study as a narrator of the healing discourse. The last section introduces the structure of the thesis and briefly discusses the content of the chapters of the research.

Conceptualization

The practice of Islam has been influenced by the local dominant discourse since its emergence in the territory of Central Asia. After the Arabs' invasion the territory was Islamised, which led to an impact on the core of native culture, whereby Uzbekistan became a part of Islamic civilisation. Islamification of the region effected to creating new forms of Islamic practices, known as folk Islam and Mystical Islam (Rasanayagam, 2011). The main core of the concept of the religion was its association with morality and identity of the Uzbek nation. However, the perception of Islamic notions was grounded on different discourses and subjectivity of individuals.

The anthropologist Johan Rasanayagam in his study explores how the understanding of Islam emerged from individuals' experiences and practical engagement in daily interactions. He argues that Uzbeks articulated the perception of Islam through their daily socialisation in the public and domestic domain located within an Islamic framework. The majority of the population attends religious ceremonies and family events such as weddings, funerals, and other similar ceremonies based on Islamic traditions (Hamrayeva, 2008). People follow traditional interpretations of Islam which are adopted, blended, and considered by local people to be part of the folk culture and traditional life (Tursunova, 2014).

The anthropologist, Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, discovers the perception of Islam by individuals grounded in the cultural and traditional practices, in which women play a crucial

role in preserving the concept. Following this perspective, Russian anthropologist Svetlana Peshkova categorises Muslim women in Uzbekistan as ‘the bearers of a special female religion’ and representative of a certain culture (Peshkova, 2009, p. 7). The point is related to women’s roles played in many aspects of society, family, tradition, rituals, and ceremony. The Uzbek anthropologist Razia Sultanova in her study explores contemporary Islamic rituals and ceremonies, in which the core is the female Goddess. She asserts that even when religion is male-dominated, women hold the main position in the structure. The sociologist Kelsy Burke writes that men and women develop a different view of morality in the religious context. Men are more socialised to value power and autonomy. Women acknowledge their social roles as caregivers to care for those who rely on them. However, women constructed different concepts and meaning within the religious framework. This is a different understanding of Islam, rather a concept of Islam that differs from that one which has emerged among the generations that is taught at Islamic universities and religious institutions. Johan Rasanayagam emphasises a dichotomy between correct Islam and religious rituals which combined pre-Islamic practices. The correct Islam is defined by the Quran and the principles of obeying the five pillars of Islam. The religious practices of everyday life combined Islam with shamanism, more relevant to Muslimness (Rasanayagam, 2006), which aimed to release physical and mental suffering and produce space and authority for women.

These are more relevant alternative healing practices that are rooted and have specific meaning for certain cultures. In order to understand the concept of alternative healing practices of a certain culture, it is necessary to grasp the root of the concept of healing practices and belief within its socio-cultural context. Most postcolonial anthropologists focused on rituals, symbolic meaning, and importance of the healing practices. Their studies showed that healing practices and beliefs emphasise not only the condition of the individual’s body, but also socio-cultural context and the meaning of the phenomenon through individuals’ experiences. The concept of the healing is located in a large system of practice and belief, which deals with social status, family problems, and moral responsibility within society (McGuire & Kantor, 1998). I will argue that women’s participation in the religious realm is a form of responding to social and patriarchal norms. These female religious rituals create meaning and empower women to deal with oppression, betrayal, and patriarchy in socio-cultural discourse.

In modern Uzbekistan, healing and healing beliefs have specific meaning related to socio-economic and cultural discourse. Uzbek scholar Sevara Hamzayeva refers to the

engagement of population, mostly women in religious rituals, as a result of economic instability and social injustice. The anthropologists Meredith McGuire and Debra Kantor explore in their anthropological study healing practices as a psychological therapy against socio-economic difficulties. On the other hand, the healing practice is a space of expression, moral order, and regaining empowerment. Women's empowerment has certain meaning in alternative healing practices and religious discourse that constitutes the collective rights and duties relating to certain positions in society (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2011). The anthropologists Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart assert that women's empowerment in religious practices depends on their accepting their duties and accomplishing tasks in healing practices (Zarcone & Hobart, 2013). By 'organizing and participating in spirit possession cults, sacrilizing their own space' whereby women experience empowerment and agency (Mahmood, 2004, p. 7), 'They heal and they embody their knowledge, they are intellectually empowering' (Boddy, 1994, p. 417). The concept of empowerment presents as a conflict resolution form within genders (Tursunova, 2014).

Secondly, I emphasise the women healers' transformation in the cultural context and symbolic discourse. The sociologist Meredith B. McGuire asserts it is important to understand the nature of the suffering, then we can better understand the reason for bodily and emotional transformation. The transformation mostly happens symbolically through rituals and words within a faith framework. This transformation re-establishes meaning and order in personal experiential discourse. This also provides healing for individuals who experience bodily and emotional suffering before the transformation (1988). The concept of transformation and perception of the symbols can be promoted and readable for certain groups of people who experienced self-transformation or culturally constructed (Boddy, 1994). Meredith B. McGuire writes that suffering comes from the understanding of facing difficulties and how they can change the situation according to experiencing encouragement by others by emphasising their problems and by linking their suffering with divine other (1998). Rituals and cultural interpretation reorder the process of self-construction in the period of suffering (Boddy, 1994). The process of transformation depends on the social condition that is produced by social systems and traditions (McGuire, 1998). Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka and Adam Mickiewicz conducted a study on the religious way of healing and shamanism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They explored the ways in which a healer's transformation can occur without suffering. This transformation can happen through transmission of the capacity from maternal or paternal lineage from generation to generation. According to anthropologist Basilov, a successor is defined by the ancestor's spirit. A healer experiences this gift through feeling ill

(Basilov, 1992). According to an ethnographic belief of Central Asia, a healer experiences suffering and painful processes, which decode as the body is changing and experiencing resurrection (Penkala-Gawęcka & Mickiewicz, 2014). The chosen healer through the experiencing of illness or having dreams, is revealing the possession of gifts by the ancestor spirit (Zarcone & Hobart, 2013). During the transformation the healer experiences spiritual purification of his/her body (Basilov, 1992). On the other hand, if the gift is refused, the healer experiences the close relative's suffering and misfortune (Penkala-Gawęcka & Mickiewicz, 2014). Zarcone and Hobart, in their anthropological study, explore the healing capacity of Prophet Muhammad and the passing of his sacred craft to his daughter Fatima. Kristina Kehl-Bodrogi describes the religious women healers' bodily and emotional experiences during the transformation. Zulfiya Tursunova in her study discovers that self-transformation of healers is grounded on socio-economic difficulties. My findings support Zulfiya Tursunova's (2014) arguments that healer and women patients' experiences are grounded on socio-cultural discourse and construction of the knowledge of traditional healing practices.

Objectives of the research

The central focus of the thesis is women's experiences, their voices, and agency. Kelsy Burke (2012) writes about agency as a way to resolve tensions between individual action and patriarchy. According to her, agency is 'the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities' (Burke, 2012, p. 123). These women's agency is an especially interesting phenomenon to study within secular Muslim context, which dominated culture and traditions. Hence my question addressed agency, specifically how local women experience empowerment in socio-cultural discourses within the Islamic framework. On the other hand, women formulate their own discourses of empowerment within the traditional-cultural realm. The purpose of the study is to reflect women's empowerment in an Uzbek traditionalist context, and simultaneously to show their self-healing in a patriarchal society. For my thesis, I use Zulfiya Tursunova's (2014) definition of empowerment which is served as a gender relation power and peacebuilding strategy.

The study seeks to demonstrate the women's spiritual possession as a knowledge, empowerment, and space to deal with social norms and patriarchy. The province in which the majority of participants reside historically observe diverse religious practices. These practices

show interesting and varied traditions of alternative and spiritual healing that have undoubtedly influenced the contemporary folk medicine in the region. By seeking evidence of women's agency in healing practices, I discovered women in both positions, as healer or patients, exercising agency and power within the system which gives them important meaning. This thesis shows how women talk about their personal psychological and social problems within their society and within their families. I will carefully describe the women's experiences in healing discourse, which reduces their oppression.

Moreover, I tried to highlight how healers and participants of the rituals and ceremonies make meaning and get engaged in peacebuilding discourse through seeking divine intervention to overcome difficulties in relationships, family, and community and respond to economic challenges. Focusing on women's rituals as empowerment, peacebuilding strategies, and reconciliation, I show how women make meaning in their everyday lives to achieve holistic wellbeing by interacting with the spiritually divine. This thesis will bring cultural understanding of this phenomenon through local women's experiences to the academic discourse.

Methodology: Oral history

The methodological part of the thesis constitutes oral history. My reasoning behind focusing on narratives as both the object and the content should be clear from my interviewees' perspective. The participants are five native Uzbek women healers possessing spirits and three women patients who actively depend on healing rituals. The ages of the interviewees are between 30 and 65. Their narratives will contribute to the understanding of women's situated knowledge as well as their positions in Islam.

All interviews were held in Uzbek and Russian. For the case study, I have taken an interview from eight respondents, all of whom have experience with possession of spirits, and who are participants of experiences. The aim of the study was to understand their specific experiences.

Robert Perks writes that it is necessary to assess the interviewees' memories not only in a cultural context but also by experiencing social processes. If these six diverse voices and backgrounds reach the goal of shaping the picture regarding the meaning of the phenomenology within the culture, the main objective will be accomplished.

All of my participants are self-identified, home-grown Muslims, without any entitled religious education. I know all the participants personally and decided to keep them

anonymous. One of them is my childhood friend, Zarifa, whom I used as a starting point for recruitment. After connecting with Zarifa via Skype, I gained a preliminary resolution. After initial recruitment, I was able to get in touch with three healers, through my sister by phone call who had convinced them to give an interview. Initially, contacting two of them was quite challenging because of their busy schedules.

Healers were diverse in age, personal background, modalities practices, and family status. I tried to represent differentiated experiences and reflect different perspectives and voices.

My position

My current position and approach in the thesis is as an alternative column. This clearly creates links between my narratives and the participants' interviews. Lynn Abrams (2010) explores in the chapter 'Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity' from *Oral History Theory* the construction of the self throughout the process of interviewing and the process of negotiation embedded in any interaction among our identities, cultural norms and representation, discourses, and interpretations that shape them.

During the interviews, this processes emerges, and as the author says in relation to oral history documents, they are 'the result of a three-way dialogue: the respondent between the interviewer and cultural discourses of the present and the past' (Lynn, 2010, p. 59). As Lynn says, then 'it is precisely the relationship between subjectivity and the discourse that engage the oral historians who understand that memory and the creation of memory stories can only be undertaken by calling upon certain sets of ideas, interpretations, and representations which are meaningful to the narrator' (Lynn, 2010 p. 64). Robert Perks asserts that 'through oral history interviews, the middle and low classes, men and women, indigenous people, or members of cultural minorities draw their experiences and interpret their history in their own way. More specifically, they relate particular aspects of historical experiences with personal meaning of the lived experience (Perks & Thomson, 2003). The narrator not only recalls the past, but also asserts her interpretation of the past.

I am using oral history as a means of exploring the construction of a cultural phenomenon and what it means for locals. This oral history includes different disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics to give meaning to the narratives (Perks & Thomson, 2003). The aim of my method is to support and allow multiple

narratives to represent themselves by avoiding imposing only one narrative upon them.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into four different chapters and an introduction. The thesis is written with a self-reflective approach, showing my position as a participant in the cultural narratives. The methodological part of the thesis is included in the introduction section. I explain the oral history approach from a feminist perspective whereby I locate myself as narrator and citizen of the location. Even though I present myself as narrator, I try to highlight the topic from local women's perspectives by taking into account their experiences and the cultural context.

The first chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual framework of Islam in Uzbekistan, in which I analyse three periods of Islam. I found it necessary to make a brief analysis of the historical conception of Islam and women's position within the religion. I also included some information about Islam in the present day as a representation of national identity for better understanding of the culture and the religious practices of healing. In the second section of my theoretical framework, I located the concept of Islamic feminism from an Uzbek context which includes women's experiences in the religious realm. To show women's experiences in religious discourse, I used relevant postcolonial feminist scholars' research and studies to connect their ideas to an Uzbek context and to give a broad perception about women's experiences. I made my arguments based on theories of Islamic feminism and situated knowledge and empowerment of how the knowledge is constructed through cultural interpretation.

Chapter two of the thesis is mainly dedicated to a case study. In this chapter I describe women's rituals as a conflict resolution space, maintaining social order, harmony, and peace, whereby women may speak out regarding their oppression, betrayal, and problems with restoring relationships and reconciliation between husbands and family members. In this regard, this section reflects a social transformation of identity and self-empowerment of individuals through divine intervention. I included participants' interviews and my narrative stories relevant to the concept to draw a broad understanding of the religious rituals and what they mean for Surkhandarians. I made efforts to be one of their voices and express as much as possible their perception and feelings regarding beliefs and practices.

Chapter three highlights the healers' lived experiences and their perception of the concepts of 'subordination' and 'empowerment' from the cultural context. In addition, in this chapter, I explain their experiences of being a healer from the locals' context, interpretation of

divine symbols, and their meaning in cultural-traditional discourse. The core of the chapter is dedicated to empowerment of women healers, their responding to hegemonic discourse, and socio-economic challenging. Moreover, this section included voices of religious women in a male-dominated religion to represent their empowerment.

The fourth chapter is devoted to discussions of the traditional model of womanhood, gender roles, and expectations which constitute the core of the culture. In this discussion, the chapter connects the concept of traditionalism with the contemporary female gatherings as a result of dealing with patriarchal orders. The chapter is based on theory that helps clarify participants' lived experiences and their perception of the model of womanhood.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 History of religion in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan became a part of the Islamic civilisation after an Arab invasion of Central Asia. Through the centuries Islam experienced different political discourses, being proclaimed as a dominant religion or suppressed by Soviets, and eventually became the national identity of the Uzbek nation after Independence. In the first section of this chapter, I describe the dominant power's position towards Islam and its construction by different discourses. The second section describes and analyses women's position in the Islamic realm as a space for their agency and authority, and how they develop their own discursive knowledge within religion.

Pre-Soviet period of Islam

The Tajik historian Ravshan Rahmoni, in his archaeological research, described the territory of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as a place of venerated earth, water, and fire. He asserts that in the Stone Age people in these territories used to worship in nature's elements (Rahmoni, 2001). This was ancestral spirituality, which exists until today. Before the Arabs' invasion the dominant religion was Zoroastrianism, which later influenced the other religious systems, including Christianity and Judaism, and existed in the territory of Bactria,¹ Uzbekistan (Sultanova, 2014). The Philosophy of Zoroastrianism constituted the mental struggle between truth and lie, in which the main concept of truth was at the foundation of all Zoroastrian philosophy.

Muslims first entered Uzbekistan in the middle of the seventh century by the Arab military leader Qutaybah ibn Muslim to conquer the Movaraunnahr.² After the Arabs' invasion, Islam spread through the whole territory and suppressed the previous religious practices, establishing dominance. Following the centuries, the native culture was replaced by Islamic norms and the state language was replaced with Arabic (Kholikulova, 2010). The Uzbek historian Khulkar Kholikulova asserts that the Central Asians were not only subjected to the Islamic faith, but they also played a crucial role in determining and developing part of the

¹ The territory of Bactria included the south part of Uzbekistan, the west part of Tajikistan, and the north part of Afghanistan. The territory was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism.

² The concept of the word Movvarounnahr is derived from Arab colonisers in the eighth century, and means 'the place between two rivers', which is present Uzbekistan.

religion (2010). During the Abbasid Caliphate,³ Uzbekistan experienced blossoming, and Bukhara⁴ became one of the most important cities in the Muslim world. The greatest number of Islamic scholars and scientists resided in Bukhara, such as Imam al-Bukhari, the author of a collection of sayings and actions of prophet Muhammad (Sultanova, 2014), the most important code of *Hadith*⁵, the second essential book after the Quran. The other Islamic scholar, al-Khakim Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn al-Termiziy, was bringing frame to the Islamic world by contributing to Islamic Mysticism known as *Tassavuf*.⁶ He learnt *hadith* and *Fiqh*⁷ at the *Hanafi*⁸ school of law that was dominant in the Islamic world. His preaching and works such as *Hatim al-avliya (Seal of saints)* and *Hal ash-shari'a (Arguments of the Islamic law)* (Babajanov, 1992) discuss Muslim rituals, 'love for God', and about various categories of mystics. Sufism was one of the essential spiritual parts of Islam, and more than a millennium belonged to Sunni Islam (Babajanov, 1992). Alongside Al-Khakim At - Termiziy's knowledge, ideas such as *tarikah*⁹, Kubrawiya¹⁰, Yassavia¹¹, and Naqshbandiya¹² appeared in Central Asia. It is hard to find a suitable term for the various groups of Sufis, for instance, for Kubrawiya and Yasawia. Some theologians interpret it as the followers of a particular 'brotherhood' or 'movement', by taking into account the overall religious philosophy (Babajanov, 1992). Sufi theologians usually speak about the Sufi teachings, and often call their followers the seekers of spiritual knowledge through Sufism (Olscott, 2007).

3 The Abbasid Caliphate was the third of the Islamic caliphates to succeed the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The Abbasid dynasty descended from Muhammad's youngest uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566–653 CE), from whom the dynasty takes its name.

4 Bukhara was one of the provinces of Uzbekistan. The city has long been a centre of trade, scholarship, culture, and religion. During the golden age of the Samanids, Bukhara became a major intellectual centre of the Islamic world after Medina and Jerusalem.

5 Collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran

6 Sufism

7 The theory or philosophy of Islamic law, based on the teachings of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet.

8 In Sunni Islam there are four sects: 1) *Hanafi*, the oldest school of law, founded by Imam Abu Hanifa (died 767 CE); 2) *Maliki*, named after Malik ibn Anas (died 795 CE); 3) *Shafi*, founded by Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (died 820 CE); and 4) *Hanbali*, named after its founder, Ahmed ibn Hanbal (died 855 CE). The differences between sects are composed in compliance rituals and in which they rely on four sources of Islamic law: the Qur'an, the Sunnah (Deeds and sayings of the Prophet, forming the pattern of behaviour of a Muslim), by inference analogy, and the consensus of theologians.

9 The Sufi doctrine or path of spiritual learning. See http://naturalworld.ru/key_tarikat.htm

10 Kubrawiya is one of the Sufi orders and ways that claims to trace its direct spiritual lineage and chain to the Islamic prophet Muhammad, through Ali, Muhammad's cousin son-in-law and the First Imam, via Imam Ali Raza. The Kubrawiya order is named after its 13th-century founder Najmuddin Kubra.

11 The Yasaviya order was named after its founder Ahmed Yesevi, a pioneer of popular mysticism, who founded the first Turkish Sufi order, the *Yasawiyya*, which very quickly spread over Turkish-speaking areas.

12 Naqshbandiya is a major Sunni spiritual order of Sufism. It traces its spiritual lineage to the Islamic prophet Muhammad, through Abu Bakr, the first Caliph and Muhammad's companion. Some Naqshbandi masters trace their lineage through Ali, his son-in-law and the fourth Caliph, in keeping with most other Sufis.

After the Mongols' invasion by the military leader Chingizkhan, Islam did not lose its importance as a dominant religion. Like their predecessors, the Mongols allowed Muslim religious leaders to guide the life of believers, while the Mongols were conquering the whole of Central Asia in 1220. Berke Khan and his descendants, Tudemengu and Uzbek Khan, adopted Islam. Uzbek Khan, who took the Muslim name of Muhammad Sultan Uzbek Khan, legitimised Islam and made it the official state religion. Since then, Muslim rituals began to prevail over previous non-Islamic practices (Babajanov, 1992).

The Mongols ruled Central Asia until the period of Amir Timur, who founded the Timurid dynasty that ruled until the 16th century. Timur established the Institute of Sheikh ul-Islam,¹³ and was made the Muslim elder advisor to the governor, but simultaneously took control over the religion. The Timurid periods were also the blossoming time of Sufism, and a range of Sufi scholars' tombs were turned in large memorial complexes. Until the Russian invasion of Central Asia in the mid-19th century, the territories and population of Uzbekistan were part of *Dar al-Islam*,¹⁴ the Islamic world, in which Sharia law dominated (Babajanov, 1992).

Islam in the Soviet epoch

Three independent khanates¹⁵ dominated in Turkestan:¹⁶ Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand between the 16th and 19th centuries. Women's positions during these periods were mostly determined by 'the strict traditions and canons of Islam' (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 49). The Soviet scholars presented Central Asia as a brutal part of Turkistani society, focusing on Central Asian women who, according to them, were totally oppressed and subordinated by the male members of society and religious leaders who treated them as property (Ibrahim, 2013). The local religious leaders holding to Sharia law allowed polygamous marriages, and men were permitted to have four wives at that time, with the terms that all wives were treated equally. However, in practice only the rich and the *khans* had more than two wives (Ibrahim, 2013).

Alongside men, women could also compel their husbands to the *Qazi*¹⁷ and request their rights on certain grounds: in cases when a husband did not inform her of his

13 The highest cleric, Muslim wisest

14 Dar al-Islam is the area of the world under the rule of Islam, and literally means 'the home of Islam'. Dar al-Islam is defined as the land which is governed by the laws of Islam and whose security (*Aman*) is maintained by the security of Islam, i.e. by the authority and protection of Muslims inside and outside the land, even if the majority of its inhabitants are non-Muslims.

15 Khanate is a political entity ruled by a khan.

16 The term labels a region in Central Asia which is inhabited mainly by Turkish peoples. It includes present-day Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

17 Islamic judge

whereabouts; in cases when a wife had not reached adulthood and could refuse her marital status until she reached a mature age; or in cases of being treated badly or not being informed about her husband's second marriage. She had a right to clothing, hiring servants, and to all those expenses which are usually spent among persons of her class. By appealing to the *Qazi*, a woman could get a certain amount of money from her husband's account, or take half of his property, in cases where she was not provided by his will. Even though it was a patriarchal society, Muslim women had the power to influence in court politics and by supporting her whole family.

Women played an important role in the socio-economic field and provided substantial financial support to their families. To support their families financially, women engaged in embroidery and making silk eggs and sold the products in local markets. Despite strong gender stereotypes within society, some of them were metal workers or craftsmen producing bowls and cups for local bazaars. Russian scholars portrayed the Central Asian women as victims of a religious system that subordinated them. The basis of their understanding of the issue was based on their misunderstanding of the marriage system in religious discourse (Ibrahim, 2013), or as the justification of the Russian invasion of Central Asia.

Beginning in the 1820s, Bukhara Amirate and Khiva Khanate could retain their native rulers and autonomy after the Russian troops' invasion of Central Asia (Becker, 2004). The American historian Seymour Becker asserts that Khiva and Bukhara could not have been threatened by the Russian Empire, because they had not had contact with the modern West or the nationalist movement (Becker, 2004), such as Poland and Finland where in the other autonomous parts of the Empire such movements existed.

After the collapse of the Russian Tsar's¹⁸ regime in 1917, the political discourse radically changed. The Westernised intelligentsia came to power and started instigating 'modernisation' and cultural transformation of the nations of the former Empire through inaugurating massive campaigns to combat Islam and 'emancipate' women (Becker, 2004).

Before the Bolsheviks' massive campaigns for the emancipation of women, the national movement known as Jadid¹⁹ had organised a project of involving women in social and cultural life. This organisation achieved success by facilitating women's participation in

¹⁸ An emperor of Russia before 1917

¹⁹ The Jadids were Muslim modernist reformers within the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They normally referred to themselves by the Turkish terms 'Taraqqiparvarlar' ('progressives'), 'Ziyalilar' ('intellectuals'), or simply 'Yoshlar' ('youth'). Jadids maintained that Muslims in the Russian Empire had entered a period of decay that could only be rectified by the acquisition of a new kind of knowledge and modernist, European-modelled cultural reform. Although there were substantial ideological differences within the movement, Jadids were marked by their widespread use of print media in promoting their messages and 'new method' of teaching in the schools of the empire, from which the term 'Jadidism' is derived.

elections. (Ibrahim, 2013). They considered women key to the development of society if women's positions were promoted and respected by the majority. In this case they organised educational programmes for women to involve them and promote them intellectually. They advocated equality and secular education for women. Through the project they hoped to eliminate polygamy and the poor treatment of women. 'They realized that the progress and civilization of a nation depended on the educational, moral and intellectual progress and civilization of women because women played a crucial role in society as mothers of the next generation' (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 49). They worked on strategic plans to transform and to hold reformation on religious and cultural discourse in everyday life, which they expected to bring about a change in perception of women's status and their role in the Islamic realm (Palat & Tabyshalieva, 2005).

The Bolsheviks intended to characterise women as producers of a new social order with the intention of increasing the labour force for assuring the success of drive for cotton and supporting the creation of a socialist economy. Secondly, the Bolsheviks considered Central Asian women equivalent to slaves in traditional society (Ibrahim, 2013). On the other hand, the Communist Party aimed to suppress Islam. With this motive, Soviet leaders committed to the women's 'emancipation' policy in all regions of their country by placing women on an equal level with men in all aspects of economic, social, and political life (Lubin, 1981). In order to achieve this, they first considered it necessary to liberate women's so-called oppression from native *khans* and tsars by favouring them with so-called socio-economic liberation (Ibrahim, 2013).

Moreover, the Bolsheviks believed that by allowing the religion the national consciousness would come, therefore, they severely restricted religious freedom and religious institutions. (Eschment & Harder, 2004). By the end of the 1920s mosques and madrasas in Central Asia were closed down and destroyed. All church lands were seized by the state. The emancipation campaign called Hujum (attack) was launched simultaneously against traditional lifestyles and the veiling of women. The women who were holding to the tradition of veiling were punished along with their husbands (Ibrahim, 2013). In some cases, the punishments were ruthless. They were intimidated into unveiling, or unveiled by force. However, the campaign atmosphere was holding in urban areas, but in rural areas or in suburban areas women continued to cover their heads and shoulders with large head scarves (Buckley, 1997). In fact, the Bolsheviks did not stop holding unveiling campaigns, but also started to involve local women in communist education. Women engaged in the Communist

Party were sent to Moscow to attend political education whereby they were required to experience culture and so-called modern civilisation (Ibrahim, 2013).

The idea of the Soviets' culture was 'national in form, and socialist in content', termed by the Uzbek historian Bakhtiyor Babajanov, and he affirms that the culture and language were used in mass Russification: 'The Uzbek alphabet shifted to the Cyrillic. Many Uzbek words were replaced by Russian words (1992, p. 35).

The Bolsheviks' cultural transformation employed the project of territorial division of Turkistan. In 1924 Uzbekistan appeared on a world map as a starting point of the 'national delimitation' project (Sultanova, 2014). Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khiva were redivided into five national Republics. This strategy was implemented with the purpose of blocking the Central Asian and Tatar nationalists, who were creating a unique state of Turks and other Muslim peoples in Turkistan (Becker, 2004). Consequently, the common histories, languages, traditions, and populations of the area were split into individual local nationalities (Sultanova, 2014). The Central Asian scholar Razia Sultanova argues that the Bolsheviks tried to replace Islamic identity by creating ethnic Republics in the territory of Turkistan, where the majority of ethnic groups constituted Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Turkmen. She argues that the Soviets had a political reason to create five new Republics. By dividing into Republics, the official Moscow wanted to make it easy to control the Republics separately, rather than ruling as a whole the 'Islamic Turkestan'. She asserts that five separate Republics were formed in the territory by not taking into account their historical roots and ethnic belonging (2014), which can be a reason for fomenting ethno-territorial conflict in contemporary times.

In 1944, a Muslim religious authority was created by the Soviets in Central Asia (CAMRA) to register the number of religious clerics. Babajanov argues that the CAMRA was a kind of lens to keep watch over suspected personnel of the religious organisation. They recruited theological spies and kept an eye on religious ceremonies held in mosques, and only 'trusted members' (Babajanov, 1992) were allowed to go on the *hajj* pilgrimage, study abroad, and represent the Soviet Union in the International religious symposiums. The next phase of combating Islam emerged after the Second World War with Stalin's repressions on religious grounds which were continued under the excuse of 'fighting cosmopolitanism' (Sultanova, 2014), whereby a great number of intellectuals were arrested and executed.

Post-Soviet Islam: ‘Our’ Islam, or national Islam in Uzbekistan

The conflict on the grounds of religion between the Taliban and Soviet troops in Afghanistan provided the basic framework for understanding the expected recurrence of war on the grounds of the new Independent Republics had they not established a religious policy in order to stabilise the territory of Central Asia. Specifically, with this religious policy was concerned Uzbekistan which bordered with Afghanistan on the south where the radical Islamist group had posed a real threat to its sovereignty. The Uzbek authority quickly realised the need to restore the state’s control over religion, but tried to make it so as not to antagonise the majority of believers (Gaziyev, 2000). Islam was reshaped by the state policy in order to secure religion in favour of national interest and border security by creating safe Islamic beliefs in the era of the War on Terror.

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam ceased to be a minority faith. Millions of Muslims accustomed to worshipping in secret for many years under the colonisation felt free to follow their faith conscience after independence was proclaimed (Gaziyev, 2000). New mosques and religious schools were opened, and old religious traditions and customs experienced revival. The anthropologist Johan Rasanayagam argues that the state legitimised Islam as a dominant religion to support Islamic ideology as a component of local culture and a source of spiritual values. Another anthropologist, Svetlana Peshkova, in her research explores how Islam has been experienced in Uzbekistan as an element of national and cultural identity (Peshkova, 2015). Following on this concept, the researcher of Political science Michael Rywkin notes that:

Islam is not only a religion but also a part of personal identity: one cannot simply call oneself an Uzbek or a Tajik and, at the same time, reject Islam. This not only strengthens the Islamic tradition but makes it part and parcel of the ethnic one. (Rywkin, 1990, p. 89)

Even at the cultural level the two identities are inseparable; the second identity of Muslimness is considered a national or traditional Islamic practice. In their studies, the researchers Diyora Ziyayeva and Martha Brill Olcott assert that the Uzbek state tried to use the notion of ‘Our Islam’ to create a national identity that would be supported by stronger local identities, and for that reason government officials advanced both slogans *Musulmonchilik* (Muslimness) and *Uzbekchilik* (Uzbekness) (Olcott & Ziyaeva, 2008). Eighty percent of the population of Uzbekistan self-identify as Muslims, even those who claim not to believe in God (Peshkova,

2015). Twenty-eight million Uzbeks are conventionally considered Muslims belonging to the Sunni Muslims from the *Hanafi* sect (Gaziyev, 2000). The Central Asian researcher Diyora Ziyayeva stresses that the religious education in Uzbekistan has historically been rooted in the territory's *Hanafi* legal tradition, but centres of religious learning lost their dynamics after the Timurid period (1370–1506), in particular, in the field of *fiqh*²⁰ (Olcott & Ziyaeva, 2008). By explaining the historical period of Russian intervention in the middle of the 18th century, she argues that 'the study of religious law' and theology in Central Asia has been uprooted (Olcott & Ziyaeva, 2008).

The fundamental concept of the *Hanafi* school is considered liberally orientated religiously, which allows the pre-Islamic traditions of the native people to be incorporated into Islam (Gaziyev, 2000).

Morality

The essential part of religion is reflected in a form of national identity, more precisely in the form of moral discourse in the Uzbek context. Uzbek researcher Shakhlo Akhrorova asserts that social policy in Uzbekistan is based not only on the support of the state, but also on the steady adherence to universal and national human values. This is viewed by the Uzbek society as the conscious development of their spiritual and moral values (Akhrorova, 2013). Apart from the authority given by the Quran and Sunna²¹, there is also the exercise of 'authorized knowledge', *Hadith* (Rasanayagam, 2011), that interprets the moral code of Islam, grounded on the recorded testimony of the Prophet's exemplary practices. Johan Rasanayagam, in his book *Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The morality of experience*, draws a conceptual frame of meaning around the notion from an Uzbek context. He explores how morality is a mutually shared norm, the ideal of moral personhood and community, which occurs during daily interaction (Rasanayagam, 2011). He argues that individuals' understanding of Islam emerges from the subjectivity of the individual, through daily experiences and religious practices. Likewise, Maria Elisabeth Louw asserts that the concept of being Muslim is understood by native Uzbeks as experiencing practices of everyday life rather than being *ulamo*²² (2007). The concept of Uzbek Muslimness is constituted by following Islamic codes of politeness, dress, eating, urinating, and making love. Moreover, it is not only a cognitive process of mind,

20 The theory or philosophy of Islamic law, based on the teachings of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet.

21 The traditional portion of Muslim law, based on the words and acts of Muhammad, and preserved in the traditional literature.

22 Islamic scholar

but also a public debate and personal consideration of cultural values. Individuals try to be good Muslims, not only obeying Islamic norms and tendencies, visiting mosques and praying five times as Islam prescribes, but also by engaging in social interactions, whereby diverse discourses and interpretation of Islam circulate. Rasanayagam explores how Uzbeks develop their understanding of the meaning of being a correct Muslim in the sense of Islamic spirituality. Islam is not concerned only with an interior belief in God, but is also associated with recognition of the existence of his creatures, evil and good spirits, and non-human others (Rasanayagam, 2011). This other phenomenon type of moral source is linked with the Divine, Islamic philosophical tradition.

Rasanayagam suggests that the concept of morality in the anthropological frame should be considered in relation to both transcendent values and daily practices:

Daily life and local forms of social interaction are invested with significance and morality by being placed within an Islamic frame. [...] I seek to explore the transcendent quality of experience itself, in the immersion of a sociality that exists within and between persons, that is at the same time apprehended as extending beyond the contingency of any individual life [...] individuals are immersed in a web of relations and obligations that locate them outside their own lives, a location that enables moral reasoning. (2011, p. 164)

He argues that the phenomenon can be explained by involving the spiritual being into human life, whereby individuals interact during the religious rituals, with sacred saints, and with cults. Many people value traditional religious rituals and the healers who hold the ceremonies, because they have a holistic approach to the person. These religious practices are not only a daily experience, they are done with selfhood to personal, ethnic, and moral identity (Boddy, 1994). In certain societies they make subordination and power relations (Tursunova, 2014).

Reviving the old tradition of ‘*Eskicha*’

As an integral element of the nation’s culture and identity, there has also been a revival of the healing way, *eskicha*, which means ‘old way’. This is a folk healing practice in Uzbekistan which constitutes two ways of healing such as worshipping saints and folk healer rituals. The anthropologists conducting research on healing rituals in Central Asia during the Soviet time referred to the phenomenon of pre-Islamic traditions, which combined shamanism, Sufism, and Islam (Basilov (1992), Snezarev (2003)). In fact, the shamanistic way of healing was held

on to, hidden in Soviet time, to replace unaffordable modern medicine by native people in rural areas as an alternative traditional medicine.

Traditionally, the shaman was an expert of the spirit realm who healed or relieved suffering through trance, whipping, or dancing. In the ethnographic history of Uzbekistan, shamanism was considered an ‘archaic religion’²³ (Zarcone & Hobart, 2013) that came to Central Asia through Siberian nomads in the pre-Islamic period. This shamanism has been feminised since Soviet time, when the *mullahs*²⁴ and *imams*²⁵ were restricted to conducting religious rituals. The traditional names of shamans in Uzbek linguistic epistemology are *folbin*, *qushnoch*, *kinnachi*, and *tabib*, whose healing activities are similar. The anthropologists Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart explored the activities of shamans in Central Asia. They argue that the all shamans in Central Asia treat diseases through words by reciting verses from the Quran and through different ways of touching: diagnosing illnesses and healing by directing the breath or touching physical objects to the skin (2013). Another anthropologist, Zulfiya Tursunova, through examining the symbolic objects used in rituals such as tea, sugar, yogurt, water, soap, needles, etc. (2014), which are directed towards healing patients, links it as an essential part of shamanic rituals. People believe that magic or spirit possession plays an essential role in recovering, and in most cases a patient, with his/her family, turn for aid to one or more religious healers. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi explores invoking spirits during the shamanic rituals, and how the local people perceive the phenomenon within an Islamic framework.

When analysing healing concepts, it must be taken into account the diverse discourses of illness and setback, which can be applicable for certain ways of healing that natives consider as the social norm. This transcendental phenomenon is produced by a discourse which is constructed through cultural interpretation and decoded as a moral discourse that constitutes an essential part of Uzbek culture.

The concept of healing via either the Sufi or shamanic way, are both articulated according to local belief in God’s magic and demonstrate the intersection of spirituality, medicine, and morality. Simultaneously, shamanic healing practices penetrate social circles and norms which make moral sense for locals, and they are considered extremely important by the natives (Zarcone & Hobart, 2013). This healing discourse plays an essential role, particularly for women, whereby they socialise, deal with their psychological disturbances through spiritual therapy, and reconstruct their gender power relations.

23 Ancient religion

24 Islamic preacher

25 Islamic religious leader

During the last decades shamanic healing rites have been feminised and domesticated in a period of economic instability. *Mushkul Kushod* (solver of difficulties) and *Bibi Seshanba* (Lady Tuesday) are healing practices that are performed by female healers as ‘peacebuilding methods’. These female healers’ practices are based on Islam and shamanism, directed to transform women's oppression, abuse, rights, and domestic violence to reconciliation and empowerment (Tursunova, 2014).

1.2 Muslim women's spirituality and Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism

The representation of women of the 'Third World' is predictable, particularly Muslim women's portrayal by the West. The discursive construction of the Muslim woman was more focused on her limited physical activity in the religious realm, which was fundamentally based on Western assumptions, whereby Muslim women are depicted as oppressed in a male-dominated religion. This image produced was in contrast to the representation of Western women as liberated, secular, and having control of their own lives. However, not all western women are liberated and secular, as well as not all Muslim women are properly aware of Islam and Islamic Doctrine. The idea of 'oppression' was more precisely derived from their class status, cultural background, education, and their position in society (Darvishpour, 2003). Feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty argues that some Western feminists portray Muslim women as oppressed by a male-dominated religion, and only a few of them write about their freedom, choices, actions, and power (1988). The anthropologist Saba Mahmood, in her book *Politics of Piety*, gives a broad analysis of Egyptian Muslim women in the Mosque movement and women preachers holding religious rituals as well as their agency and power within the mosque movement and Islamic society. By referring the topic appropriately to Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy's study, she asserts: 'Women use perhaps unconsciously, perhaps strategically what we in the West might prefer to consider instrument of their oppression as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organize and individually [...]' (2005, p. 7).

By stressing the notion of 'instrument of oppression' (Mahmood, 2005), both authors explain the Western perception of religion, and how Muslim women use this instrument to set limits on a male-dominated religion through ceremonies, either individually or collectively. Mahmood asserts that religious women, through the religious ceremonies and rituals, organise complementarily with men; through 'the oppression instrument' they reproduce their own power and fix patriarchy to their own way and interest (Mahmood, 2005).

Through their analysis of the Quran, the Islamic holy book, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas take different discourses and give a broad conception about the Quran and women's role in Islam. For instance, Amina Wadud writes about the interpretation of women in the Quran and argues that everything depends on interpretation. The Quran acknowledges that men and women function as individuals in society. However, there is no detailed

understanding set on how to ‘function culturally’ (Wadud, 1999). She suggests reading the Quran from the female experience and without the stereotypes, which have played as a main framework for many male interpretations.

Like Wadud, her colleague Asma Barlas points out that ‘Islam opposes patriarchal imaginaries of God as Father, the Prophet as Father and the Father/male as ruler’ (2002, p. 129). She asserts that the Quran does not define men and women as binary oppositions, and does not portray women as insignificant or inadequate to men, or the two sexes as unequal (Barlas, 2002). In her analysis she advocates Islam as an ethical-moral notion which allows mutual recognition of individuals.

The sociologist Mehrdad Darvishpour, in his analysis of feminism in Islamic countries, considers all the religions as patriarchal and divides feminism into four trends: ‘Atheist feminism, Secular feminism, Muslim feminism, Islamic feminism’ (2003, p.2). According to his analysis, atheist feminism considers religion as anti-women, and women’s movements can challenge for religious influence in society; secular feminism takes a neutral position about religion, but does not believe in the possibility of the emancipation of women without a women’s religious movement; Muslim feminism is the opposite of the previous two trends and has a liberal view of Islam which tries to adapt the modern tendency of society. Mehrdad asserts that Muslim feminist imagination about Islam was dominated by a patriarchal vision of Islam, and for that reason they primarily focus on the teachings of the Quran because much of *hadith* and *shari‘ah*²⁶ are patriarchal readings of Islam (Darvishpour, 2003). By his analysis he refers Islamic feminism to state feminism, fundamentalist, or a religious movement, whereby Muslim women have a chance to be emancipated. With his analysis, Darvishpour homogenised the concept of Islamic feminism by not taking into account the diversity of colonial background and dominated ideology in Muslim countries. In addition, explaining through Amina Wadud’s concept of the interpretation of Islam, the cultural aspect and its certain norms play a crucial role in the construction of women’s positions in Muslim society. Moreover, the concept of Islamic feminism differentiates even among the Muslim countries within the context, meaning, and purpose. Conceptualising the notion of feminism from the Uzbek context, which carries a negative meaning of ‘struggle’. These Muslim ‘feminists’ do not use the terms ‘struggle’, ‘right’, or ‘equality’ to gain their position in society; their strategy constitutes from the ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘gender power relations approaches’ (Tursunova, 2014) which derive the meaning of equality in their context.

26 Islamic law

Women healers' situated knowledge

The concept of healer from an Uzbek context means a religious practitioner who has the spiritual power to cure ill people through religious rituals and ceremonies. Historically, women and men's religious leadership in Uzbekistan has developed separately, but are equally important: male religious practitioners mainly officiate at the ceremonies among local men, and female religious practitioners provide those services mainly among women by presiding at women's ceremonies, counselling, and healing mainly in domestic spaces and at local pilgrimage sites (Zarcone & Hobart, 2013). In the Uzbek context, the healing capacity is always believed to be bestowed upon a person endowed with *ilohiy kuch*²⁷ which, in essence, can be bestowed on anybody. However, some categories of people are seen as particularly destined to receive the gift of healing. In Uzbekistan there is such a notion as belonging to certain 'holy lineages' such as *qushnoch*²⁸ and *folbin*²⁹, and the healing capacity tends to be inherited (Bodrogi, 2006). In those cases, where healers have inherited their power from their ancestors, people speak about them as *orkasi bor* (having a spirit). At the time of their vision, all healers suffered from some kind of severe illness which doctors were unable to cure. As soon as they accepted the call and started to heal others, their health condition improved or they recovered completely. The healers interpret their illness as a means of forcing them to accept the call. This is how the body gets made and how the meaning is derived, as Donna Haraway asserts: 'not in order to deny meaning and bodies, in order to build meaning and bodies that have a chance for life' (Haraway, 1988, p. 577). According to the study of anthropologist Johan Rasanayagam, the healers go through certain experience and suffering, which are interpreted by sufferers as a sacred praxis. He termed it as 'embodied self-process', and more precisely, 'self-sacred' (Rasanayagam, 2006) in which the divine 'other' is objectified. He argues that this phenomenon is in the sense that people can develop their moral selfhood through this phenomenon of 'divine other', which is quite meaningful for this society (Boddy, 1994). Healers are social actors and they manufacture knowledge through their bodily experiences, which bring semiotic meaning for the community, the sort of meaning that is legitimised by society. This divine other derives power according to the local interpretation, and the experience is not confined only to healing practitioners, but is also manifested in non-healers' dreams, which denote an omen from God (Tursunova, 2014) to make a reasonable decision or experience relief from illness as an encounter with divine

27 Divine power

28 Healer

29 Soothsayer

power. This kind of subjectively experienced phenomenology such as illness, healing, and dreams, Johan Rasanayagam termed as a 'local interpretative model' (2011, p. 74) in which people develop the sense of selfhood through a certain experience, and this experience is culturally coded (Rasanayagam, 2011), which derives specific meaning. The anthropologist Zulfiya Tursunova asserts that only those women healers in this context can read their experience of transformation which they bodily experienced (2011). In her research she has also considered healers' personal transformations, specifically focusing on women healers. She conducted a case study on long-practising local Tashkent³⁰ women practitioners of the healing arts, by characterising participants' personal narratives of their experiences. For these women healers, spiritual and bodily experiences were very important for learning self-transformation. Tursunova argued that all participants have been doing this by assisting the Saint Spirit, as they 'accepted the gift given by Allah'. Their situated knowledge shows commonalities and differences in knowledge and experiences which create alternative solutions for new voices, inner authority, and power (Tursunova, 2014).

Conceptualising the agency of religious women

The Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy, in her study on spiritual possession, analyses the notion from a cross-cultural context. By explaining the term broadly, she asserts possession is a power and agency while denying women's subordination in the spiritual realm and situates their possession in a wider social discourse and power praxis. In her anthropological studies she argues that the 'spiritually-reformed body is an affirmation of power and identity' (1994, p. 408) whereby women are protected, supported, and esteemed.

Later, the anthropologist Pedram Khosronejad conducted research on Muslim women in Iran by outlining their participating in and organising of spirit possession cults, in the sense of sacralising their own space at the shrine complex, sharing grievances and community. He stresses that this is a way to attempt agency for Muslim women, who are 'marginalized or excluded from the mosque' (2013, p.159) and other male-dominated religious areas. By exemplifying the *zar*³¹ rite, he asserts that the ceremony constitutes the psychological problems of the subordinate women in male-dominated communities. During the *zar* possession period, women step outside the traditional social patterns of behaviour and express

³⁰ Tashkent is the capital of Uzbekistan.

³¹ *Zār* rite is a female religious gathering where religious woman exorcise evil spirits from the possessed individual. Saba Mahmood's analysis is devoted to Iranian *zar*, the spirit possession ritual and cult.

their personal crises freely, which can be perceived as precarious in casual situations, and is never tolerated or respected by the patriarchy. Khosronejad advocates that *zar* rites give a space for women to express their problems and enjoy a temporary freedom to behave without the constraints of social conventions (2013). For Uzbek women the concept of possession is a strategy to deal with local distress, familial violence, and economic dependency, and through the possession ‘they mobilize power to reclaim their own voice’ (Tursunova, 2014), whereby they create a safe space for themselves.

Zulfiya Tursunova considers ‘the spiritual possession’ as a source of women’s knowledge, agency, and authority. She asserts that healers’ agency provides a new input toward value and the human rights paradigm, alters power relationships, and produces new spaces for ‘renegotiation and communication’ (Tursunova, 2014). Moreover, she correlates the term ‘possession’ with the concept of empowerment. She argues that in Uzbek, language empowerment has a negative meaning, as in to exercise authority over someone, the meaning related to the historical colonial connotation and the regime implemented by the Soviets. From the Western perspective, empowerment refers to autonomy and self-determination in order to enable them to represent their interests in a self-determined way (Tursunova, 2014). Native Uzbek women naturally do not gain power over men through struggling with them for their rights. They prefer to gain rights and empowerment through a peaceful way, via subordination and spirituality.

Conclusion

The chronological background of Islam in Uzbekistan demonstrated how Islam was modulated since its emergence from pre-Soviet time to the present day. I explored how the religion in Uzbekistan articulated as a moral discourse rather than a fundamental perception of Islam, and how it played an essential role in the construction of national identity. The anthropological study of scholars Johan Rasanayagam and Zulfiya Tursunova show the significance of Islam as a cultural value, traditional medicine; and how the local discourse constructs from individuals to be correct Muslims; and how it constitutes the local context and cultural logic.

To demonstrate my intention, I focused mostly on women’s activities in the religious realm as I considered Islamic feminism, which plays not as a revolutionary concept from an Uzbek context, but rather as a moral evolution to legitimate social change. Women’s spiritual

possession actively contributes mutual support and socialisation for vulnerable women. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in distributing welfare within the communities (Tursunova, 2014).

At the core, by introducing Islam through post-colonial scholars studies, I tried to show religion as a form of agency, autonomy, and a way to make positive changes in women's lives. As such, the general aim of this chapter was to set a theoretical framework that helps to understand religious women's empowerment through cultural elements.

In this framework, the next chapters present the women healers' lived experiences within the Surkhandarya, Uzbekistan context regarding their situated knowledge, agency, empowerment, and peacebuilding strategies. The reason I have chosen to present female healing practices as an authority, power, and agency within my hometown is due to the fact that it represents how healers, through different ritual practices, raise the consciousness of women to transform social order to remake power relations and identities within family and community.

2. Healing practices as a psychological therapy

Gender politics in Uzbek culture is connected with ‘reproduction and heteronormativity’, which means that reproductive discourse is the dominant norm. This prescribes specific roles and responsibilities for women and men so that the system maintains the normative or expected gender roles (Hamrayeva, 2008) in the dominant discourse of the Uzbek culture. Alongside the gender roles come other behavioural expectations. By nature, Uzbek women are brought up to be patient, obedient, and to accept patriarchal norms. With any form of violence, women can appeal to the legal system (Ibrahim, 2013). However, in most cases, they try to avoid both the legal system and the discussion of violence for a variety of reasons. They feel embarrassed about their situation and prefer not to talk about familial violence. In order to deal with their problems within the family and society they visit healers and conduct ceremonies to gain inner relief and peace. The first section of this chapter describes ceremonies such as *Ehson*, *Mushkul Kushod*, and *Bibi Seshanba* as a sacred space of Surkhandarian women where they share their problems and feel empowered and supported. The next section of this chapter shows how the rituals transform the male-dominated discourse to the women’s perspective whereby women reconstruct themselves and gain strength. The main argument of this chapter is the power of healing and its role in peacebuilding and reconciliation within the family and society. This chapter comprises participants’ interviews and my personal narratives to give clear explanations of women’s rituals and symbols which function for the female perspective.

Female gatherings: sacred space

According to local legends of the past, female gatherings in Surkhandarya were related to the celebration of a lunar or solar system based predominantly on Islam or other religious beliefs such as Zoroastrianism. In ancient times, the territory of contemporary Surkhandarya was a part of the Bactrian³² Kingdom, the homeland of Indo-Iranian tribes (Rahmoni, 2001).

The centre of the province, Termez, is an ancient city of Central Asia and reflects multiple cultural elements of historical sites. The city is located in the centre of the legendary Bactria region, on the bank of the river Amu Darya. It was a place of the great cultures of the East, the unity of Eastern and Western civilisations incorporating ancient Iranian, Hellenist, Buddhist, Turkish, and Arab Muslim influences (Rahmoni, 2001). Now, Termez is popular

³² Bactria was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism and later important in the history of Buddhism.

with its historical sites where tourists come to see the old Temple of Buddhism, Zurmala,³³ the Sultan Saodat³⁴ complex, and Qirqqiz majmuasi.³⁵ However, one of the outstanding sightseeing places is the Al-Khakim at-Termiziy³⁶ shrine. Al-Khakim at-Termiziy was a Sufi scholar in ancient times and had a great influence in developing Sufism in Central Asia. It is believed that before going on pilgrimage to Makkah, one should make pilgrimage to Termiz Ota (Father of Termez) because this place is considered the second holiest place after the *Ka'bah*.³⁷

Visiting this shrine is equal to fulfilling certain religious duties. This is considered part of the cultural pattern. The natives have a well-developed sense of responsibility in preserving cultural and traditional values which have moral significance for them. However, some people visit it for different reasons: to pray, or to get sand from Chilakhona³⁸ in order to heal certain skin problems. Locals believe that the sand in sacred shrines is able to heal light skin problems, and use it as a remedy by spreading it during the veneration. However, Wednesday is a special day for pilgrims to venerate sacred tombs and shrines. This is a day when male and female religious leaders gather and hold the *Ehson*³⁹ ceremony. This day is also considered as a day of sacrificing sheep to perform *sadaqa*⁴⁰ in the name of Termiz Ota to get help for solving problems or recovering from certain diseases. When I visit this shrine it always brings back my childhood memories of the place, crowded with pilgrims venerating the tomb of Termiz Ota and carrying out religious rituals.

My childhood memories

Wednesday, early June 1997, my father took me to the sacred shrine of Termiz Ota to show me a part of our cultural values. During this time, he had a position of responsibility in the

33 A dome-shaped structure erected as a Buddhist shrine

34 The Sultan Saodat complex constitutes a series of multi-religious structures, mausoleums, mosques, and *khanaqa* of the influential Sayyid dynasty of Termez which were direct descendants of the Islamic prophet, Muhammad.

35 Qirq-qiz is a fortress of forty young ladies, according to folk traditions, and could be connected with a legend about the girl warriors living in the fortress.

36 Al-Khakim at-Termiziy, full name Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Ḥakīm al-Termiziy al-Ḥanafī was a Sunni jurist and traditionalist of Khorasan, but is mostly remembered as one of the great early authors of Sufism. His full name is: Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ali bin Hasan bin Bashir (in some sources it is 'Bishr') Al Hakim At-Termiziy. He is locally known as At-Termiziy or Termiz Ota ('Father of Termez city').

37 Holy shrine located near the centre of the Great Mosque in Makkah, and considered by Muslims everywhere to be the most sacred spot on Earth:

38 A small cave where religious leaders stay during the receiving of religious knowledge and title. In Termiz Ota exists three *chilakhona*, where healers stay for a while during their transformation.

39 *Ekhson* is a religious ceremony which is devoted to the Honour of God and the deceased.

40 Voluntary charity

memorial complex, which was one reason for spending most of my childhood time in this place. Next to the tomb of Termiz Ota there was always a responsible male religious leader who recited *surah*⁴¹ from the Quran to honour Termiz Ota. This space was public; women could participate alongside men in the blessings and praying. On the west side of the shrine there was a specific place where religious rituals were held. It was not hard to notice women's religious rituals among the other gatherings; female rituals differed by having only female participants. On that day the shrine was crowded as usual. People were sitting on *kurpacha*⁴² around the tablecloth and were concentrating on the religious leader's reciting. Most of the participants were women, with five men among them. The ceremony was *Ehson* in which attendance by both genders was permitted, and it was being held by a female healer.

Oydin otin⁴³ was there, dressed in a white dress and veiled with a headscarf. Usually, women on pilgrimage to sacred tombs wear coloured dresses with flower prints on them. To meet women dressed in white in this place was rare. These women who were dressed in white have a higher status in religious context. Whiteness is associated with purification in Islam, and those who wear white are signified by having the honoured title Khoji, a title received after making the *hajj*⁴⁴ pilgrimage.

Oydin otin had the title of Khoji ona,⁴⁵ which acknowledges her religious knowledge and authorises her to carry out rituals. The woman was confident, open-minded, and had a pleasant-looking face. The main purpose of holding the *Ehson* ritual is to honour Allah and the sacred spirit of Termiz Ota in the name of *savob*.⁴⁶

Sufi practices are exercised in Uzbekistan by reciting verses from the Quran and chanting poems by the healer in the ceremony (Tursunova, 2011). Oydin otin started reciting poems from the Quran, then continued discussing good deeds from *hadith*⁴⁷ and about doing *savob* every day, to honour parents and elders. Then she shifted the topic to women's and men's equality according to the Islamic doctrine – that women should be treated in a respectful way. The ceremony was connected with kindness, faith, health, power, and sacred space. The conversation changed again and participants of the ceremony started talking about their family problems, the new fabrics which were becoming fashionable in the city, the price

41 The chapters in Quran, Islamic Holy book

42 Mattress in Uzbek style

43 Religious woman who conducts ceremonies in an Islamic way

44 Hajj definition: the pilgrimage to Makkah, which every adult Muslim is supposed to make at least once in his or her lifetime.

45 Khoji ona is a title granted to women who have made pilgrimage to the Ka'bah, Makkah, the Holy shrine of the Islamic world.

46 Good deeds

47 Hadith is one of various reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the prophet Muhammad.

of a bride's dowry in the village, how people were solving their financial problems in order to give big dowries, and they shared experiences. A sheep was slaughtered and meat was fried with onion and potatoes in a big cauldron and later shared among the participants of the rituals. The rest of the meat was distributed to a poor family as a symbol of *savob*. Usually, *Ehson* is held with some *non*,⁴⁸ candy, and meat to transmit power into food, and is distributed by participants. At the end of the ceremony Oydin otin gave a blessing to participants, then made an excuse that she was in a hurry because one hostess had invited her to hold the *Bibi Seshanba* ritual in her house.

***Bibi Seshanba and Mushkul Kushod* rituals**

The *Bibi Seshanba* (Lady Tuesday) and *Mushkul Kushod* (solver of difficulties) rituals are considered entirely women's rituals, where men have no access to participate. For these rituals female guests are invited to share the blessings of the *qushnoch*.⁴⁹ The rituals are conducted in the guestroom of the hostess's home which is considered the space between private and public domains. The women who were excluded in male-dominated religion can be seen here, but there is another component. It makes women's everyday social lives a sacred space whereby they reveal their hidden feelings and experiences which they usually don't share with male members of society.

Bibi Seshanba and Mushkul Kushod represent female goddesses who were maternal aunts of Bahauddin Naqshbandiy.⁵⁰ The fictitious presentation of the two female saints in Islamic mysticism can be considered as a counterweight to gender hierarchies (Gabriele Rasuly-Paleczek & Julia Katschnig, 2004), reflecting female perspectives in Islamic Mysticism. The story of Bibi Seshanba and Mushkul Kushod are still widely popular in the Boysun area, Surkhandarya. It is believed that these female saints are the protectors of all women in the world. Their names are invoked when women healers hold religious ceremonies. At these ceremonies women sit around a tablecloth, light candles, and burn *isphand*.⁵¹ The ritual is performed on Tuesday. The name of the ritual means 'appealing to mother Mushkul Kushod, the lady who solves problems'. Later, these beliefs were transformed into the Islamic cults of Mother Aisha, the wife of the prophet Muhammad and the daughter Fatima (Sultanova, 2011).

48 Uzbeki round bread loaf

49 Healer

50 Baha-ud-Din Naqshbandiy, the founder of the most influential Sufi Muslim order, the Naqshbandiya

51 Rue seeds

When I asked Salomat, a *qushnoch*, about the content and power of the ceremonies she described it to me in the following way:

The purpose is to hold both ceremonies almost at the same time to ease someone's difficulties. These ceremonies are carried out on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. In a domestic realm the hostesses prepare thin, round wheat pancakes that are fried in oil and are distributed to all the participants. I make nine candles by rolling cotton wicks and burning them on a clay pot. I carry out the ceremonies on Tuesday, in the name of the wise elder woman Bibi Seshanba; on Wednesday or Friday in the name of Bibi Mushkul Kushod. In the ceremonies, I use sugar, white candy, cookies, and raisins. With the bread, altogether there must be five symbolic elements. The patient cleans the raisins that are still on the stems while I am burning cotton wicks, then the bunch of stems are wrapped with a piece of cotton. The food is distributed among the participants. The patient takes the stems wrapped in cotton, puts them under the pillow before going to sleep. He/she should remember his/her dream that he/she has that night. Then the symbols of the dream are interpreted. The essential part of the ceremony is that the patient should believe in Allah's Miracle. If she/he believes in the power it will work .⁵² (My translation)

The rituals of the ceremonies are almost the same. The only difference between them is the specific saint the healer devotes the ritual to, which is done by recalling her name. The participants of the rituals believe that Bibi Seshanba and Mushkul Kushod are sacred spirits (angels), and if they satisfy them by devoting the ceremony to their names the messages will reach Allah's realm undoubtedly; they believe that Allah can create miracles and so obey what the healer orders them by bringing symbolic elements and carrying out rituals by using these symbols.

52 The original interview: *Мушкулкушод билан буймушкул битта маросим. Буларни ўтказишдан мақсад инсоннинг мушқулини енгиллаштириш (осон). Асосан чоршанба, жума, якшанба кунлари ўтказилади. Маросимда пахтадан пилакча қилиниб, чироқ ёқилади. биби момоларга сешанба кунни ўтказилади. Оят, сураларни ўқиб, пахтадан пилакча қилиниб, ёгга ботириб, тошни устига чироқ ёқилади, айримлар исриқнинг чўпларини қўшиб ёқади ва айтиладиган гапларини(сура, оят) айтади. Тоқ сонда нон олинади(3,5,7), керакли миқдорда оқ қанд ёки парварда, кишмиш майиз, печенье ва конфет(шоколад) олинади, нон билан жами бешта нарсга бўлиш керак. Чироқни ёқаётганда одамлар майизни чўпидан тозалайди. Чироқ ёниб бўлгач, чўпларни пахтага солиб олиб қўйилади ва мевалар ҳар бир нонни устига бўлиб қўйилади. Хамма ўзига аталган ноинин олиб кетади. Мушкулкушод аталган одам кечаси пахтани ёстигини тагига қўйиб ётади, тушунни эслаб қолиши керак, куйин туши талкил этилади. Бу маросимнинг ахамиятли тарафи худони мужизасига ихлос қилиши. Ихлос булса барчаси мухайё булади.*

Symbolic elements and their meaning

The *qushnoch* uses symbolic elements in the ceremonies as a power transmitter, such as a bowl of sweet water, some tea, salt, *isphand*,⁵³ a mirror, and a bowl of flour covered with a piece of white fabric. The items associated with *oqlik* (whiteness) mean purity and a happy life; tea, salt, and water are the elements of prosperity and plenty; cotton wicks symbolise brightness and contain purifying powers. After burning cotton wicks, a bowl of sweet water is passed round among the participants and they sip it three times. It is believed that the harm is burned down and is replaced with happiness. The same ritual is repeated with a mirror, and participants look in the mirror one by one. This symbolic linkage is associated with the brightness in which participants transmit their positive state one to another. For the ceremony the hostess cooks *shirguruch*⁵⁴ to share among the guests which also signifies purification. After this ritual a bowl of flour is revealed and an image is viewed among the participants. The semiotic meaning of the image is also interpreted by the healer as a way of predicting the hostess's future. Foods and symbolic elements play essential roles in the ceremonies. It is believed that the power of the ceremony is passed to the fire, food, and water through the *qushnoch*'s blessing. These symbols link with ancestors, female saints, and the transcendental world whereby female rituals bear women's perspectives.

In fact, the symbolism of the elements, like water and fire, derive from the local legends of Surkhandarya in the Pre-Islamic period, when the territory belonged to the Bactria Kingdom. During this time Bactrians believed in a God of the sky called Tengri. There was God (male Tengri), Goddess (O't-Ona), and Goddess (Anahita). O't-Ona means 'the mother of fire', who was responsible for providing the fireplace of every household, meals, and warmth. Anahita was associated with fertility, healing, and wisdom (Sultanova, 2011).

Surkhandarya was a place of veneration, fire, water, and earth (Rakhmoni, 2001), where the contemporary religious elements emerged and constitute a union of Islamic rituals. In some areas of Uzbekistan, Anahita became known as Ambar ona, whose power came from the river Amu Darya; at some point she was a symbol of water and rain. Her name is invoked during the healing rituals. The *qushnoch* Muyassar says even sacred female saints are mentioned, but Allah is always at the centre of the ceremonies. The sacred spirit of Termiz Ota, Bibi Seshanba, and Ambar ona support their message to Allah to solve their problems.

The essential part of the female gatherings is to increase spiritual awareness to reinstall peace and harmony in women's life journeys. These female spiritual activities are a

53 Rue seeds

54 Rice pudding

part of their cultural works as alternative therapies, particularly dominated by female religious leaders and participants.

Participants' empowerment

Women report positive changes, self-empowerment, and healing due to their participation in religious rituals. Their perception of their feelings reflects the better balance in their relationships between their family members. In general, misunderstandings among Uzbek family members occur on the grounds of control exercised by parents-in-law and husbands or betrayal by their husbands, which are often the reasons for women's suffering. Women attempt to change oppressive aspects of the family by participating in rituals and ceremonies. The majority of women try to free themselves from the oppressive part of the patriarchal culture, and particularly to shift aspects of their lives. The religious rituals and ceremonies are intended to achieve this goal. The *qushnoch* functions as psychotherapist as she listens to women's concerns and helps them to deal with the patriarchal norms. Dilfuza is one of my interviewees who suffers from family oppression. She shares a household with her parents-in-law, where sometimes misunderstandings and problems occur relating to domestic work:

There are such moments that I am not able to deal with the oppression from my mother-in-law's side. She criticises all things that I do. I cannot complain to my husband, because he protects his mother; she is right and the things that I am doing are wrong. At the same time, I cannot complain to my mum, because I do not want to make her worried. I decided to ask a *qushnoch* to help me to build a nice relationship with my mother-in-law. She blessed the things that I brought: tea and sugar, and obliged me to drink the tea, adding the sugar everyday while making nice wishes, and gave me *fotiha*⁵⁵ (a blessing). (My translation)

When the healer required Dilfuza to drink blessed tea every morning, she wanted to remove her anxiety and convince her that everything would be fine by changing her emotional state. The ritual that she took part in communicates with symbols and the senses by involving the spiritual divine. The tea, sugar, and recitation from the Quran are symbolic forms of therapy

55 Transcript in Uzbek: *Ba'zida qaynonam menga qilayotgan adolatsizlikni hazm qila olmayman. Qilayotgan ishimdan doimo norozi, doimo kamchilik topadi. Erimga aytolmayman, bari bir onasini tarafini oladi. Nimaiki desam o'zing ayibdorsan deydi. Onamga ham aytolmayman ichimdagi dardimni. Ularni havotirga solishni istamayman. Keyin rosa siqilib o'tiradi meni deb. Qushnochdan qaynonam bilan munosabatimizni joyiga tushishiga yordam berishini so'radim. Choy va qand keltiruvdim shularga dam solib berdi. Har kuni yaxshi niyat bilan choy qilib ichishim kerakligini aytdi. Keyin fotiha berdilar.*

which represent emotional stability. After the therapy, Dilfuza kept her positive mood in front of her mother-in-law which prevented an escalation in the tension between them.

Zarifa applied for a healer's help for a different reason. Her main problem was her husband's betrayal:

There was a case when I used a healer's service a couple of times. I had suspicions about my husband who started to come home late and sometimes got drunk. When I asked him where he was after work, he refused to answer or sometimes raised his hand to me. There were times when I found some messages and pictures of unfamiliar women on his phone. One day I could not stand his treating me in this way, so I took my daughter and went to my parents' house. He did not show up for two weeks to take us back home. I was really disappointed, hopeless. Then I decided to return home on my own, whatever would happen, because I knew that I was a guest in my parents' house, and one day they would judge me for my failing marriage. And I did not want my daughter to grow up without a father. One day a friend of mine recommended that I ask Nargiza for help, who was a well-known *qushnoch* in the neighbourhood. Then I visited her.⁵⁶ (My translation)

Zarifa brought the necessary objects and the healer held a ritual. The healer recited some *surah*, gave a blessing, and recommended her to be patient. In such situations healers recite specific *surah* from the Quran which perpetuate family stability. This is a form of resistance which initiates social changes in the household. In Zarifa's case this method of resistance against betrayal is called *issitma* (warm-up). Women ask healers to make *issitma* when women want their husbands to be faithful; healers recite magic into water, an outfit, or a picture as a symbol of building strong family relations. There is an opposite of *issitma* which is termed *sovutma* (cool-down). When women are suspicious that their husbands are betraying them with other women, the healer performs the same rituals in reverse order to reconstruct family relations. In this case the healer, with her holistic approach, gave hope to Zarifa to change her relationship with her husband.

⁵⁶ Transcript in Uzbek: Shunday kunlar bo'ldiki qushnochning yordamidan bir ikki marta foydalanman. Erim hiyonat qilayapti degan shubha bore di. Sababi orada ishdan kech kelib ba'zida mas holatda bo'lar edi. Qayerdan bunday kech kelayapsiz deb so'raganimda javob bermas edi yoki qo'l ko'tarar edi. Orada telefonidan bir ayolning rasm va smslarini ko'rib qoldim. Oxiri bardoshim chidamadi, qizimni oldimda ota-onamni uyiga ketdim. Erim ikki hafta yo'qlamadi, xolimizdan xabar olmadi. Rosti qiyin vaziyatda edim. Qolaversa ota – onamning uyida bari bir mehmon ekanligimni anglardim. Bundan tashqari qizimni otasiz o'sishini istamadim. Bir kuni bir dugonam Qo'shni mahaladagi Nargiz qushnochga borib uchrashishimni aytdi. So'ng umid bilan uning oldiga yordam so'rab bordim.

Some women visit healers to stop domestic violence by the husband and his family members. Nigora endured such violence, which was her reason for visiting a *qushnoch*.

My husband always raised his hand if I refused to do something. Once it happened when I was a pregnant. I asked him to let me visit my parents, because there was a special occasion in our family. He did not allow me to go. Despite his restriction, I used my pregnancy as an excuse and participated in the event thinking that he wouldn't do anything. The next day he gave me a slap, because I didn't obey his order. I couldn't bear it. I needed to do something to stop this physical violence. Then I decided to use a *qushnoch's* services. Because everybody does it.⁵⁷

In rural areas, men believe that their wives should be submissive to their orders. However, the majority of men are not aware of their wives' magical actions. Those who are aware certainly fear the power of magic and change their attitude towards their wives. Even if the men's behaviour doesn't always change, at least the healing power and blessings help women to feel that their stress is relieved for a short time when they tell the healer about their problem. Through these ways women reconstruct their approach towards their husbands, and it can be articulated as regaining strength and hope.

The healer Muyassar opa asserted that they do not only focus on the healing process, but also on family prosperity and mutual understanding of couples:

We try to relieve women's suffering, pain, and oppression. The woman is the only member who suffers in a family and community realm, because she has a lot of responsibility as mother, daughter-in-law, and wife. The man does not take into account her work, contributions, and love. He treats his wife according to his mother's attitude towards the daughter-in-law. The behaviour of mothers towards their daughters-in-law is patriarchy. Because some mothers-in-law initially consider their own pleasure in the familial realm, to be free from housekeeping and cooking. This is the main source of problems, whereby women are insulted by family members, beaten by the husband, and conflicted with mothers-in-law. As a result, women lose harmony

57 Original interview: Erim doimo gapini ikki qilsam qo'l ko'tarardi. Bir marta bu og'r oyoqligimda bo'ldi. Ota onamni uyida bir marosim o'tkazayotgan edik shunga ruxsat surasam yo'q dedilar. O'qir oyoqmanu borsa qattiq gapirar deb ketdim. Ertasi kuni kelsam nega ota onangnikiga ketding deb yuzimga shapoloq tortdi. Bir alam qildi. Ortiq chida olmadim. Nimadir qilishim kerak edi bu qul ko'tarishlarning oldini olish uchun. Qushnochga borishga qaror qildim. Chunki odatda kupchilik shu ishni qiladi.

and stability in their families. We help them to restore the harmony and stability in their lives.⁵⁸ (My translation)

By using the tool of rituals, Muyassar opa tries to build peace in the household, because in the society spiritual power is considered in a moral discourse and it is believed to reinforce new behaviour of individuals. She empowers women to pursue their self-interests and seek harmony. Muyassar asserts that sometimes the healing happens without the belief: ‘Some people say that they do not believe, but they still hope it will happen.’⁵⁹ (My translation)

People believe that when they visit a healer they feel a holistic change, even if it’s temporary. They revert back to the previous state because of factors around them, or they face the same problem that caused their holistic imbalance. In most cases people think that they can get rid of the problem completely by changing the process temporarily.

Healing rituals as a strategy for reconciliation and reinforcing familial relationships

In this section, I highlight healing rituals as a peacebuilding strategy, whereby I describe the *pholbin*⁶⁰’s ritual as a direct influence on the quality of the relationship with family members as well as its effect indirectly by fostering temperance. To clearly explain the concept I decided to bring my own story and share the experience of my participation in healing rituals.

Being part of Uzbek society, as a woman of 25, I was supposed to be married according to the culture and traditions. My state of singleness was making my mum, who wanted to see me happy, feel worried. In Uzbek society, a woman’s happiness is associated with being married and having children. My elder sister convinced me to go to the healer for my mother’s sake. She told me that a healer called Pardakhol was the best one in the town. Pardakhol specialised in holding religious rituals and foretelling the future; she was both *qushnoch* and *pholbin*. When we visited her house, a middle-aged woman opened the door and led us to the crowded waiting room. Most of the participants were women. The healer

58 *Boshqa tomondan biz ayollarning qiyinchilarini, og’riqlarini va ezilishlarini yengillashtiramiz. Sababi, ayol kishi oilada va jamiyatda eng ko’proq qiynaladiganlaridan. Ayolning buyniga juda ko’p ma’suliyat yuklangan, ona sifatida, kelin sifatida va rafiqqa sifatida. Erkaklar ularning bu mehnatini, hissasini va muhabbatini hisobga olishmaydi. Ular onalaridan olgan tarbiyasi qarab munosabat ko’rsatishadi. Hatto, qaynonalarning kelinlari oldidagi munosabati ham adolatsiz. Sababi qaynonalar birinchi galda o’zlarini rohatini ko’zlashadi oilada, uy va oshxona ishlari kelinlarning zimmasida deb bilishadi. Va bu vazifani ular a’lo darajada bajarishlari lozim degan fikrdalar. Ana shu muammo barcha muammolarning urug’i. Uydagi janjal va kelishmovchiliklar ana shundan kelib chiqadi asosan. Buning orqasidan kelin haqorat qilinadi, eri qo’l ko’taradi kezi kelsa va qaynonasi bilan bitmas tuganmas kelishmovchilik yuzaga keladi. Ayol shuni orqasidan qattiq siqiladi, hayotga bo’lgan qiziqishini yo’qotadi va oilaviy tinchligiga putr yetadi. Biz ularga bularni barini tiklashga yordam beramiz.*

59 Ba’zi odamlar ishonmiman deyishadi. Bari bi rich ichidan o’sha narsani sodir bo’lishiga umid qilib turishadi.

60 Healer, soothsayer

was sitting on the right side of the room and performing a ritual to drive out someone's evil eye by burning some pieces of oiled cotton and reciting *surah*⁶¹ silently. Some young girls in the room, aged around 24–29, were covered with white sheets, and some of them were holding smouldering candles. Even though I was sceptical about all the rituals and their effects, I decided to try to experience the feelings that give a lot of hope for women in the town who need psychological and spiritual support in a patriarchal society. When my turn came, the women around the healer started hiccuping and yawning oddly. As I understood later they were *shogirds*⁶² of Pardakhol. Pardakhol looked at me and gradually went into a trance state, fainting and then coming into consciousness slowly. I looked at her and smiled. I was told that inside of me there was something wrong that blocked my way to happiness. This 'something wrong' was associated with the 'evil eye' – more precisely with sorcery – as she explained that it came from a family acquaintance attempting to harm the family members because of a misunderstanding between families. But, she interpreted, this sorcery mostly affected me rather than others. Then she obligated me to visit her three times, so that she could undertake a cleaning ritual against the sorcery. For carrying out the ritual she told my sister to bring a sheep, a white sheet, and a bottle of water. The next day we did as she had told us. I was required to sit on the sheep, and then she covered my whole body with a white sheet. She lit a thick stick, the top of which had been wrapped with oiled cotton. She started to rotate the burning stick around my head and read several *surah* while blowing all over my head. Most healers contact their mystical spirits while they are in an altered state of consciousness. In this state they can hold rituals by burning a stick, drumming, chanting, or dancing. However, Pardakhol specialised in driving out the evil spirits by flame. She asked spirit angels to start cleaning the inside and outside of me: 'I am burning all harmful spots. I am burning all bewitching. Take harm from her body. You are the only one Allah. You are the Almighty One.'

She continued to call on the spirits to help her drive out the evil eye: 'Burn and remove everything. Remove the burden from her shoulders. Open her road. Remove inside all that bewitches. I burn everything.'

She repeated the statement several times. Her actions immediately reminded me of another healer who I had visited earlier. Instead of using sheep and fire, she held a ritual with a white pigeon. The healer requested me to hold the pigeon while she was reciting *bakhtnoma*⁶³ and let me set the bird free.

61 Verses from the Quran

62 Follower, student

63 Quranic verses granting happiness

Both healers had different approaches to healing, but similar purposes. These healers used a shaman's method through symbolic sources of flame, trance, and animals to ensure changes of holistic mood towards the institution of marriage. These rituals have a symbolic meaning for my family members, which gave them hope for social changes. My family became more positive and open towards me. As well, the therapeutic action of healers emphasised the reconstructing of relationships between me and my family, which transformed our attitudes towards each other. The interpretation of the healing action depicts the perception of good relationships and hope as a means of rebuilding new social structures at the family level.

The study of this chapter shows that these ceremonies are 'agents' that combat one form of oppression and may at the same time be preserving and validating the other part of patriarchy. The healers use symbolic items like tea, sugar, yogurt, water, soap, and needles for emancipatory strategies which symbolise the individuals' and the families' prosperity and happiness. Through their actions, healers promote the social norms relevant to traditional-cultural norms, specifically pro-marriage attitudes and gender traditionalism. On the other hand, these ceremonies prove their essential role in empowerment and peacebuilding discourse in the social domain. The anthropologist Maria Elisabeth Louw writes that healers' rituals create 'peace' and harmony at home. By using the term 'peace' she refers to reconciliation in a family or at work between colleagues or community. This peacebuilding approach of healers is more successful in Surkhandarya than the Women's Committee intervention into family issues, because the Committee does not solve the conflicts between family members. The community based on rituals may reduce and solve conflicts and give a space for reconciliation for many families. Simultaneously, it can play a crucial role as resistance against oppression, abuse, and violation in the familial realm.

3. Empirical knowledge of women healers and their path towards the Uzbek model of empowerment

In the previous chapter, I tried to highlight religious practices of Surkhandarian women that link with their long tradition and history that now represent their sacred space whereby they share and deal with social and familial oppression. The narratives reflect the nature of experiences, the symbolic meaning, and the role of rituals in reconstructing familial bonds and reinforcing gender power relations. In the first section of this chapter, I will try to show healers' experiences prior to becoming healers and the symbolic elements leading them towards this path. The participants shared powerful experiences of their personal transformations and the reasons for becoming healers. The narratives demonstrate a range of deep empiricism in Salomat, Muyassar, and Gulnora's life journeys. The second section describes the meaning of empowerment in the Uzbek context and the cultural perception of the concept of subordination. In this section, the participants of the study gave specific definitions of what empowerment and subordination mean for them, and how these concepts present in their lives. In the last section, I focus on the healing art as an opportunity for alternative employment, whereby healers find new paths towards empowerment and self-healing.

The process of transformation: How did I become a healer?

Prior to engaging in the healing arts, the healers experience spiritual transformations whereby they undergo certain experiences which are interpreted by locals as a call from the ancestral spirit. In Surkhandarian language epistemology, this is called *chilton*,⁶⁴ an ancestral spirit which usually can be attributed to transforming individuals into healers. This spirit belongs to either the maternal or paternal line of the family, who had the title of *eshon*⁶⁵ or *qushnoch*. This spirit manifests in a symbolic form according to local beliefs in the form of a dream, illness, or bad luck.

Salomat, a *qushnoch*, experienced the *chilton* in the form of a dream and illness in one of her family members. Before accepting the 'sacred gift' she was a secular woman who did not have any knowledge of Islam. Her mother followed Islamic doctrine, but never forced her

⁶⁴ Spirit. The term is used in the southern part of Uzbekistan and northern part of Afghanistan.

⁶⁵ Male religious leader who holds folk and religious rituals of healing.

daughter to obey the five pillars of Islam. When she was 35, she dreamt of her great grandfather, who was an *eshon*, giving her a blessing and knowledge of Islam. Through interpretation of the dream within the parameters set down by those in her region, she experienced spiritual and psychological motivation. She accepted the gift and responsibility from her ancestor. She says:

It was a period when I was experiencing hardship and handicap. After that my father fell ill. His kidneys were not functioning properly. I took him to different doctors. But everything was useless. After having this dream, I was surprised to see in my dream my great grandfather whom I never knew. I was sceptical about the spiritual possession because I was interested in modern medicine and herbalism. When I told my dream to my mum, she told me I had a *chilton* and it was a sign by my great granddad to *take a hand*.⁶⁶ She said my father's illness could be related to the *orqa* (spirit possession). Then she recommended me to visit the *qushnoch* Oynisa, who has been practising healing for 15 years. When I visited her she told me the same as my mum did. Then we started the accepting the gift ritual. Oynisa started lightly lashing me with a whip. Then she played a *doira*,⁶⁷ walking around me and chanting sacred words. Later on she burned some cotton wicks on a small piece of stone, giving me a blessing. She told me to keep this stone for using in the rituals that I would hold.⁶⁸ (My translation)

According to Zulfiya Tursunova's hypothesis, the *qushnoch* Salomat was endowed with '*ilohiy kuch*', and so was destined to receive the call. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi explains this phenomenon as 'holy lineages' whereby the gift is inherited by ancestors. In her study of the Khorezm region, Uzbekistan, Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi gives an example of one of woman who experienced spiritual transformation by having a disease. According to her, the woman had been advised to learn how to write Arabic and how to recite verses from the Quran. Later, she accepted the divine gift in order to get better. Moreover, her mother, who used to engage in

66 To accept the obligation of healing, spiritual possession

67 Round drum

68 The original interview: *O'gir kunlarni bshimdan o'tkazayotgan edim. Boshim qiyinchiliklardan chiqmay qoldi. Tasodifan birdan dadam kasal bo'lib qoldi. Buyraklari yaxshi ishlamay qoldi. Ko'rsatmagan duxtirim qolmadi. Keyin tushimga kata bobom kirib chiqdi vaqo'limga nimanidir tutqazdi. Onamga aytсам balam chiltoning bor qo'l olishing kerakligidan darakdir dedi. Keyin esa dadangni kasali ham shu tufaylidadir deb qoldi. Oynisa qushnochga uchrashimni aytdi. U ham onam aytganini takrorladi. Keyin esa marosim o'tkazib qo'l oldim. Oynisa qushnoch qamish bilan sekin silab, atrofimda doira chalib oyat keltirdi. Keyin esa toshga chiroq yoqib, toshni saqlab quyib uni kelajakda chiroq uchun ishlatishimni aytdida duo berdi.*

healing, transmitted her *lashkar*⁶⁹ (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008). Johan Rasanayagam, emphasising the healers' empirical knowledge, talks about a man experiencing transformation by holding a 15-day period of *chilla* (isolation and fasting). He was experiencing disease which motivated him to undergo the transformation. In general, men and women can go through the same empirical knowledge regardless of gender. The anthropologist Habiba Fathi, describing Central Asian women healers in her study, asserts that women get ill or experience family members' diseases, which in some cases can bring them close to death. After taking a 'gift' they revive with a new religious identity. (Fathi, 1997). If the family member of a former healer gets seriously ill, people in the community consider it proof that this individual is an assignee to continue the tradition (Bodrogi, 2005). In the case where a woman refuses to take the 'gift', she or her family is expected to become ill or face different challenges; in general, this *chilton's* power can damage her family members. However, after a woman's receiving the 'sacred gift', everything can be worked in her way. It is interpreted by the community as evidence of the *chilton's* power.

For Salomat, being a *qushnoch* was a *shart* (must) according to culture and religion, manifested by symbolical messages and the experiencing of difficulties. But it was not her own choice to follow the canon of tradition. However, she does not regret engaging in healing and religious rituals. She asserts, 'I am doing *savob* (good deeds); this is the most important thing for me.'

The transformation of the *qushnoch* Muyassar into a healer was a similar story. She used to suffer from headaches, and after having a dream of her dead grandmother she was advised to receive a *photiha*⁷⁰ from a *qushnoch* woman. Initially, she carried out a small religious ritual in a domestic setting by cooking a traditional meal commemorating the ancestors' spirits and sharing it with neighbours to bless deceased people. Then she started visiting a *qushnoch* to obtain a *photiha*. Once, when she was in the midst of a healing ritual, she felt a pain in her stomach, which was viewed as a *jinn's* (demon) harm, because she was accepting the call. According to cultural interpretation, the *jinn* sometimes conflict with the successor of the healer because she/he accepts the craft. In general, in Islamic methodology and theology, *jinn* represent evil creatures, which cause psychological harm. During the first night after the healing ritual, she felt her body was paralysed and experienced muteness when she was sleeping. She explained that she felt separated from her body and trapped between

69 Troop of helping spirits

70 A blessing

dreaming and consciousness. As she had been instructed by the *qushnoch*, she committed the first religious ceremony of healing patients which helped her to get rid of the night paralysis. Her transformation shows a set of experiences that she went through. Rasanayagam termed this as an ‘embodying self-process’ (Rasanayagam, p.171) whereby Muyassar’s experiences of dreaming of her great grandmother, the pain in her stomach during the ritual, the paralysis of her body, as well as getting rid of it through the religious rituals, are the stream of knowledge. For this woman, the experiences caused by these events helped push her in the direction of becoming a healer for others.

The Russian anthropologist Gleb Snesev, in one of his studies of shamans, refers to the transformational experiences of healers as mental illness. The anthropologist Basilov gives a counterargument by asserting that ‘taking a gift’ is imposed on the individuals by tradition and community. It is more a traditional pattern than mental illness, he adds. After accepting the ‘divine gift’, according to tradition the illness is supposed to pass, and this connotes that the call is accepted (Basilov, 1997). The symbolic omen can be evidence of constructive knowledge in which the body is made and transformed by community belief and interpretation immersing physical, psychological, and emotional discourses.

My other respondent, Gulnora, describes how she was recommended to accept a spiritual possession. Previously, she suffered with epilepsy, which made her feel vulnerable. She took modern medical treatment, but after a couple of treatments, her family decided to try traditional medicine. The healer said that she should become a *qushnoch*, otherwise it would be difficult for her to be healed. Her parents agreed with this woman, because Gulnora’s great grandmother had been a respectable healer. They immediately found a *qushnoch* and organised an initiation ceremony. Gulnora shared with me the process of the ceremony:

She started calling the spirits and put two whips on the table to whip the illness. She whipped lightly on my back, reciting:
‘Bismilahu Rahmonu Rahim,
My great elders (female and male), ease the difficulties of the person,
Clean her body from harmful spirits,

Help her to recover.’

I felt some disturbance in my body; it seemed like something was moving. Such a weird feeling I never felt. At the end of the ritual, she gave me a *photiha* (blessing), enabling the epileptic seizures to cease.⁷¹ (My translation)

⁷¹ The original interview: *Buyuk avliyolarni tiliga keltira boshladi va qamchi bilan engilgina ura boshladi. Quyidagi so'zlarni keltirib:*

Gulnora is not officially engaged in healing. However, she sometimes rubs her nephews' throats and performs head and body massage, asking Allah to cure them. I asked her whether she feels better after *getting a hand*.

Since having had this ritual, my epilepsy is disturbing me less. I was recommended to visit her again to be cured completely, but did not go since that day. My parents remind me every day to go there and finish my treatment.⁷² (My translation)

Salomat's, Muyassar's, and Gulnora's experiences partially differ from one another and carry symbolic meaning, which reflects their situated knowledge, as well as bodily, emotional, and spiritual experiences. Even though they did not want to accept the call, at the same time they realised that consciously they could not refuse it.

These three healers are similar in nature, and the call affected them at a deep level. In terms of making space for their own identities as healers, the participants connected these aspects of family history to the healing arts by providing a legitimised history that has been passed down to them through their ancestors. Even though the participants did not speak in these terms, their connections to ancestral healers assisted to illustrate the ways in which their identity can be understood by themselves, even subconsciously. On the other hand, their experiences reveal the cultural aspects of becoming healers from a traditionalist view. Their empirical knowledge demonstrated how the cultural model plays a crucial role in their individual life journeys through interpretation of illness and having the revelatory dream.

The Uzbek model of empowerment

Even though the spiritual call is considered a cultural pattern, this point does not lead to the notion of disempowerment, whereby the life path of being a healer is unavoidable. It depends on how modernists and traditionalists view the concept of Islam. Some participants reported they were disempowered prior to becoming healers, while some of them consider it as the

Bismillahhu Rahmonu Rahim

Yo bobolarim va momolarim bu insonning mushkulini oson qilinglar

Tanasini tozalanglar

Shifo beringlar

Tanamda g'alati xolatlarni his eta boshladim, go'yoki nimadir siljib yurganday. G'alati. Ilgari unaqasini xis etmaganman. Marosim tugagach fotiha berdi, kasalikdan butkul tuzalishim uchun.

⁷² The original interview: *O'qitganimdan keyin kasalimning bezovta qilishi kamaydi. Qushnoch yana kel degan edi butunlay sog'ayishim uchun. Ammo, undan keyin borishga quntim bo'lmadi. Ota onam har kuni eslatadi qushnochnikiga borishni va marosimni yakunlashni.*

norm, that they never felt disempowerment in certain discourses. Their insightful narratives show how different experiences in particular discourses offered them a chance to experience either oppression or empowerment which was one reason for choosing the spiritual path. In choosing this path the participants began to see themselves as more empowered or exercising more authority than they ever experienced in their lives.

For Salomat, empowerment meant gaining financial independence and estimation among family members and community. During the economic transformation many people in rural areas experienced financial difficulties; Salomat was one of them. She was raising her two sons and they needed proper education which required financial stability. She did not pursue higher education after finishing school. Instead, she got married and started taking care of family members, a husband, and a mother-in-law. After engaging with the healing craft she stopped being dependent on her husband. Besides her healing practices, she runs her own business in which she provides her patients with natural healing herbs. She hired an employee who helps her to collect herbs from a mountain, clean them, and pack them in bags. Since growing her business she has been able to cover household expenses, and more importantly, to aid her family members by purchasing gifts or helping with the expenses of weddings, all of which certainly strengthen her status within the family and society. Moreover, she has been able to invest her own money in her children's education. She says:

When I was a child, I read a lot of stories about our ancestor Ibn Sino (Avicenna). After getting married, when my children got ill, I used to try to heal them with natural remedies. It always worked well. Then I started reading encyclopaedias, learning about herbs. Then after having the spiritual possession my higher interest in herbalism helped me to heal patients with natural herbal remedies. I feel patients' health conditions through taking their pulse through their hands, feeling their bio-energy, and through my *chilton* (spirits). In this case, I do not conduct ceremonies; instead, I recommend them to use applicable herbs to get well.⁷³

Salomat possesses biomedical knowledge about the body, whereby she feels patients' positive and negative energies. She says, 'When the body produces less energy, it means the body is weak and something is wrong with it. It needs to be cured either through the biomedical way

⁷³ Original interview: Yoshligimda Ibn Sino haqida ko'p hikoyalar o'qir edim. Turmushga chiqqandan keyin, bolalarim kasal bo'lganida tabiiy dorivor o'simliklar bilan davolashga harakat qilar edim. Juda foydasi tegardi. Keyin o't larga oid ensiklopediya kitoblarini o'qib, o't turini foydali jihatlarni o'rganishga harakat qildim. Qo'l olganimdan keyin bemorlarni o't bilan davolay boshladim. Kasallarni qo'lini ushlab pulsidan bilaman kasaligini, yo orqam borligi uchunmi qayerda og'rig'I borligini o'z tanam bilan sezaman. Kasali bo'lgan paytlarda marosimo'tkazmasdan ularga o't berib qay mahalda ichish kerakligini tavsiya etaman.

or through conducting religious rituals of driving out the *duo* (sorcery).’ Her biomedical and spiritual knowledge contributed to her life shift. Her healing capability and religious leadership assisted her to become independent and powerful, and to manage herself in a range of discourses, particularly rewarding her financially – in contrast to her work as housewife – and freed her from dependency on male members of her family.

When I asked if her empowerment and autonomy are associated with a struggle against dominancy and the dictation of patriarchy, she asked me what patriarchy means. I gave her a long explanation, exemplifying from life experiences, because the explicit translation does not exist in the Uzbek language. She replied in the following way:

I think patriarchy is a Western perception and there is not any word which can be associated in the Uzbek language. Even if the word exists, the perception and meaning must be different. I would say when men dominate in a family or society, we Uzbek women do not see anything wrong there. Because the woman has her own duties and responsibilities for the family and society in which she feels comfortable. I never fought for dominancy in my family. Because I did not feel oppressed or underestimated by male members of my family or community. In my family it is always dominated equality. Even my spiritual possession does not mean a struggle for a certain position in the Islamic realm. I just inherited a *chilton* as a family tradition. My spiritual possession was just a way to accomplish my childhood dream to cure people. And certainly to have my own financial budget.⁷⁴

Salomat does not judge women’s subordination within traditional religion. On the contrary, she argues that women can gain respect through their subordination to male members of society:

If a woman obeys what her husband orders, it is only out of respect to him. Because her husband also does what she asks of him. This is in the sense of mutual respect to

74 Original interview: Menimcha bu aytayotgan atamangiz ko’proq g’arb tushunchasiga mos keladi. Chunki o’zbek yilida bunday so’zni uchratmaganman. Agar shunday so’z mavjud bo’lsa ham boshqacha ma’noda keladi. Bir narsani aytishim mumkinki, agar erkak kishi oila yoki jamiyatda bosh bo’lsa, biz uzbek ayollar buni noto’g’ri deb hisoblamaymiz. Chunki ayol kishi jamiyatda va oilada o’zing o’rni bor va o’sha o’rinda o’zini qulay his etadi. Men xech qachon oilada bosh bo’laman deb intilmaganman. Chunki jamiyatda ham oilada ham erkak tomonidan doimo xurmat ko’rganman. Oilamizda xech qachon sen past pog’onadasan, sen yuqori pog’onadasan degan tushunchalar bo’lmagan. Oilamizda doimo tenglik xukm surgan. Xatto qo’l olishim ham biror bir pog’onani egallashim uchun kurash degan ma’noni bermaydi. Bu oilaviy an’ana bo’lgani uchun qo’l oldim. Qo’l olishim ham ko’proq bolaligimdagi orzuimni amalga oshirishga as qotdi. Va albatta o’zinning daromadimga ega bo’lishga yordam berdi.

each other. We should not consider it only as subordination. If a woman is submissive, the man respects this woman and answers her in the same way, being submissive and accomplishing all her wishes. I, also as a wife, sister, and daughter obey the orders of our men and have not lost anything so far.⁷⁵

According to Salomat, women's subordination in an Uzbek context connotes an estimation which empowers women. For this reason, Islam grants them respect and equality. She says the holy Quran generally mentions women with respect and dignity, due to their contribution to humanity and creation. As a basic tenet of the religion, Islam gives certain rights and authority for women, which are sometimes not seen because of the perception of some male members of society regarding the concept of women's subordination and how they use this instrument. She sees it as wrong to use the 'instrument' in the reverse way by underestimating women's value. She was a witness to this in some families, but she has never experienced it herself. In her husband's family her parents-in-law were orphans who underwent difficulties and never allowed domination or mistreatment in the domestic atmosphere.

The other *qushnoch*, Oysha, thinks women's subordination in Islam is a natural instinct, part of the culture, which does not bear a negative meaning:

When we educate our children we do not tell them to be submissive, we say respect elders, the male and female members of your family, particularly respect your husband and wife. But we should take into account that woman plays a crucial role in the relationships between family members. She is a peacekeeper who maintains harmony in the family. This is why it is important to pay attention to girls' education in the family.⁷⁶

According to her, women should fit the social and gender norms, demonstrate good manners of *Uzbekchilik*⁷⁷ and femininity, which they are taught from their family and community.

⁷⁵ Original interview: Agar ayol ayol erkakning aytgan gapini bajarsa, bu unga bo'lgan xurmati ramzi sifatida qarashimiz kerak. Chunki erkak ham ayoli nima desa o'sha ishni bajaradi. Bu o'zaro xurmat belgisi aslida. Buni ayol erkakka buysunuvchi inson sifatida qarashimiz kerak emas. Agar ayol erining gapidan chiqmasa bu ayol xurmat qozonadi, eri ham shu ayolga ana shu yul bilan, javob qaytaradi yani aytgan gaplarini bajaradi. Me ham rafiqa sifatida, singil va farzand sifatida erkaklarimiz aytgan ishni bajaraman. Xech joyim kamaygan emas shu vaqtgacha.

⁷⁶ Original interview: Farzandlarimizga tarbiya berayotganimizda, buysunuvchan bo'l demaymiz, aksincha kattalami xurmat qil, oyiladagi barcha erkaklarni ayniqsa turmush o'rtog'ingni xurmatini joyiga quy deymiz. Xurmatini joyig qo'ysa oilada tinchlik va totuvlik ham bo'ladi.

⁷⁷ Uzbekness, the manner and behaviour belong to Uzbek culture. In most cases it represents moral aspects of Uzbek culture.

These good manners and ‘Uzbek’ norms associate with female obedience, shyness, and respect for others. These features of character are good models of womanhood, wifehood, and particularly motherhood on the grounds that woman is the only person who can keep the household in peace and harmony and teach offspring about humanity. The healer Oysha feels an attachment to these cultural norms and the Uzbek model of teaching and manner of treating women for the reason that it is based on a combination of modern and Islamic approaches where women are esteemed and have equal rights to a man. The healer’s ancestors experienced difficulties during the colonialism and were oppressed due to their national and religious identity. For her to regain her national identity is the only way to continue ancestral traditions:

I belong to the lineage of *eshon* from my paternal side where I learnt the Islamic manner of behaving. My grandfather was an *eshon*; he was called Sherali *eshon*, a religious person who conducted Quranic recitation at funerals and weddings. But it was during Stalin’s time and they were not allowed to pray or perform any ceremony in the Islamic way. The day after conducting one of the ceremonies, he was taken by controllers of NKVD(НКВД) (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs). They came to my grandfather’s house to investigate and took him for interrogation. My father did not see him again. He was raised by his mother who taught him Islamic morality and to read Quran. He did not follow his father’s footsteps; he was just an engineer working at one of the neighbouring farms. My mother was from a traditional family. After finishing school, she got married to my father. She was religious, used to pray five times a day, and was my first mentor in learning to pray *nomoz*.⁷⁸ It was a time when the Soviet policy secularised the whole country, and Russian culture and manners were dominating by suppressing national traditions. This Russification policy was only focused on big cities; the rural areas were still holding to their cultural customs. We were living in the countryside in the small village of Oltinsoy. My mother was from an extended family and usually there was a lot of work due to her family having a big harvest field and a couple of cattle. She learnt everything from her mum and aunts. And I was definitely taught some manner of behaving from her. For instance, she always told me not to look straight into elders’ eyes or contradict them, particularly male elders. Because this is considered bad behaviour and a way of expressing disrespect. Moreover, when I was a teenager, she taught me to wake up

78 Islamic way of praying

early and sweep the yard, because Allah grants the person and the household with an abundance of blessings. Also to make breakfast and to greet the family members. I was the only daughter in my family among three brothers, which was the reason for learning to fulfil all the female duties in the household.⁷⁹

For Oysha, the concept of good womanhood is grounded on familial lineage and education where women acquire basic knowledge of good manners and female duties. The moral aspect here is that all housework (particularly female domestic work) has symbolic meaning which is interpreted by connecting to Islam. For instance, sweeping the yard in the morning signals a good, welcoming atmosphere and an abundance of blessings from Allah. This can be the reason women feel motivated to wake up early and fulfil their duties. In traditional families, which are common in rural areas, the gender roles and duties are taught at an early age to children, and every obligation is signified as female work or male work. Female work comprises indoor duties which are based on the multi-functional capabilities of women such as: cooking, baking, cleaning, and nurturing. Men usually do not do female duties (only in exceptional cases or in modern families). At the most he'll issue orders relating to the requirements of fulfilling these duties. This is the Uzbek model of subordination, and most women consider it the norm.

During our conversation, Oysha linked Uzbek feminine norms with the concept of Uzbek feminism, whereby women struggle for harmony and peace within their household. According to her, the only thing that Uzbek women need is to see all their family members healthy and happy; women mainly care about their status as wives and mothers, which at the same time empowers her in societal and familial discourses. She is always ready to sacrifice herself in the name of motherhood, to see her children's prosperity, and she always feels the responsibility of being a decent woman. For the healer Oysha, the empowerment mainly implies harmony and peace in every family, where there are no battles or conflict. She tries to

⁷⁹ Original interview: Otam tomonidan eshonlardan bo'lganim uchun uyda tarbiyamiz shunga yarasha bo'lgan. Bobomni Sherahli eshon deyishardi, a'za va nikohlarda quron tilovat qilar edi. Stalin davri bo'lgani uchun nomoz o'qish va diniy marosimlarni olib borish taqiqlangan edi. Bir marosimni o'tkazgandan ertasi kuni NKVD odamlari kelib, uyini taftishadi va bobomni surov qilishga olib ketishadi. Shundan keyin bobom qaytmaydi uyga, bedarak ketadi. Otamni momom tarbiyalaydi, quronni o'qishni o'rgatadi. Ammo, otam bobom yo'lidan bormaydi, oddiygina ingener bo'lib qushni fermada ishlaydi. Onam maktabni bitiriboq otamga erga tegadi. Onam nomozxon edi 5 vaqt nomozni kanda qilmas edi kuniga. Nomoz o'qishni onamda o'rganganman. Va albatta asosiy tarbiyachim onam hisoblanadi. Doimo qulog'imga quyur edi kattalarning ko'ziga tik boqma va gap qaytarma derdi. Bu xurmatsizligingni bildiradi derdi. Qolaversa har ertalab turib hovlini supursang xudo rizq-ro'z ulashadi derdi. Ertlabki nonushtani tayorl va salom berishni unutma degan tarbiyalari bore di. Oilada bitta qiz bo'lganim uchun uchta akalar ichida barcha uy ishlarini o'rganishga majbur bo'lganman. Ammo, shu tajriba tufayli erga tekkanimdan keyin qiynalmaganman. Juda as qotgan.

help female patients achieve balance in their lives, to solve their problems through religious rituals, whereby she becomes self-empowered.

In comparison with her, for the *qushnoch* Dilafuz, the concept of empowerment comes from different experiences and discourses. She experienced some criticism of her address from male religious leaders, which undermined her ability as a religious person. She thinks there is still hierarchy in religion, in which man sees himself at the top:

Male members of the society prefer Islamic religious practices conducted by male religious leaders: mullahs and imams. They think women's activity is related to sorcery and witchcraft with non-Islamic practices. Actually, sorcery can be conducted by both genders. Nevertheless, mullahs always reject rituals performed by women religious leaders. I also conduct *Ehson*, *Bibi Seshanba*, and *Mushkul Kushod* ceremonies. I obey the five pillars of Islam.⁸⁰ (My translation)

She says that men believe that true knowledge belongs to male religious leaders and that is why the male members of the community deny female religious practices, even the religious practices carried out similarly by both genders. Nevertheless, her visitors are both male and female, yet her engagement is criticised by some male members despite her religious activity and authority being recognised by the same community. When I asked how she replied to criticism of her address by male religious leaders, she answered she did not resort to any outward action, instead she started improving her religious knowledge by reading Quran. When we discussed empowerment and what empowers her in religious discourses, she shared her own story:

After getting married, I experienced a lot of difficulties in my husband's family. My mother-in-law was strict and always quarrelled with me. The problem was caused from housework: cleaning and cooking. I graduated from university with a degree in pedagogy and started working as a teacher in elementary school. It was really difficult to manage my career and the housework at the same time. After a couple of conflicts with my husband and mother-in-law I was near to getting divorced. My family convinced me not to divorce and to be patient. My mum told me, 'Qizim (daughter),

⁸⁰ Erkaklar ko'proq mulla va imomlarni taklif etishadi marosimlarni o'tkazish uchun. Ayollar ko'proq din taqiqlagan qora va oq sehrgarlik bilan shug'ulanadi deb o'ylashadi. Ko'p mullalar ayol qushnochilarni qoralashadi, ishini nopok deb atashadi. Bu notug'ri deb o'ylayman. Meh ham Ehson, Bibi Seshanba va Mushkul kushod marosimlarini o'tkazaman. Islom dini buyurgan beshta farzni bajaraman. Ammo, mullalar oldida bizni darajamizni bari bir pastki pog'onaga quyib quyadi. Nima ham derdim.

all problems are temporary. These hard times will pass one day and you will forget everything.’ She asked me if I divorce, what will the neighbours think? It does not fit with *Uzbekchilik*. I had no choice and was in a desperate situation. In the end, I had to quit my job to save my family. It was really hard for me to do it. After receiving a ‘gift’ my status completely changed. Now I have more choices and can organise my everyday life. I have visitors three times a week, when I am completely busy with conducting ceremonies and rituals. The rest of the days I visit my parents, participate in community events, and do the other household things. I think this is empowerment for me: to have the choice to do whatever I want, and to have autonomy in my private behaviour. Because, after engaging the *qushnochilik* I gained the chance to be less involved in housework and my conflicts with family members ended. Now, I have more time to organise my days and I am thinking to come back to my career. The attitude of my mother-in-law towards me has changed. Now my family members support me no matter what, either in the family or with community works. Even though some men do not acknowledge my spiritual possession, some of them pay respect and ask me to solve their problems through divine intervention.⁸¹ (My translation)

In comparison with Salomat and Oysha, Dilafruz has been exercising more empowerment in different discourses because of her harsh experiences in the past. The idea of subordination from her personal perspective is represented differently because of her familial atmosphere and her experience of being treated. Her story demonstrated and reflected a similar destiny of other Uzbek women who still live in patriarchal families and face everyday oppression by exercising the model of *Uzbekchilik*. At some point, traditional and cultural requirements put

81 Original interview: Erga tekkanimdan keyin xo'jaynimning oilasida juda qiyinchiliklar ko'rganman. Qaynanam qattiq qo'l edi va deyarli har kuni men bilan janjal qilar edi. Janjal har doimgidek uy ishlarini ustidan chiqar edi. Bu yerni tozalamapsan, ovqatni kechiktirding deb. Pedagogika sohasi bo'yicha o'qiganman. Oqishni tugatgandan keyin maalik bo'p maktabda boshlang'ich sinfga dars bera boshladim. Ammo, uy ishlari va ishni bir vaqtda uddalash juda qiyin edi. Bir mahal erim va qaynanam qattiq janjal qilishdi. Ajrashish darajasiga kelib qoldim. Onam quy qizim ajrashma odamlar nima deydi, bu o'zbekchilikka to'g'ri kelmaydi deb qoldi. Qaltis vaziyatda edim. Yig'ladim, siqildim. Keyin ishni tashlashga majbur bo'ldim oilamni saqlab qolish uchun. Qo'l olganimdan keyin vaziyat o'zgardi. Hozir har bir kunimni planlashtiraman. Haftada uch kun bandman odam ko'rish bilan. Haftaning qolgan kunlari ota onamni borib yo'qlab kelaman, mahalladagi tuyu marosimlarda qatnashaman va uy ishlari bilan band bo'laman qolgan mahal. Men erkinligim bu xurmat va tanlash huquqiga ega bo'lishimni bildiradi. Chunki qo'l olganimdan keyin uy ishlarini deyarli qilmayman. Oldinlari assosan vaqtim uy ishlarini bajarishga ketar edi, tozalash, supur sidirkatta hovlini o'zingiz yaxshi bilasiz. Ikki mahal ovqat tayorla va hokazo. Hozir qiladigan ishlarimni rajalashirishga vaqtim bor. Qaynonamning munosabati butunlay o'zgardi. Hozir oila a'zolarim meni bu vaziyatda oilada ham, mahallada ham qullab quvvatlashadi. Xattoba'zi erkaklar qilayotgan ishimi tan olmasada, ba'zilar xurmat ko'rsatishadi. Kelib mushkulini oson qilishimi so'rashadi.

big responsibilities on women's shoulders which disempower them, as we saw in Dilafruz's example. On the other hand, as Salomat mentioned, it depends on the individual's perception of the woman's role in the family and if they use the model of *Uzbekchilik* as an instrument of exploitation and oppression. Dilafruz, within the structure, tries to survive by resisting, but not by using radical ways of fighting. Instead, she is taking an alternative way that simultaneously empowers others. Her experience could be the main reason for her to find spirituality and solutions to deal with patriarchal oppression and injustice under the mask of *Uzbekchilik*. She is one of the women who could claim her inner voice against oppression, taking action against it. However, there are still some women who keep silent about their familial conflicts and accept their oppression as the norm.

Secondly, Dilafruz's experience with male backlash signified her subsequent level of 'struggling' with domination and unequal discourse in religion. She replied to the criticism through peaceful action by devoting her time in developing her religious knowledge and gaining emotional stability.

New career

The healers in this study reported that they got involved in the healing arts because of their spiritual call or familial traditions that gave them an opportunity to gain new healing work or a professional career unrelated to alternative medicine; some of them shifted from standard work like that of a merchant or housewife to that of a *qushnochilik*. As the women talked about their previous lives, ancestral heritage, the illness of their family members, and the bodily and emotional experiences which invoked no choice, for some of them; for some of them gave an opportunity to organise their own life. In terms of becoming a healer, it eventually led them to an empowering path of self-empowerment and empowering others. Their new position as healer was an essential step for them. The experience of these participants' becoming healers demonstrated the necessity for career changes rather than a predetermined step to take the path.

Like Dilafruz, Muyassar had a series of hard experiences that contributed to her career change, or her shifting from a certain position into the *qushnochilik*. Muyassar was a trade salesperson for over 10 years and had a small shop in the shopping centre in Termez, specialising in selling fabric and textile fibres before beginning the explorations of alternative spirituality. Eventually she decided to quit her previous job and switch completely to practising as a *qushnochilik*:

It was in 2005, when I started selling vegetables like potatoes and onions in a local market. It was hard work, but I did not have a choice. I was a single mother with two children who I needed to take care of, being both mother and father. I used to wake up early, around five am to come to the wholesale market and buy vegetables from farmers at a cheap price and resell at a higher price. The hard moments were in winter time, when it was cold and the market was outdoors. Even though I used to wear layers and layers of warm clothes, I would freeze. I tried to put some wood under my frozen feet or move them constantly in circles to warm them up. Once I got pneumonia and had to take time off to recover. After two years, I could collect some money and decided to change the type of goods I sold, and rented a small shop to sell fabrics. It was a successful and profitable job; I travelled every week to the big city to bring products to my shop. My children started helping me with selling, when I was away or if there were any events like weddings and gatherings in the community. But after being recommended to receive ‘a call’ I decided to quit that job and switch to being a *qushnochilik*.⁸² (My translation)

Muyassar lost her husband after six years of marriage and had to take care of her two children. She decided to devote her life to them instead of getting married again. Her trade life was not so easy. At the beginning she borrowed some money and started buying goods to sell to make a living. Even after shifting the products, she faced difficulties like commuting 10 to 12 hours every week to a big city. Her shift into the work of a *qushnoch* was not by accident; it was necessary for her personal circumstances and for reasons of tradition.

In Salomat’s and Dilafuz’s case it was different: they were housewives and their transformation created a temporary career for them which ultimately led to them fulfilling their chosen careers. Salomat described that the path of healer opened the way for her to fulfil her herbalism career, whereby she could alternatively heal patients with natural herbs. Salomat’s father’s illness motivated her to open a healing practice and become self-employed,

⁸² Original interview: 2005 yilda bozorda kartoshka piyoz sotishni boshlaganman. Qiyin edi, oson ishning o’zi yo’q. Ikkita bola bilan qolgan edim erim o’lganidan keyin. Bolalarimga ham ona, ham ota bo’lishga harakat qilardim kam ko’st ko’rmasin deb. Ertalab optom bozorga chiqib sabzavotlarni dehqon qo’lidan sotib olish uchun sahar 5 da turar edim. Qishda qiyin bo’lardi, bozor ochiq joyda bo’lgani uchun tez sovqatib qolardim. Qalin kiyinsam ham sovuq o’tib ketardi. Tovonlarimni isitish uchun oyog’im ostiga taxta qo’yardim yo bo’lmasa pastayana harakatlantirardim isitish uchun. Bir marta shunday sovuqdan o’pkamni shamollatib quyuvdim, keyin davolanishga ancha vaqtim ketgan. Ikki yildan keyin, pul yig’ib magazine ijaraga olib material sotsammi degan qarorga keldim. Ancha foyda ko’rardim bu ishdan, har hafta Tovar olib kelish uchun Toshkentga qatnar edim. Bolalarim kata bo’p qoluvdi, Toshkentga ketgan bo’lsam yo mahalla yig’iniga chiqsam yo tuyga borsam o’rnimga savdo qilib turardi. Keyin qo’l olgin deyishdi, shu bilan savdoni yig’ishtirdim.

whereby she felt even more determination to be successful in her new life as a healer and herbalist.

After her marriage and the birth of her children, Dilafruz had to quit her previous job to save her family and obey cultural rules in the name of ‘good wifehood’ rather than pursuing her career. Once her children grew up, she began exploring employment options again after becoming a healer. Dilafruz realised that she could not continue to live this way, living without choices or satisfaction from her own lifestyle. Indeed, this way of living had caused her negative consequences such as constant depression and spending most of her time indoors, without socialising:

It took my wonderful years, keeping me indoors. I used to see my life as running between my husband and mother-in-law to satisfy their wills. I started falling into a depression; as a result I didn’t feel like talking or seeing people. My life was circling from one domestic duty to another. I really wanted to change something in my life, but always found difficulties. I tried to share my feelings, that I really felt ‘bad’, a feeling which I was constantly wrapped in, but my mother-in-law considered it as an excuse for not doing housework. I was done with it.⁸³ (My translation)

After receiving a spiritual gift, she could take a step towards changing her life. Dilafruz works with many women suffering from emotional imbalances severe enough to impact their mental, emotional, and spiritual health, which at the same time helped with her self-healing. She started empowering herself through resisting the social and patriarchal structures by improving her religious knowledge and devoting herself to religious rituals. Becoming a healer was an essential period in her life, for the process of self-healing and empowerment.

Oysha was a housewife, whose ‘holy lineage’ contributed to her getting promoted from stay-at-home mum to healer. Her healing and religious knowledge were obtained via home education, as there were no alternative healing or female religious knowledge educational institutions. She obtained primary knowledge from her mum and later improved her skills by following home-grown female religious leaders.

For Gulnora, the youngest healer among the participants, the healing work is serving as an alternative position to her career as a journalist whereby she balances her emotions and

⁸³ Original interview: Eng yaxshi yillarim uyda o’tirish bilan o’tib ketdi. Hayotim erim va qaynonamni istak xohishini bajaraman deb o’tdi. Tushkunlikka tusha boshladim, atrofimdagi odamlar bilan gaplashgim kelmasdi. Hayotimda biror bir o’zgarish bo’lishini xohlardim. Bu haqida qaynonam bilan gaplashay deganimda bahona qilayapti uy ishlaridan qochish uchun derdi. Juda charchagan edim.

deals with stress. She explained that prior to becoming a healer her work in journalism seemed to cause her excessive emotional and stressful experiences:

When you have responsibility for checking the reliability of news, correctness of sources, it always forces you to be responsible and attentive. If you skip something important you always get criticised from administration. It causes stress for me; I am always tense and stressed. When I heal someone by doing massage or cleansing her body from the evil eye – I do it seldom – you cannot imagine the release I feel from the stresses. Moreover, since engaging in healing arts, I feel less disturbance from my seizures.⁸⁴ (My translation)

After exploring this path, Gulnora found a balance in her career life, which gives her an opportunity to discover herself in different positions. Her alternative job benefits her by keeping her health stable, her emotions balanced, and she is able to deal with stress. At some point, it helped her to gain self-healing and normalise imbalanced emotions which sometimes provoked her epilepsy.

The stories of the healers demonstrate the participants' motivation in pursuing the healer's path which was a cultural obligation, as well as fulfilling their individual needs. In choosing this life path, nevertheless rejecting or accepting the phenomenon by taking responsibility, the participants started seeing themselves as more empowered than they were before. We also had a look at their lives through their interviews in order to understand the nature of their experiences and the meaning of their empowerment in terms of cultural patterns.

⁸⁴ Original interview: Yangiliklarni xatosiz o'tishi uchun mas'ulman. Uni manbaasini tekshir, xato o'tib ketmasin degan kata mas'uliyat bo'ynimda. Xatto o'tsa boshliqlarimdan daki yeyman. Shunga doim assablarim tarang bo'lib yurardi. Odatda suq chiqarish, yo massage qilib biror joyini davollashga vaqtim bo'lmaydi deyarli. Ammo qilgan vaqtimda ishonmaysiz o'zimni biram yengil his qilaman.

4. Discussion

Traditional models of womanhood: gender roles, subordination, empowerment, and the space for conflict resolution

This chapter discusses the traditionalist concept of womanhood and the model that empowers them within a religious framework through their participation in rituals and ceremonies. The chapter includes a review of the concept of subordination from the perspective of Uzbek women and further analyses of empirical knowledge of women healers reaching empowerment both as clients and as healers by implementing a theoretical framework to analyse the essential parts of their life experiences. The goal of this chapter is to support the foundations of theory that help clarify and illuminate these participants' empirical knowledge.

The discussion uses the work of Jane Boddy (1994): women's agency in religion as contra hegemonic discourse; Saba Mahmood (2005): Islamic feminist theories of agency; Tursunova (2014), Pedram Khosronejad (2013): religion as a space of 'renegotiation and communication'; Johan Rassayanagam (2013), Peshkova (2015), Olcott & Ziyaeva (2008): Islam as a national identity and its moral aspects; Donna Haraway (1988): situated knowledge of women healers; and Meredith B. McGuire (1998): exploring the meanings and realities of the experiences of the women patients and healers, including concepts of creating space for new identities. The discursive approaches of Saba Mahmood (2005), Pedram Khosronejad (2013), and Zulfiya Tursunova (2014) assist in understanding the participants' experiences and the concept of subordination and empowerment.

Traditional discourse of womanhood and the means of empowering

As psychological therapists and practitioners, the healers in the study demonstrated a variety of pro and counter ideas about the model of subordination in the Uzbek context and how it reflects in gender role-based discourse. Interestingly, in some interviews healers reported they were never disempowered within the patriarchal structure; on the contrary, according to them, the meaning of empowerment for Muslim women is grounded in their subordination to men. The idea of the 'good, submissive' wife and daughter-in-law that some participants perceived as a core of cultural values represents the ideal model for womanhood and femininity. For instance, Salomat said that Muslim women's subordination is associated with agency

(Mahmood, 2005) whereby women gain mutual respect and estimation; the concept does not bear a negative meaning within the Uzbek context, depending on individuals' understanding of the concept and how they use the model in practice. The other healer, Oysha, says female subordination in Islam means peace and harmony in every family; women are the main peacekeepers and preservers of cultural values (Peshkova, 2015) because of their biological function as caregiver and reproductive abilities which constitute the core of the traditional family's values. However, some of the healers recognise this cultural form of womanhood leads to suffering of women and a cycle of oppression. This concept, as the *qushnoch* Salomat asserted, depends on the subjectivity of individuals and the constructive knowledge within traditional families regarding the concept of subordination. Participants' practices demonstrated their reasons for becoming healers and for their visits to healers in the sense of how they deal with their status of womanhood within cultural discourses. These participants view patriarchal social relations as the norm and a cultural value, nevertheless experiencing oppression. They see female empowerment in fitting to hegemonic discourse as having a status of wifehood according to the traditional norm. The tradition dictates that marriage is for procreation and is a religious duty. These family values are supported by elders, relatives, and neighbours, and their value is embodied through the routine of daily life, forms of social interaction, rituals, and habits (Ibrahim, 2013). They cultivate the ideal of the patriarchal family, placing huge responsibility on women's shoulders. Even after becoming healers the participants held their biological essentialism and their opinions about supporting elements of the patriarchal system. It is clear that participants, either healers or patients, are attempting, through a counter-hegemonic process (Mahmood, 2005), to create an alternative path for themselves than what was presented to them as normal for their social position and gender. For them, empowerment has been achieved through subordination and restructuring their personal identity through religious and spiritual intervention by participating in female rituals. The clients' stories of reaching for empowerment demonstrated their concern for their status as wife and daughter-in-law fitting to existing hegemonic norms of gender roles and gender expectations. By connecting to the caring element of their gender role and socialisation through the religious rituals, the clients reclaim their statuses as 'good wife' and 'good daughter-in-law' which may have been forced upon them by society and social expectations. Their increased responsibility for their own lives assisted them in reaching empowerment, even in the sense of their role as wife. The client Dilfuza sees her empowerment in terms of improving her relationship with her mother-in-law. Her concern was to maintain her social status within a patriarchal society, because her marital status depended on the decisions of her

mother-in-law. She realised that if she lost this status she could be judged by the community and bear the label of ‘divorced woman’ which carries a worse connotation. Nigora, the participant who experienced violence from her husband, took a step to change the relationship with her husband by approaching a healer. Her way of approaching the healer is a form of resistance against violence, a form which is considered neither violence nor fighting, but which establishes harmony and peace in her family. She had been seeing her husband’s shouting and raising his hand as the norm, the answer to not obeying his orders. However, even if it was the ‘norm’ she realised it needed to stop when she was pregnant and needed more care and understanding. Zarifa, through religious practices, wanted to preserve her family’s stability and stop the betrayal by her husband. She took control of her husband’s sexuality which empowered her.

Through their stories and experiences the interviewees demonstrated the importance of the female gatherings and religious practices and the impact of healers on individuals’ holistic changes and achieving self-healing, because the religious practices and gatherings are strongly associated with a sense of collectivism, community, and women’s solidarity (Tursunova, 2014). For instance, women who participate in religious ceremonies and rituals have the strength to speak up about their oppression or to be optimistic about a conflict in the family. Their conversations and stories do not involve the changing of their lives’ circumstances, but rather the power to change their perception of those circumstances. For some of the participants, empowerment means reconstructing family relationships and building gender power relations by holding on to patriarchal norms, whereas some of them see the concept of empowerment in self-realisation, making choices, and having autonomy so that they can move towards greater a realisation of doing what they want to do.

At this point, if healing can be considered as an empowering adventure, and if healers and patients are empowered through the rituals and ceremonies, then their empowerment is more in line with Zulfiya Tursunova (2014), Saba Mahmood (2005), Pedram Khosronejad (2013), and Janice Boddy’s (1994) ideals of a Muslim feminist theory of empowerment. However, this concept reinforces empowerment as an outcome of their gender socialisation, or traditional ideals of womanhood, which suggests women care for their families before caring for themselves.

The concept of becoming a healer

This cultural pattern reflects participants' understandings of the phenomenon, especially in the cases of those who considered becoming a healer as part of their fate or destiny, as a result of belonging to certain 'holy lineages' inherited by ancestors (Bodrogi, 2006). The process of becoming a healer is highly significant to participants' descriptions of their life stories as well as giving meaning for them to pursue the healing craft. The participants experienced certain illnesses, the disease of family members, or had symbolic dreams which led them to this path. As soon as they accepted the call and started to heal others, they started the process of self-healing and reaching empowerment. Through 'embodied self-process' (Rasanayagam, 2013) whereby they experienced their bodily and emotional suffering, they built their own knowledge of the concept of becoming a healer, which is readable and meaningful for them. Healers in this study mentioned certain family members who practised a healing art of some form in terms of making space for their own identities, and to be able to legitimise their healing art by connecting it to an ancestor's heritage and Islamic practices. In referencing their perceptions of this 'holy lineage' (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008), Salomat described her father's illness or her dream of her great grandfather as a potential signal to continue the familial craft. Interestingly, Salomat, before these problems, was not aware of this aspect of her family history. However, she received the call because it was an obligation. Being a single mother and facing different financial and social challenges, Muyassar did not link her transformation explicitly to her difficult life which caused her physical and emotional illness. As a person who experienced these difficulties, she believes that it emerged as a signal to continue the tradition of female healers in her family line. Gulnora recounted her epileptic illness which led her to the healing arts. Her parents attributed her illness to her healing heritage. Their way of experiencing the phenomenon was more relevant to intuitive and subjective knowledge (Rasanayagam, 2013), which they gained through daily social interaction and religious practices. So, this is why it is not only a cognitive process of mind, but also a public debate on the phenomenon of becoming a healer. The healers' praxis presented their knowledge through their bodily experiences (Haraway, 1988) in the third chapter. What is most interesting about this discussion in terms of the participants' experiences in becoming healers is the way in which the cultural patterns and public interpretation of the phenomena of 'dreaming' and 'illness' play essential roles in the individuals' life transformations, by rejecting the core reasons for their bodily and emotional experiences. This is what Rasanayagam meant by applying the term 'local interpretative model' to the phenomenon within the cultural

framework by building connections to their ancestral craft as an essential part of the cultural interpretation of becoming a healer. The participants indicated that to receive a call to the healing arts was an obligation rather than their own choice. Even if they didn't express it in these terms, they recognised their wellbeing and emotional stability after receiving the craft. Through understanding the ways in which participants engage with the religious and healing practices, the experience of the phenomenon can be more deeply understood. The discursive approach of their situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) illuminates the healers' narratives, particularly in terms of their relationship to the local interpretative discourse within the culture. The cultural and traditional patterns are important to their grounding process of becoming healers and demonstrate constructive discourse in the manner of choosing the healing art path.

The concept of agency

The interviews of the participants illustrate that becoming a healer does not lead to the idea of rejecting hegemonic or dominant social orders. On the contrary, supporting the way that healers make space for their new identity gives them authority as a religious person with the individuals' affirmation and empowerment gained from their consciousness in the religion. The various experiences described in the previous chapter contributed to illuminating the capabilities of the healers in order to make their choices and control their own lives and experiences. One reason that the concept of becoming a healer is so powerful is due to its relationship to women's empowerment. What resonated most with these healers' experiences from Mahmood's (2005) discussions was the notion that agency is felt when women described the meaning of the subordination of Muslim women which is considered the norm. Women are conscious of the patriarchal structure and gaining agency through subordination, because the concept of subordination bears different meanings in local perceptions. Their agency in the sense of action contributes to giving power to restructure gender power relations and family conflict resolution (Tursunova, 2014) in a peaceful way, without any kind of 'struggle', because healers' and clients' experiences and narratives showed that they feel more disempowered if they do not fit to the dominant patriarchal discourse. In terms of this study, participants declared that the conscious experiences pushed them towards healing rituals and ceremonies which made them feel empowered; they were encouraged towards self-transformation, to change their approach towards the problem they faced. This reinforces the importance of individual agency with regard to the individual experience of consciousness within religious practices. Healers built connections to traditional ways of womanhood and

femininity with empowerment which reinforced the high value of gender roles to the participants.

The model of Uzbek feminism

These participants' experiences, as described in the previous sections, demonstrated a means of empowerment. It seems that in terms of empowerment, these participants demonstrated their traditional role as wife and daughter-in-law, despite recognising the realities of Uzbek patriarchy. Muyassar said that her clients often need divine intervention, because doctors, psychotherapists, and the Women's Committee are not able to do so, as clients need more emotional and spiritual care to deal with familial and social problems. The Women's Committee can intervene in family conflicts, but at the same time the institution supports the gender roles and expectation models which can be the main cause of the problems. For the healers in this study, being effective implies an ability to address what clients need when the other institutions fail to do so. The most important thing in this tradition is its reflection of the Uzbek cultural model of feminism, whereby oppressed women socialise, share their problems, get psychological relief, and become empowered to make social changes. The notion of Uzbek feminism in the sense discussed by Pedram Khosronejad (2013), Saba Mahmood (2005), Janice Boddy (1994), and Zulfiya Tursunova (2014) can help illuminate the value of female gatherings by which the healers and patients in this study demonstrated their experiences. The most important element of the religious rituals is its grounding in Islamic Mysticism and its ability to provide psychological care and nurturing. In terms of empowerment, healers provide help to patients, making their healing powerful which facilitates wellbeing. This is because the *qushnoch* heals others and in this way encourages them to build personal strength. By encouraging the clients, healers maintain the value of their circle in the religious framework (Tursunova, 2014). Zulfiya Tursunova (2014) has discussed how this female circle as a provider of 'peacebuilding' and 'gender power relations' can be integrated into caring services to create positive changes in society. In helping individual clients, healers help themselves, which can undoubtedly be a good pattern for societal change.

5. Conclusion

First of all, I would like to comment on the acquisition of oral histories from the feminist perspective as a research method. At the end of the research I now realise that it was a great choice, enabling me as the narrator to provide my own voice as a local Surkhandarian who is aware of the concepts and meanings of the native culture and practices. This oral history approach allowed me to recall my own memories and construct my own discursive knowledge relating to religious practices.

At the beginning of the research this topic seemed to be more personal, beyond the academic sphere, and something that I could share only with my family. Thanks to the research I could express not only my own experiences, but also the experiences of women in Surkhandarya, whose voices could reach beyond the territory.

I supported my research with post-colonial feminist and anthropologist theories, which helped clarify the concept and reconstruct the knowledge of those whose voices have, until now, been unheard. These theories helped to reflect their experiences, knowledge, and practices in religious discourse and were useful in conducting research. The participants of the research made a significant contribution by giving their voices and sharing experiences to modify and make the theories more practicable, particularly the women who were oppressed by socio-cultural and gender-traditional discourses.

I tried to be all-embracing by putting my own experiences within the religious and traditional-cultural discourses. By emphasising their voices, I found significant cultural meaning and knowledge in their interviews.

As a result of the thesis, my findings were as follows. The women who are engaged in religious rituals are:

- women who inherited spiritual possession;
- women from the rural area who are affected by socio-economic changes;
- women who are voiceless within the traditional gender-based discourse;
- women who are oppressed by patriarchal social discourse;
- and women who are constructed through cultural interpretation and traditional discourse.

Agency

Investigating the agency of religious women is both empirically and theoretically interesting precisely because agency for Uzbek women is to participate in religious practices mostly as a means of empowerment, rather than for resistance and struggle (Tursunova, 2014). Because women's social identities are limited to the family circle, their roles are tied to other individuals of their families. In this situation, religion serves as a means of moral support and finding orientation in society. Steeped in modern, secular, and Western assumptions about individual desire for liberation and freedom, agency is typically understood through their actions that build peace and harmony. Some participants define religion as a part of one's personality and connect it with cultural and national features. In this study the religious rituals and ceremonies are highlighted as a space where women exercise agency individually and collectively in a cultural discourse.

The research for the question regarding how women exercise empowerment in an Uzbek context found that they were:

- financially independent from male members of the family;
- in a submissive position;
- fit gender role-based discourses;
- transforming participants' holistic moods;
- and undertaking peacebuilding approaches and reconciliation.

Female gatherings as an Uzbek model of feminism

In the research, I show that religious healing rituals function mostly as a form of psychological therapy rather than contributing to their physical wellbeing. The female gatherings provide an opportunity for mutual support and the empowering of individuals. Secondly, rituals play an essential role in the alteration of the holistic state as a therapeutic action. Thirdly, feminist rituals often change women's views of conflicts and their approach to challenges, as well as transform relationships. Their conflict resolution techniques are based on religious rituals and Quranic verses to deal with patriarchy. This way of raising the women's consciousness increases their psychological and spiritual approaches towards oppression. This thesis provides multiple approaches, such as healing in terms of spiritual and psychological intervention, women's empowerment in terms of subordination, inner transformation, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. The research shows how women in

Surkhandarya reconstruct their identity and how they demonstrate alternative views of patriarchy.

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