Book Discussions

Svetlana Peshkova,* Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in PrivateSpaces in Uzbekistan *(Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

Accepted version of a book review published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
"Book Discussions", *Central Asian Affairs* 3, 1 (2016): 77-93.

Otinchalar – "Truly" Muslim?

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Women, Islam, and Identity is a groundbreaking study of the role of the *otinchalar*, or religious teacher, in contemporary Uzbek society. Drawing on ethno- graphic data collected over the course of nine years, Svetlana Peshkova weaves a compelling narrative demonstrating the power of the individual in an authoritarian context to change the lives of others and to contribute to discussions concerning the meaning of "true Islam." Peshkova's in-depth analysis is novel; only a few scholars, such as Habiba Fathi and Marianne Kamp, have studied the *otinchalar*. Peshkova contributes to our understanding of individual agency and different forms of leadership in an authoritarian polity, as well as the consequences of religious renewal in Central Asia.

A brief survey of Peshkova's research agenda permits a more comprehensive understanding of the arguments presented in *Women, Islam, and Identity*. A 2009 article explores domestic space as a politically safe space in which devout Muslims express socially active religiosity; another 2009 article considers the *otinchalar* in terms of informal leadership based on a methodology for moral renewal in which change begins in the *otinchalar*'s life, and then spreads to the lives of her relatives, students, and community members. A 2013 article analyzes *Hafiza-opa*, whose interpretation of the consequences of biological differences between men and women illuminates a trend among Central Asian women that I find in my research. A 2014 article about a religious home-school in Uzbekistan reveals that non-institutionalized religious education among local women fosters critical thinking required for social change. Lastly, another 2014 article is a case study of leadership that shows how Uzbek *otinchalars* neither resist nor comply fully with state mandates.

doi 10.1163/22142290-00301004

Women, Islam, and Identity is set within the context of Peshkova's personal interactions with Uzbek authorities who did not approve of her research topic. Her gripping story reveals the authoritarian nature of the Uzbek state and the extent to which it attempts to control religious discourse within and beyond its borders. To study the *otinchalar*, whose profession is illegal, Peshkova appropriately relies on the case-study method and focuses on the lives of a few individuals, including Tursun-oi, Jahon, Nainahon, and Tahsir, who were willing to relay their stories. Peshkova draws on various works, such as Nigel Rapport's conceptualization of a "life project," Gabriele Marranci's theory of identity and understanding of Islam as a map of discourses, and Saba Mahmood's theory of ethical agency, to identify the *otinchalar* as agents actively participating in the cultivation of discourses on the articulation of "true" Islam. One of Peshkova's most important findings is that rather than emanating solely from the state, "national Islam" is informally contested by individual agents who initiate social change through personal transformation. She writes: "The women I am writing about were among the discussants producing and actively participating in the range of discussions about how to be "truly" Muslim … their participation … was not just iterative of the government's discourse on "national Islam," but also formative of it. The women co-created "national Islam" through their individual articulations of "correct Islam," which stemmed from their consciousness and bodily experiences" (232–33).

Careful ethnographic research shapes the book's central argument, which is revealed via analysis of particular individuals who claim to be "truly" Muslim and, on this basis, inspire others to become better human beings. Peshkova argues that a central element of the transformation of the *otinchalar* into "true" Muslim is the personal need to spread religious knowledge to others; this, Peshkova claims, leads to social change. These religious educators are not overtly political; on the contrary, they generate social change gradually via individual moral change. The book's chief contribution is the notion that in order to understand the role of religion in social change, we must begin with individuals who (a) foster that change through "relational existential power" and (b) are not constituted but *informed by* such relations (12). These individuals, she suggests, skirt the ban on informal religious education in various ways. Tahsir promoted Islam by healing in "traditional ways"; Nainahon led *ehsons* (ceremonial gatherings to thank God), which she viewed as equivalent to Friday prayers at the mosque; Jahon facilitated religious ceremonies and rituals; and Tursun-oi referred to herself as a tutor rather than teacher because the Uzbek authorities permit tutorship.

Peshkova provides insight into understudied phenomena emerging throughout the region like polygyny. Such subjects appear in the life histories

of the women and men acquainted with Peshkova. For example, Tahsir had three wives: his first wife lived with him and found the second wife, who lived in an apartment in the same town, and the third wife, who lived in the same mahalla as Tahsir but in a separate residence. The head wife's explanation for the additional wives was that one woman could not satisfy her sexually active husband (83). Other stories from *Women, Islam, and Identity* suggest that women are less than enthusiastic about polygynous marriages. Nainahon's husband wanted to (and eventually did) take a second wife in order to have more children. According to Peshkova, "Nainahon felt ambivalent. On the one hand, as a Muslim woman she thought she should not object to her husband's second marriage. But as a proud individual she could not allow it either. Her solution to this problem did not jeopardize her understanding of "correct" Islam. She thought she would resolve this dilemma in the "Islamic way" by allowing him to marry on one condition – he and his second wife would have to live elsewhere and not in this house, which Nainahon called "my house" (202). Jahon, who presided over religious ceremonies, counseled community members, and inspired ethical behavior, considered polygyny "one of the main problems afflicting Uzbek society, affecting women and children negatively" (207). Her solution rested on the shoulders of women: a mother-in-law needed to relieve her daughter-in-law of burdensome household chores that prevented her from keeping up her appearance and educating herself. Spare time would enable a *kelin* to remain attractive and intellectually vibrant, thus weakening her husband's desire to take a second wife. Jahon's view of men and women as biologically and ontologically different (the former provide for their families, the latter raise children and satisfy their husband's sexual needs) is not uncommon. The director of the Social Technologies Agency, which works to advance gender equality in the Kyrgyz political arena, links polygyny to economic conditions – poverty causes women to become second wives. "There are many examples, especially when widows or divorced women agree to become a second wife because they aren't confident they can provide for themselves. *There's this belief that the husband must be the breadwinner who provides for the family*."[1] Focus group discussions with first wives residing in Bishkek reflect this particular understanding of gender roles. As one participant put it: "In present day Kyrgyzstan, women play the role of men: they are the hunters in the family … We are forced to do everything because of the economy … But in theory, the man must provide for the family, and the woman must be the family's hearth."[2]

1 Author's interview, 2013.

2 The El-Pikir Center for Public Opinion Study conducted the focus groups in 2014.

Peshkova also sheds light on consequences of the Soviet-inspired double burden in Central Asia, where some women argue that women's full liberation will be achieved only when men and women fulfill their natural biological duties: or, when men support the family and women raise the children. This not atypical "nonliberatory" view of women's rights, Peshkova argues, stems from historical legacies that have informed the views of women in the region. She argues further that the "nonliberatory" discourse on women's rights, which is fundamentally pragmatic in the context of rocky economic transition, is "not exceptional" in Uzbekistan (135). Though not shared by everyone, this dis- course is not exceptional in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan either, where young women studying at religious *and* secular universities sympathize with retraditionalization, which means they embrace religion, family life, traditional values, and are not necessarily eager to enter the work force. Just as in Uzbekistan, economic uncertainty continues to shape "nonliberatory" views of women's rights in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Like any thought-provoking book, *Women, Islam, and Identity* raises questions, two of which I pose here. Peshkova aims to enhance our analytic comprehension of social change in the region. The takeaway is this: sometimes social change is enacted by "other leaders" in "other places": in other words, by women who do not consider themselves social reformers, who are not part of a social movement or political organization, but who effect change in a self- reflexive manner in domestic spaces. First, is there evidence of actual social change, as opposed to claims made by the women Peshkova writes about asserting that they have enacted social change? Second, how do the *otinchalar* in Uzbekistan compare to their equivalent in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan? How do the political, economic, and social contexts of these countries affect the trajectory of *otinchalar*? Peshkova has done her job: good books *should* raise questions and *should* cause readers to think beyond a particular case.

Theorizing the Individual and the Social in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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In *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* (2014) Svetlana Peshkova argues that Islam's resurgence in Central Asia must be understood as the product of individual strivings rather than changing historical and political realities. The ethnography describes the lives of pious men and women

and their dedication to learning about and teaching "correct" Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, where interest in Islam is growing but increasingly coopted by a paranoid state. In haunting passages that introduce each chapter, Peshkova tells a parallel story about her political difficulties; even as her research progresses, she increasingly attracts the attention of the Uzbek secret police. Connecting these narratives is Peshkova's fresh theorization of the individual. Writing against the agency/structure dichotomy so familiar in the social sciences and rejecting analyses that reduce the self to a product of power relations, she argues the individual creates and is created by the social through the development of what she calls "relational existential power."

Three women figure prominently in the book's narrative: Tursun-oi, a religious teacher; Jahon, one of her students; and Nainahon, a pious business- woman. All three women were educated, got married, raised children, experienced some professional success, and became interested in Islam during the Soviet era. It was not easy to practice Islam during the Soviet era, much less acquire a formal religious education, but each woman studied with an *otincha* (pl., *otinchalar*), or female teacher, and ultimately became an otincha in her own right. By the time Peshkova met them, in the early 2000s, Tursun-oi and Jahon were popular teachers in their community, and Nainahon was a successful businesswoman who studied Islam and taught what she learned to her family. All three women are dissatisfied with social and economic realities in post- Soviet Uzbekistan and hope to promote social change, but their immediate goal is the moral improvement of individuals.

Peshkova's informants believe this moral improvement occurs when an individual aligns her will with God's will. In everyday life this manifests as making correct choices, i.e., choices that reflect "a universal ethical paradigm provided by God" (8). In her informants' telling, this is a slow, dialectical process. As an individual learns more about Islam, she accepts the importance of making correct choices and commits herself to trying to make correct choices. Every correct choice she makes acts as a "propulsion" (52), predisposing her to future correct choices. Change is not always easy, however, and even the most well-intentioned individual makes mistakes. One pedagogical technique Peshkova's informants use to help their students in this process is telling *masalalar*, didactic stories. These stories, many taken from scripture and featuring famous historical figures, describe challenging situations in which the central character must choose between different courses of action. The stories allow the listener to reflect on how she might have reacted in the given situation before ultimately revealing which course of action was "Islamically correct" (163).

Many of the stories Peshkova hears address gender, and Peshkova is puzzled by the otinchalar's willingness to promote what she calls "nonliberatory

discourses" that accept existing gender (and age) hierarchies. For example, Jahon uses the Christian account of Adam (Oto) and Eve (Havo) to illustrate to Peshkova that men and women "are not equal, but different and equally important" (118). Havo sinned and led Oto into sin, so God punished her. But Havo also had the first moral understanding and made the first moral choice. Havo, therefore, is clean and morally pure. Oto, in contrast, is strong. Every human has elements of both Havo and Oto, Jahon explains, but the story also reveals that men and women are ontologically different. Women and men should respect each other for their differences. Peshkova notes that these stories shape her informants' visions of social change; their goal is not a society in which men and women have equal opportunities to pursue professional success and attain power in the public sector, but a society in which women can live the uniquely female lives God has ordained for them.

As a researcher who has heard similar discourses from pious Central Asian women, I am intrigued when Peshkova describes these discourses as "nonliberatory." When her informants in one breath describe the bad behavior of their men (who, for example, want polygynous unions for all the wrong reasons) and in another talk about women as moral, clean, and ideal educators, I instead hear something resembling what I have referred to elsewhere as a "subversive … discourse of women's spiritual superiority."3 When her informants talk about wanting to be free from wage labor to pursue their religious education, educate their families, and be the best possible companions to their husbands, I instead hear not complacency, but a dream worth pursuing in a corrupt, dysfunctional society where doing business requires paying bribes and participating in other activities these pious women consider immoral. In other words, I wonder if rather than starting from the assumption that these discourses were nonliberatory, Peshkova might usefully have identified and examined the criteria commonly used to make this distinction.

Peshkova offers a compelling account of the relationship between her informants and "official Islam," the state-sponsored discourse. Rather than resist it, they adopt its dictates, even when that requires abandoning practices they have previously valued (such as ceremonies in honor of local female saints) or, in their work with children, focusing on "promoting ethical behavior" (218) rather than imparting religious knowledge (because teaching religion to children is illegal in Uzbekistan). Rather than theorize this relationship as individuals conforming to a coercive discursive regime, Peshkova argues that her informants actively participate in the construction of official Islam. Discourses, she points out, can only

3 Noor O'Neill Borbieva, "Empowering Muslim Women: Independent Religious Fellowships inthe Kyrgyz Republic," *Slavic Review*, 71, no. 2 (2012): 297.

exist if they are spoken. They are dependent on the individuals who speak them, meaning these individuals are always already co-creators.

Peshkova similarly rejects theories that underestimate the individual's part in the creation of the state, particularly those that construct the state "as a metaphysical entity that exists beyond the individual" (298). This position creates a dilemma for her, however, when she is detained by the secret police on charges she has violated the registration regime. She is manipulated into signing a false confession and forced to pay an exorbitant fine. Later, about to board a flight out of the country, she is detained again – this time on drug charges – and strip-searched. Unwilling to abandon her theoretical position, she struggles to make peace with the fact that the people of Uzbekistan, including the people she knows, are, according to this understanding, partly responsible for the cruelty she (and many Uzbek citizens she knows) suffered. She realizes that many of her informants, like her, have learned to fear the state, but their unwillingness to express dissatisfaction except in the most veiled of forms emerges in her telling as a form of complicity. Others, such as the otinchalar she describes, are simply not interested in political change, focused as they areon individual, ethical reform.

Although Peshkova is probably correct to fault Uzbek citizens' complacency, I wonder if she goes too far in reducing the state to its citizenry. Her argument – that the state is a system its citizens have created – aligns with her central argument that individuals shape and are shaped by the social, but it ignores the complex ways states materialize and reinforce the interests of *certain* individuals and groups at the expense of others. The powerlessness Peshkova, a relatively wealthy, mobile (albeit foreign) researcher, experienced at the hands of the Uzbek state is a case in point. Maybe all citizens are complicit in constructing the state, but some of them are more complicit and others less. Analyzing the complex way power operates on individuals via the Uzbek state and the way Uzbek state structures manifest and defend the *relative* power of particular individuals (and groups) would be a demanding undertaking, but it would offer a more accurate understanding of Uzbek state power than the under- standing articulated here.

These concerns detract only minimally from an otherwise riveting ethnography that will appeal to many audiences – students, scholars, professionals, and casual travelers. The book mixes suspenseful storytelling with painstaking analysis, and long after finishing it, I am still haunted by the questions it raises. I was particularly impressed by Peshkova's ability to link her theory and ethnography, something many anthropologists struggle to do. One reason she succeeds at this is because they overlap. Peshkova's "relational analysis of individual self-formation" is remarkably similar to the model of ethical forma-

tion idealized by her informants. Peshkova often talks about her informants using the language of education – she was the student, they were the teachers –and perhaps I should not be surprised that her theoretical insights are informed by their teachings. A more explicit reflection on the degree to which her theory is informed by the Islamic anthropology of her informants would have been welcome, particularly considering how skillfully she documents her scholarly influences. This is not a criticism but rather a wish inspired by one of the book's strengths. In its early history, anthropology was long practiced by theorists who viewed "native" wisdom as a curiosity to be documented, preserved, and picked apart. Peshkova offers a very different model of social discovery; it is a more promising model, but one that requires additional refinement. Ideally, this book is a first step in bringing this model to the attention of the discipline.

Spatializing Everyday Anthropology

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Conducting ethnographic research about Islamic practice in Fergana Valley is no small task, given how politically charged it has become in Central Asia's new states. Nor have authorities in the region's variably authoritarian regimes made empirical research an easy affair for scholars. Svetlana Peshkova's *Women, Islam, and Identity* recounts the author's effort to overcome these barriers over the course of two field visits in Uzbekistan in 2002–2003 and 2011, where her informants were female religious leaders, *otinchalar/otinlar*. The book simultaneously presents Peshkova's own trials and travails of conducting this research, alongside the narratives, life stories, aspirations, and practices of her informants in one small village, dubbed "Hovliguzar." It raises a number of important theoretical questions that come out most succinctly in the book's subtitle, "public life in private spaces." The first is a question of the public life of the academic researcher and the multiple spaces that she traverses in the researcher encounters that produce the "field." The second is a question of how the experiences and spatial imaginaries of the *otinchalar* are positioned to challenge essentializing masculinist conceptions of the public/private divide that confine "politics" to public spaces.

Each chapter of *Women, Islam, and Identity* begins with one "installment" of Peshkova's ill-fated effort to conduct follow-up research in Hovliguzar in summer 2011. With her fate becoming hopelessly intertwined with those of her

interlocutors, Peshkova's life as a researcher in Uzbekistan can never be any- thing but "public," no matter how many "private spaces" she seeks out in order to avoid the far-reaching tentacles of the National Security Service (SNB). Her stories provide an illuminating example of why social scientists should not take lightly the obligations of human subjects' protection, nor indulge in any sense of false security based on being a "private" individual "merely" in town to visit friends. This point is hit home in particular when Peshkova sees a copy of her PhD dissertation sitting on the table in an interrogation chamber, where she is confined for a day in the small town's Office of Visas and Registration. Hounded by SNB agents and eventually accused of violating local visa regulations, Peshkova's simple honesty offers a useful insight into the pitfalls of assuming that, as a public figure, she might assume the protections of ostensibly private spaces. Indeed, Peshkova finds that even these spaces are infiltrated by the eye of state surveillance, as she slowly comes to realize that some of her closest friends and informants in Hovliguzar are themselves employed in the service of the state.

As recounted in the book, the author's experience is – unfortunately – far from unique in the broader picture of fieldwork conditions for regional scholars. Her experience implies a set of questions that academics need to consider for navigating these conditions in their own work, and how we as scholars imagine and produce the field and structure our expectations of spatial con- figurations in foreign settings. While many of us who work in Central Asia seek to conduct research as "private" individuals, from the standpoint of the local governments and their debilitating visa regimes, we must not be misled by our very own strategies of evading surveillance. Naming any place a "field site" is a decidedly political act and, as such, this demands that academics seriously reckon with the fact that they are thus, invariably, public figures, wherever they conduct research. Authorities today have increasing access to our work through the internet and, though we may often assume they will not bother to actually read it, Peshkova's experience highlights the fact that the content of our writing is actually of little importance. Rather, what is significant is merely the fact that scholars are public intellectuals and, from the standpoint of state security officials, this is sufficient grounds to negate any efforts we make to claim "private" motives for being a foreigner in a strange land.

Furthermore, the book illustrates the need for scholars to think very critically about the technologies we use to store and transmit data and to communicate with our informants. Of course there is no simple remedy for being shadowed, but Peshkova's missteps of not securely storing her data highlight the importance of password protection, VPN connections, self-destructing storage devices (e.g., IronKey flash-disks), and communicating with individuals in person rather

than over unsecured phone connections. Peshkova's accounts also imply the need for researchers to reflect carefully about what data they actually collect in the first place and to consider innovative solutions to disguising the identity of informants. More generally, however, these missteps again underscore the dangers of assuming that "private" mechanisms of transmitting information electronically are in fact private. Even in the United States, it is apparent that data can rarely ever be secure and is always potentially public.

The second theme related to the book's subtitle, "public life in private spaces," is how the experiences and spatial imaginaries of Peshkova's informants, the *otinchalar*, actively blur the simplistic public/private binary characteristic of masculinist conceptions of space. Although Peshkova could have done so far more explicitly in the text, the *otinchalar*'s narratives, practices, and imaginaries provide especially fertile ground to interrogate and challenge simple classifications of space along these divisions. Such an analysis begins from the important feminist theoretical contribution that refuses to reduce the political to that which unfolds only in "public" spaces. Indeed, in her criticism of "the abyss of the 'one-man's land' argument" (296), Peshkova argues that the life histories and daily practices of her informants show how "Uzbekistan" cannot be reduced to the "Karimov regime" (299). Nor can political change be reduced to regime change. As shown through the stories of the central characters of *Women, Islam, and Identity,* the *otinchalar* Tursun-oi, Jahon, and Nainahon:

> These women knew that engineering and building a different society is a slow process and that their abilities to change others were limited. They did not aim at radical social changes but continued doing what they did the best on a small scale, at an individual level, within their immediate environment because they felt it had to be done. (248)

Furthermore, when Peshkova returns to their small village home after eight years away, she discovers that the public and the private have a markedly different configuration from when she was there before. Rather than being a fixed set of categories, which merely need accurate description, the analysis is best focused on the production of the border between the public and the private. This is exemplified in the case of one of her informants, Jahon, who moves from being a more or less "private" *otincha* to a "public" *otin*, when she "wins" a regional contest to become an officially sanctioned practitioner. Not only did this woman's narratives and practices of self-formation change accordingly, so too did her understanding of the public sphere and her role in it. This is but one example of how these women not only co-produced official

discourse of "national Islam" (230), but also how they actively co-produced the border between public and private. This explicit focus on space is central to research in geography, and it is productively united with anthropology's interest in the everyday. However, what seems to be missing from Peshkova's text is an effort to explain how the everyday practices of Uzbek *otinchalar* fit into this bigger picture of how public and private spaces are performed through micro-practices of religion across Muslim communities in very different political settings. What does the idiosyncrasy of Uzbekistan tell us about the rest of the world? Or, at least, what does it tell us we need to *ask* about the rest of the world?

Peshkova Response

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In Post-Soviet Central Asia, individuals create social change while exercising their relational existential power. The key words in this statement are "relational" and "existential," meaning that one's power is always informed by surrounding context and the actions of others, but not determined by them. In Uzbekistan, on a daily basis, despite structural constraints, including economic instability and political repression, individuals continue orchestrate changes in their and others' lives. In *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces*, I strive to prove this argument by examining how one's relations with the divine and are informed by social transformations. Unlike some excellent books about the region, I do not attempt to tell the story of Uzbek women, or post-Soviet women, pious women, or Uzbekistan's citizens, or any other collectivity, through the lives of particular individuals. I explicitly emphasize the importance, necessity, and determination of not losing sight of a singularity in the development of the argument, and focus on several individuals, who are/ were (or are/were not) *otinchalar* (women religious practitioners, teachers, and leaders). I do not aim to re-examine religious resurgence, renewal, or revival in the region. Rather, I hope to contribute to theorizing the dynamics between an individual's understanding and experience of the divine and the social effects of such processes. Three insightful book reviews presented here demonstrate that despite the author's intentions, readers will experience the book's narrative in different ways. Some parts will speak louder to them than others, evoking different emotions and leading to different conclusions and

questions. If the same text indeed tells different stories, then, as its author, I take pride in the book's multivocality.

The reviewers raise important questions and offer provocative comments. I address these questions and comments below.

Michele E. Commercio asks if there are tangible evidences of social changes resulting from individual ones in Uzbekistan. How do *otinchalar* compare to female religious leaders in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan? How do socio-political contexts in these countries affect these leaders' social roles? I admit that a comparative analysis of female religious leaders in the region and of socio-political contexts in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is missing in this book. This gap is a result of my zooming in on individuals and their uniqueness – an approach rarely used in theorizing Central Asia. The book demonstrates how such an approach provides a wealth of information about complexities of individual lives, relations with the divine, and the resulting social effects. This focus also sheds light on an interconnectedness of social and individual histories and entanglements of body and mind, personal and political, private and public, and local, regional, and global in the daily life of individuals. Moreover, this approach shows and clarifies the breadth and dynamic nature of Islam – a map of discourses on how to be truly Muslim4 – and how and why humans create and are informed, but not determined, by these discourses.

I think we should embark on a comparative analysis of religious leaders embedded in their different socio-political contexts in these regional countries, or indeed, in the post-Soviet space, only after we have grasped the uniqueness and social complexity of each particular case. Several excellent studies done during the last decade, among them Commercio's own recent work,5 provide a variety of materials for such comparative analysis, which is yet to be done.6

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4 Adopted from Gabriele Marranci. *The Anthropology Of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5 Michele E. Commercio, "The Politics and Economics of 'Retraditionalizing' in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31, no. 6 (2014): 529–56, doi: 10.1080/1060586X.2014.986870.

6 E.g., Noor O'Neill Borbieva, "Empowering Muslim Women: Independent Religious Fellowships in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Slavic Review*, 71, no. 2 (2012): 288–307; Liliya Karimova, "Muslim Tatar Women's Piety Stories: A Quest for Personal and Social Transformation in Tatarstan (Russia)," Ph.D. diss., Department of Communications. University of Massachusetts – Amherst (2013); Morgan Liu, U*nder Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh, pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Maria Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter When There is Too Much of It: Islam as Threat and Source of Well-Being in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 32, no. 4 (2013): 514–26; Julie McBrien, "Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 25, no. 3 (2006):

I am glad Commercio has asked a question about evidences of social change effected by *otinchalar*. If the reader agrees that humans are striving to achieve their life projects always in relation to human and non-human others, including themselves, and in the process inform each other's actions and create social transformation, then everyone – some more than others and in different ways – effects social change, not only *otinchalar* in the town of "Hovliguzar" (a pseudonym).

The reader learns how and why individuals central to the book became teachers and leaders, whether for their students (e.g., Tursun-oi), community members (e.g., Jahon), family (e.g., Nainahon), or for themselves. Their life histories and the researcher's observations demonstrate how they effected change in their own lives and the lives of those around them, including family members and friends (e.g., Tursun-oi's and Nainahon's husbands). Also these individuals' personal transformation (or self-formation) ensured the continuity of religious knowledge and contributed to its further politicization. One tangible example of such change would be the creation of an administrative position of a *hokymyat* (city) and *villoyat* (county) *otin.* Among other things, these individuals co-created such social processes as privatization, while the Soviet Union was disintegrating (e.g., Tursun-oi), and actively bodied forth a survival of local economies in the post-Soviet financial downfall (e.g., Nainahon's trips overseas and subsequent trade at home).

I would have liked to conduct consecutive systematic surveys of life-style changes and social effects of these women's self-formation, and to gather quantitative data about an increase or decrease of certain customary practices, such as veneration of local female saints such as Bibi Seshambe. I hope that other researchers and storytellers at other times – when independent research in Uzbekistan is less challenging – based on their other (new) research materials will offer necessary correctives to the book's conclusions and exemplify social change in a more quantitative way.

In her thought-provoking review Natalie Koch notes that *otinchalar* "co-produced the border between public and private." She then inquires, how *otinchalar* fit in a bigger picture, and asks, what does the Uzbek case tell us about the rest of the world and what kinds of analytical inquiries does it

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341–57; Julia McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, S1 (2009): S127–S144; Julia McBrien, "Afterword: In the Aftermath of Doubt," in M. Pelkmans (ed.), *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 251–68; Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

stimulate? Morgan Liu's book7 is a better example of spatializing everyday anthropology than *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces*.8 Yet, the latter book challenges an analytical reduction of the political to one's engagement with the state, spaces of ritual life and activism to mosques, religious leadership to men, social change to protests and statistics, and women to docility and a lack of power.

Otinchalar are a part of a bigger picture of Muslim women's leadership and activism. Several scholars are writing about Muslim women's leadership and activism. Some authors are excavating historical sources. Others are documenting the lives of individual women leaders or looking at their daily lives and activism anthropologically.9 *Otinchalar's* public life in private spaces is both similar to and different from other historical and geographic examples. The analysis of these particular women's lives and practices provides us with tools to continue discovering and understanding these other examples.

For instance, by looking closer at what is often considered to be a private space, one can discover numerous situational public forums. These forums become places where larger questions are not only discussed but also formed in light of small problems encountered in the minutia of daily life. A closer analysis of such places and forums then can shed light on dynamics of political mobilization, particularly if we consider the emotional nature of cultural behavior (see Chapter 1 on identity and self-formation and Chapter 4 on emotional learning of empathetic and nonabstract ethics). Additionally, while trying to understand social change, the relational nature of one's existential power should help researchers to investigate and be more attentive to not only socio- historical contexts but also historical artifacts that I refer to in the book as "physical remains of past practices" (see Chapter 6). These artifacts, when re-activated – attributed meaning by individuals – inform personal transformation and a nature and relative importance of an individual's activism, which leads to social change. Finally, a theory of self-formation that has social effects advanced in Chapter 1 is applicable beyond the context of individual faith in God. With its help we can better understand the social effects of self-formation vis-à-vis liberalism or any other ideology, by including in our analysis historical

7 Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne*.

8 Also, see Svetlana Peshkova, "Bringing the Mosque Home and Talking Politics: Women, Space, and Islam in the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan)," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, 3, no. 3 (2009): 251–73.

9 For a review of some existing studies, see Svetlana Peshkova, "Muslim Women Leaders in the Ferghana Valley: Whose Leadership is it Anyway?" *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2009): 2–24.

artifacts (such as ideological literature) and the relational nature of this process. If we want to understand human behaviors and motivations behind them, then we should abandon an overreliance on an assumed clear-cut and established separation of public and private, personal and political, and individual and social.

Ethnographic materials presented in the book are a fertile ground for the reader's interpretations and conclusions. In the same narrative different reviewers have heard different discourses and different voices. While focusing specifically on a didactic story (*masala*) attributing ethical purity to Havo (Eve), not to Oto (Adam), and on some women's views of wage labor as a gendered activity belonging to the "men's world" (121), Noor O'Neill Borbieva hears a "subversive … discourse of women's spiritual superiority." As a result, she questions the use of "nonliberatory" as a category describing some Central Asian women's discourses about their rights. This is an interesting point to engage, since the book meant not to challenge but emphasize individual existential power to be and become. Stories in the book reveal, over and over again, how, against all odds, these particular women continue to overcome various contextual and existential challenges.10

While analyzing research materials collected in the Fergana Valley, I found that an explanatory and descriptive value of the category "subversive" (of what?) is very limited. In some way, any discourse is subversive of some other discourse(s). To wit, in the United States a pro-life discourse is subversive of the pro-choice one and vice versa; both are well-established discourses and, even though they are mutually constitutive, each means to undermine the other. Yet, to call a particular discourse "subversive" tells us nothing about its the origin and life span and does not describe and does less to explain this discourse's contextual value and workings (as in, what it does). I hope that the book's narrative and analysis shows that the struggle for rights and sociopolitical activism can but does not *have to be* expressed in terms of resistance and can be understood beyond being subversive.

Why "nonliberatory"? In Chapter 3, I analyze the twentieth-century debates about women's rights in order to understand these women's views on their rights (e.g., "women are one knee below men" and "women and men are not equal") – irrespective of whether these views are liberatory (meant to set one free from some kind of bondage) or not. I conclude that historical discourses, including the Russian colonial, indigenous, and Soviet debates and criticism of

10 See also Svetlana Peshkova, "Leading Against Odds: Muslim Women Leaders and Teachersin Uzbekistan," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 31, no. 1 (2015): 23–44.

women's rights, and the twenty-first century's variegated discourses on women's rights in the region, share a gradual politicization of women's rights and an ideological commitment to biological determinism and women's economic and political dependency on someone or something else. For example, while arguing that women had to be liberated (Ru. *osvobozhdenny*) from the patriarchal family/oppression supported by religious ideologies, the Soviet activists and ideologues did not conceive of liberation as liberal equality, such as the possibility of co-sharing parental and spousal responsibilities or eliminating gendered and generational hierarchies. Rather, these liberatory discourses focused on economic independence and, in time, materialized as women's participation in wage labor, while women's dependence was reallocated from patriarchal families to the (Soviet) state, itself a protective patriarch. In light of this analysis, I find some existing individual discourses on rights, such as those expressed by research participants, to be understandably nonliberatory, as in denying modes of liberation that end with women's access to wage labor (129). These nonliberatory discourses are political, since achieving them requires social change.

Hearing me faulting Uzbek citizens' complacency in the injustices experienced by many in the country, Borbieva wonders if I go "too far in reducing the state to its citizenry." Such reduction, she continues, ignores "the complex ways states materialize and reinforce the interests of *certain* individuals and groups at the expense of others." Borbieva's corrective then is to think about complex ("*relative*") degrees of power. I agree completely with the reviewer that some have more power than others, and certain individuals would pursue their interests at the expense of others. While discussing individual existential power to be and become, I point out that since this power is relational, then others can enhance or hamper it. Some will "further their life projects 'irrespective of others or at [sic] others' expense'."[11] In the process of achieving their life projects, human individuals, not a collective citizenry, or an impersonal state, create new or reactivate existing historical artifacts (or physical remains of past practices), such as laws, which become resources for historical continuity. Without individuals, however, the state's symbology and ideology, including laws, the president's directives, the parliament's decrees, or the police orders, would be (literally) meaningless. Therefore, any state cannot and should not be analytically reduced to its citizenry (or any other collectivity), but can exist only as (re)created, (re)produced, and understood as such by individuals on a daily basis.

11 Nigel Rapport. *I Am Dynamite: An Alternative Anthropology of Power* (London: Routledge, 2003), 254, quoted in Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity*, 263.

Finally, Borbieva points out an important venue for further reflection: "the degree to which" scholars' theories are informed by the participants' ideas and ideals about the social. If Marranci's theory of identity,12 which I describe in Chapter 1, is useful to an understanding of the participants' life-projects and identities, then I can use it to understand myself and my theories. My theological training in and work with Islam and Christianity became a part of my self prior to the research and writing about Uzbekistan and *otinchalar*. Although I did not share *otinchalar's* faith in God – or their idea(l)s about human relations with the divine – the experiences I had with these women and others in the Fergana Valley raised certain emotions that too, became a part of my individual self. I made sense of these emotions and memories of my experiences through identity, which is not a style I select, or a (fixed or fluid) state, but a process (48). The book and its theory are my acts of identity, my symbolic communications of how I feel deep inside, as a scholar of anthropology and Islam. These acts are also relational and, therefore, are certainly informed, but not determined, by others' idea(l)s, including *otinchalar's* ones. As Borbieva aptly observes, some anthropologists take "native" wisdom to be a curiosity. My intention was to learn about, understand, and explain in *etic* terms, but with a full respect for *emic* insights, who these individuals are and what they do, believe in, desire, act as, and feel like. If my theory and *otinchalar's* understanding of the relationship between human and divine worlds resemble each other, then I am deeply hum-bled, as I had achieved more in this book than I have expected.

The reviewers offer differing understandings of the material presented in the book; certain parts of the book appeal to some of them, but not to others. Their important and provocative questions and comments about the book's conclusions and the author's assumptions provide venues for further reflection, analysis, and research of the "not a one man's land" (see Chapter 7) and those *creating* it on a daily basis in Hovliguzar, the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

12 Gabriele Marranci. *The Anthropology Of Islam.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).