Discovering a sense of well-being through the revival of Islam: profiles of Kazakh imams in Western Mongolia

Cynthia Werner\textsuperscript{a}, Holly Barcus\textsuperscript{b} and Namra Brede\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Anthropology, Texas A\&M University, College Station, USA; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Geography, Macalester College, St Paul, USA; \textsuperscript{c}Independent Scholar, Bellingham, USA

Throughout Central Asia, the end of communism has been marked by a significant change in the management and influence of local mosques. In many rural areas, small underground mosques operated by informally trained, elderly moldus have been supplanted by newly constructed mosques led by younger, foreign-educated local imams and financed by governmental and private donations from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. From several perspectives, this ‘revival’ of Islam is characterized in a way that implies that increased religiosity and piety is somewhat problematic. In this essay, based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Western Mongolia, we argue that such an approach prevents understanding how religious changes are enhancing the social and material well-being of certain actors. We explore the utility of the concept of well-being by focusing on the everyday lives of Kazakh imams in Western Mongolia. Approximately 100,000 ethnic Kazakhs live in the Western Mongolian province of Bayan-Ölgii, where they comprise about 80% of the population. Although a significant portion of the population has been migrating to Kazakhstan in the post-socialist period, the Kazakhs who choose to remain in Mongolia have experienced a significant increase in religious freedom. In this context, the new cohort of imams is playing an important mediating role as members of the local population reinterpret and renegotiate their identity as Muslims. In addition to finding spiritual well-being through their knowledge of Islam, these imams are acquiring social status and economic security from their local roles as religious leaders and through their transnational connections with a broader Muslim community.

\textbf{Keywords:} Kazakhs; Mongolia; religion; transnational; well-being

\textbf{Introduction}\\

In June 2009, we returned to a beautiful yet rugged mountain pasture settlement near the border between Mongolia and China for a short visit with a Mongolian Kazakh family that we had first met the summer before. We drove up a dirt road to a yurt assembled on a flat part of a grassy mountain valley. Madina, a woman in her mid-thirties, greeted us warmly and ushered us into the yurt for a hot cup of tea.\footnote{Madina lives in a household with her husband Zhumakhan, his 85-year-old mother, their four young sons, and their daughter. Like many Mongolian Kazakhs, Madina and Zhumakhan make their living by raising a mixed herd of sheep, goats, yaks, and horses. The livestock provide them with dairy and meat products that they consume nearly every day, in addition to wool and animal-hair products that can be used to make a variety of home-made textiles. Madina and Zhumakhan are semi-nomadic pastoralists who migrate several times a year, living in an isolated but permanent mud-brick house during the hottest months of the year and a round felt yurt during the summer. Like most modern nomads, the family is connected to local markets; they sell livestock and cashmere on an occasional basis in order to pay for household expenses and essentials such as flour, sugar,} Madina lives in a household with her husband Zhumakhan, his 85-year-old mother, their four young sons, and their daughter. Like many Mongolian Kazakhs, Madina and Zhumakhan make their living by raising a mixed herd of sheep, goats, yaks, and horses. The livestock provide them with dairy and meat products that they consume nearly every day, in addition to wool and animal-hair products that can be used to make a variety of home-made textiles. Madina and Zhumakhan are semi-nomadic pastoralists who migrate several times a year, living in an isolated but permanent mud-brick house during the hottest months of the year and a round felt yurt during the summer. Like most modern nomads, the family is connected to local markets; they sell livestock and cashmere on an occasional basis in order to pay for household expenses and essentials such as flour, sugar,
and oil. The environmental conditions are challenging for daily survival. In a good year, they are able to collect and store hay to help their livestock survive the winter. During the previous winter, however, the weather was uncooperative, and about 30% of the family's sheep and goats, and nearly half of the newly born calves and foals, starved to death through a harsh combination of drought and freezing temperatures (known in Kazakh as zhūk). Throughout the year, herding families must perform an endless number of tasks to survive and get ahead. During our visit, Madina's day started around five in the morning when she got up to prepare tea before all of the family members got up to help her with the first task of the day: the first of several daily rounds of milking the goats and sheep. She barely had a chance to rest during the day, which was spent milking animals, preparing meals, washing dishes, producing dairy products, cleaning the yurt, mending clothing, and supervising her young children. Zhumakhan and the children were also busy with household and livestock work throughout the day.

As we walked into the yurt, Madina told us that three of her sons, ranging in age from 8 to 16, were recovering from a circumcision procedure that had been performed a few days earlier by a visiting Muslim specialist from Turkey. The boys were comfortably resting on mattresses placed in the centre of the yurt. We listened with interest as Madina explained how the imam in charge of the new mosque in the nearby town of Deluun had organized circumcision procedures for young boys in the region for the past few years. Madina's sons were circumcised together with at least 80 other boys in the community. The procedure was performed by a specialist with an electric knife who had been coming all the way from Turkey to perform these mass circumcisions. The procedure took place in Deluun, which meant that the family had to drive four hours (round trip) for the procedure.

As we drank tea, Zhumakhan's mother unobtrusively stood up, took a pitcher of water, and went outside. She was wearing a long dress, a pair of black boots, and a kimeshek -- a white headscarf with cross-stitch embroidery, covering all of her hair and enclosing her face. Fastened with safety pins, the headscarf was adorned with several beads intended to protect her from evil spirits. After ritually cleansing herself with water, the older woman returned to the yurt, and without saying a word, she placed a small prayer rug on a chair before quietly starting to perform námaz (the Islamic prayers performed five times a day), as the rest of us continued to talk and sip tea. Towards the end of the recitation, she took her prayer beads and recited the 99 attributes of Allah as she touched each bead. None of the other members of the family, including Madina's own mother (who was visiting from Kazakhstan), joined her in reciting the prayers.

Later that day, Zhumakhan and his brother entered the yurt, carrying a sheep. The men brought the sheep to the centre of the yurt and huddled in a circle around the stove, which is constantly fed a combination of dried horse and cow dung. The family used our visit as an opportunity to slaughter a sheep for fresh meat, having nearly consumed their supply of salted winter meat. Everybody in the yurt bowed their heads and opened his hands in prayer, as one of the men recited a quick prayer (ayırat) to bless the sheep before it was taken outside to be slaughtered. As we were told, the blessing is a way to thank Allah for the nourishment that the sheep will provide.

In contrast to perspectives that frame Islam as a negative force in Central Asia (Rashid 2002), we seek to explore ways in which the transformation of Islam in post-socialist spaces has contributed to the well-being of some segments of the population. We begin this essay with these three short scenes from our field notes to illustrate the ubiquitous nature of Islam in Kazakh life. We encountered similar snapshots of daily experiences with Islam in many of the other Kazakh homes that we visited in Western Mongolia (and Kazakhstan). Collectively, these snapshots reveal a number of developments that parallel the changing religious landscape across Central Asia. First, Islamic practices in Western Mongolia are openly practised today, in contrast to the socialist past when many practices, such as circumcision, were conducted secretly to avoid the attention of the authorities. These practices, which are often performed by local clerics, are usually financially supported by the families of the recipient. Male circumcision is performed on the night before a wedding, and the ceremony is attended by close relatives and friends. In our study, we found that the average cost of the procedures was around $100 (for a family, this includes the cost of the procedure, plus any additional expenses, such as transportation to the hospital and meals for the guest, which are customary). We also found that many of the procedures were performed by local doctors or traditional healers who have received training in Western medicine. In some cases, the procedures were performed in the home, while in others, they were performed in clinics or hospitals. In all cases, the procedures were performed in a religious setting, and the families of the recipient were invited to attend the ceremony. This is in contrast to the socialist past when many practices, such as circumcision, were conducted secretly to avoid the attention of the authorities. These practices, which are often performed by local clerics, are usually financially supported by the families of the recipient. Male circumcision is performed on the night before a wedding, and the ceremony is attended by close relatives and friends. In our study, we found that the average cost of the procedures was around $100 (for a family, this includes the cost of the procedure, plus any additional expenses, such as transportation to the hospital and meals for the guest, which are customary). We also found that many of the procedures were performed by local doctors or traditional healers who have received training in Western medicine. In some cases, the procedures were performed in the home, while in others, they were performed in clinics or hospitals. In all cases, the procedures were performed in a religious setting, and the families of the recipient were invited to attend the ceremony. This is in contrast to the socialist past when many practices, such as circumcision, were conducted secretly to avoid the attention of the authorities.
the attention of authorities. Second, Islamic practices today are undergoing changes that are influenced by transnational Muslim actors, such as the Turks and Saudis who have helped finance the building of local mosques and the education of local Kazakh imams. Although male circumcision was widely practised (though in secret) during the socialist years, the use of a Turkish specialist to perform the rite (rather than a local doctor or religious specialist) is a new phenomenon that emerged after the communist period. Third, levels of religiosity can vary within a family in ways that tend to correlate with generational (and gender) differences. In our larger survey sample, we found that the elderly, as well as the young, are more likely than the middle-aged to do things that are associated with the more pious segments of the population, such as reciting the daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, dressing modestly (for women), and abstaining from alcohol. Yet, all members of the family view themselves as Muslim and participate in rituals that they perceive as Islamic, such as the blessing of the sheep. We acknowledge that these are not necessarily equal ‘signifiers of religiosity’; however, the people we interviewed tend to use such signifiers to distinguish different levels of religiosity within a community where all Kazakhs view themselves to be Muslim. Thus, we feel that these signifiers offer insight into the varied and complex ways in which Islam is re-emerging within this community. In a previous essay, we explored the dimensions of gender, age, and local versus international religious practices among Mongolia’s Kazakh population (see Brede, Barcus, and Werner forthcoming). Fourth, Islam in Central Asia continues to be practised in syncretic ways, blending beliefs and practices in a fluid way, as illustrated by the beads the grandmother used to protect herself from evil spirits. This is but one example of how Islamic beliefs and practices are blended with other religious beliefs and practices.

In addition to illustrating the points above, snapshots of Islam in Kazakh daily life such as the ones presented above stand in contrast to other representations of Islam in the broader region of Central Asia that present the ‘revival’ of Islam as a negative, dangerous threat to peace and security. As Khalid (2007, 117) describes, Western observers, in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, have tended to ‘exaggerate all Islam-based political activism and all threats of militancy while ignoring the broader context in which they exist’. The broader context suggests that the practice of Islam has become more public with the end of Soviet rule, yet the ‘rhythms of everyday life remain secular in a way that is inconceivable even in other secular Muslim countries’ (Khalid 2007, 121). Citing Privratsky’s (2001) work in Kazakhstan, Khalid (2007) further notes that the level of knowledge about Islam remains relatively low among the general population, and many Central Asians are content to allow others to fulfil ritual requirements on behalf of the larger community. Nevertheless, Western journalists and politicians who may not be as familiar with the broader context continue to make casual observations about the region, portraying outward signs of increased religiosity and piety, such as increases in the number of men growing long beards and the number of women wearing hijabs, as problematic developments that suggest a dangerous rise in Islamic extremism (Rashid 2002). Islam is assumed to be at the root of most conflicts and tensions in the region (Abashin 2006; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). Such characterizations are based on a ‘domino effect’ logic that assumes that Islamic fundamentalist movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan are likely to spill over into nearby countries if not for the careful surveillance and monitoring of religious activities. This logic is also adopted by states, such as Uzbekistan (Zanca 2005). We argue that these perspectives are based on a false assumption that Islam is a negative force, and thus fail to capture ways in which transformations of Islamic practices might be contributing to the well-being of the local community.

This article contributes to the growing literature on well-being in anthropology, geography, and other disciplines (Jimenez 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo 2010; Jackson 2011). Well-being is a complicated, multi-faceted concept which makes simultaneous reference to three disparate concepts: health, happiness, and prosperity. Defining well-being is further challenged by the
reality that health has both physical and cognitive components, happiness can be enduring or fleeting, and prosperity is generally viewed as a relative state of being.

While we employ the concept of well-being broadly in this essay, we want to draw particular attention to the relationship between religious practice and notions of well-being as a way to contextualize our assessment of well-being among imams in western Mongolia. The intersection between subjective well-being and religious practice is vast, with scholars actively teasing out the means by which to measure gains in well-being obtained from religious beliefs and practices and 'identifying aspects of religious/spiritual involvement that have a beneficial effect on mental health and those that do not' (Fiorito and Ryan 2007, 341). Religious or spiritual beliefs and practices have long been associated with greater happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) (see e.g. Diener et al. 1999; Diener 2000). Social psychologists in particular have assessed the relations between SWB and a host of other social and demographic factors such as marital status, age, religious faith, intelligence, and education, which positively affect happiness and SWB (see e.g. Diener 2000). Religious identities and practices can also offer a collective identity and reliable social networks' (see Diener et al. 1999). Thus, an individual’s happiness or SWB can be seen as deriving at least in part from religious faith and practices. Using these ideals as a base, we focus on the emergence of a new group of foreign-trained Kazakh religious leaders (imams) who, through their religious teachings, ceremonial duties, and social contributions, are helping community members renegotiate their relationship with Islam after decades of religious repression. We argue that religious transformations in western Mongolia have been enhancing the social and material well-being of this new social group and that their presence and expertise have been enhancing the subjective well-being of families and the broader community. We further argue that well-being among imams is not simply the outcome of obtaining a position of power within the community but rather that embracing religious faith and acting as mediators in helping others do the same also enhances well-being among imams.

Mongolia’s socialist period (1921–1990) can be characterized as a period of religious repression, which was especially intense during the purges of the late 1930s. During the most tragic period of state-sponsored political violence, religious leaders, including approximately 18,000 Buddhist lamas, were killed as enemies of the state under Chorbalsan, who is commonly described as ‘Mongolia’s Stalin’ (Kaplonski 2002, 164). At that time, mosques were destroyed and Muslim religious leaders were also executed (Finke 1999). Throughout the socialist era, it was difficult for Kazakhs to practise their religion openly, though some Kazakhs did participate in underground mosques (Diener 2009). The end of socialism has been marked by a significant change in the management and influence of local mosques, as small underground mosques operated by informally trained, elderly moldas (T. molla, Ar. mawla) have been supplanted by an association of new mosques led by younger, foreign-educated local imams. In this new context, the new cohort of imams are playing an important mediating role as members of the local population reinterpret and renegotiate their identity as Muslims. In addition to searching for spiritual well-being through their knowledge of Islam, these imams are acquiring social status and economic security from their positions as local religious leaders. We speculate that the imams are doing well compared to many people, but not all, living in the same community. We also note that today’s generation of imams is better off than the generation of religious specialists who were targeted for persecution during the socialist era. This new group of imams does not seem to be benefiting at the expense of others in the local community; instead, the transnational connections involved in their religious journey are providing the imams with social and economic benefits that are not available to all segments of society.

The remainder of this essay is organized into three sections. In the following section, we describe the methods used for this study. We then provide a contextual overview of the social and political context of religious change in Western Mongolia. In the final section, we present profiles of several imams from a new group of imams.

A few brief comments

This essay is part of a larger ethnographic project among Kazakhs in a polity of Western Mongolia. The ethnographic data was generated primarily through in-depth interviews with 15 Kazakh villagers, ethnographic research, and participant observation. We acknowledge that our research has provided information about these Kazakhs.

We chose to conduct research among Kazakhs because visits to Kazakhstan for interviews are extremely expensive, and we wanted to conduct research with Kazakhs that serve as direct representatives of Kazakh culture. We chose to do research in this setting and present these Kazakhs because they are/were deeply involved in local research and activities.

Mongolian Kazaks

At just 4.3% of the country that is primarily inhabited by the Chinese, and more than 2% of the population of China (Diener 2009), these Kazakhs live on the borders with China and Mongolia. They have relatives in several areas of Mongolia, including Ulaanbaatar, Ulan Bator, and Altai Mountain, and their lives have been separated from those of other Kazakh communities. Like Zhuushaks, they have gone to work in production as a result of this separation.

The largest of the Kazakh groups is situated along the border with China, with many religious organ
profiles of several imams to illustrate how the new religious landscape is providing this new group of imams with a sense of well-being.

A few brief comments on methodology

This essay is part of a larger study focusing on the transnational community of Mongolian Kazhaks in a post-transition context. Our field research was conducted among the Kazhaks of Western Mongolia over the course of three summers (2006, 2008, and 2009). Reflecting our disciplinary differences, we adopted a mixed, or multiple, methods approach that combines ethnographic research and survey research, without privileging one over the other. Our surveys are ethnographically informed, and our interviews and participant observation provide detailed information about individual experiences.

We chose to conduct interviews in multiple locations as a way to capture the diverse experiences of rural and urban Kazhaks. Most of our interviews and ethnographically informed surveys took place in the province (aimag) of Bayan-Ölgii, in the central town of Ölgii, in three villages that serve as district (som) centres, and in three mountain pastures used by semi-nomadic herders. During the summer of 2006, we also conducted preliminary interviews in Khovd Province and one additional summer pasture location in Bayan-Ölgii Province.

In each location, we employed local research assistants and participated in the daily lives of Kazakh families while conducting semi-structured interviews and structured face-to-face surveys with their relatives and neighbours. All together, we conducted 38 semi-structured interviews, 28 life-history interviews, and 184 structured survey interviews with an equal number of women and men of different ages and different occupations, including semi-nomadic herders, traders, teachers, and textile seamstresses.

While the larger project focuses on issues related to the transnational migration of Mongolian Kazhaks, one component of the study considers how religious practices, such as shrine visits, reinforce place attachment and therefore contribute to immobility. We asked a number of questions about religious practice during our ‘life history’ interviews. We also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with imams and other religious professionals in the region (Brede 2010). The time spent living with families in western Mongolia and working with our local research assistants has also informed our understandings of local religious practices.

Mongolian Kazhaks and their changing social and religious landscape

At just 4.3% of Mongolia’s population, the Kazhaks are the largest ethnic minority group in a country that is dominated by Mongols. Kazhaks first settled in this area in the late nineteenth century, and most Mongolian Kazhaks trace their ancestry to Kazakh territories in western China (Dienner 2009; Enwall 2010). Beginning in the 1930s, the development of international borders with China (and Russia) made it difficult for Mongolian Kazhaks to maintain ties with relatives on the other side of the Altai Mountains. Today, over 100,000 Kazhaks live in Mongolia, including over 80,000 who reside in the western aimag of Bayan-Ölgii (NSOM 2001). A large number of Kazhaks also live in neighbouring Khovd aimag. Nestled in the Altai Mountains, the western region of Mongolia shares borders with Russia and China and is separated from Kazakhstan by a thin strip of territory claimed by both Russia and China. Like Zhumakhan and Madina, many inhabitants of the region rely on semi-nomadic livestock production as a means of subsistence and a primary source of income (Finke 1999; Dienner 2007).

The largest settlement in Bayan-Ölgii aimag is Ölgii, a city with nearly 30,000 residents situated along the Khovd River. Ölgii serves as the centre of social, economic, and religious organization for Mongolia’s Kazakh population. Bayan-Ölgii aimag also contains
13 administrative-territorial units called soums. Each soum has one central settlement, such as Deluun, which provides commercial and community services, as well as a boarding school for the children of herders.

As a former socialist bloc country, Mongolia’s recent history has been influenced by economic, political, and social transitions taking place in the former Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the local economy was devastated by disruptions in trade with Russia and the initial transition within Mongolia from a socialist command economy to a capitalist-oriented market economy (Diener 2007). Between 1989 and 1998, the poverty rate increased from 1% to 33% as collective agricultural units were dissolved and local social services (including health care) fell victim to budgetary crises (Portisch 2007). The region’s relative isolation from the outside world ended in the early 1990s with the expansion of transborder trade, international tourism, and commercial mining (Diener 2007; Werner and Barcus 2009; Barcus and Werner 2010). All of these factors contributed to a gradual improvement in the local economy.

In the early 1990s, Mongolian Kazakhs also encountered new economic opportunities when the newly independent country of Kazakhstan introduced a repatriation programme for diasporic Kazakhs. At the time of independence, the titular ethnic group, the Kazakhs, comprised a plurality (39.3%) but not a majority of the country’s total population of 16.5 million. The Russian population in Kazakhstan was comparable in size, at 37.5% (Svanberg 1999). From a nationalist perspective, the relatively small size of the Kazakh population was considered problematic, leading to concerns about the potential influx of neighbouring Uzbek or Chinese populations (Kuscu 2008). Further, many Kazakhs did not have a strong command of the Kazakh language, because the Russian language had provided greater opportunities for social mobility during Soviet rule (Davé 2007). From a nationalist perspective, a single solution to these perceived demographic, linguistic, and cultural problems existed: encourage ethnic Kazakhs living abroad to return to the newly independent country of Kazakhstan, now imagined as the ‘homeland’ of all Kazakhs (Diener 2009; Kuscu 2008). Initially, the repatriation programme was targeted at Kazakhs living beyond Soviet borders, with specific quotas set for migrants from China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. Approximately 60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs responded to this invitation and migrated to Kazakhstan on five-year work contracts in the 1990s (Diener 2007). Some of the original migrants eventually returned to Mongolia; but others have continued to migrate to Kazakhstan (Werner and Barcus 2009; Barcus and Werner 2010; Dubuisson and Genina 2011).

These economic changes in the post-socialist period have occurred alongside increased religious freedoms, in a landscape where atheism was once the official ‘religion’. The religious changes taking place in western Mongolia are comparable to other regions of Central Asia where Muslims have also been rediscovering their national and religious identities (Heyat 2004; Abashin 2006; Fathi 2006; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006; Roberts 2007). In the post-socialist period, religion, nationalism, and state power have become increasingly interconnected. The national scale of religious life can be seen in the ways that governments approach the subject of religion and the ways that citizens employ religion in discourses of ethnic and national identity. Central Asians, like Muslims in other countries (especially the Turkic regions), tend to fuse ethnonational and religious identities, viewing ‘Muslimness’ as a subset of ethnonational culture; for many, an Islamic transnational identity is unimportant (Khalid 2007; Montgomery 2007).

During our interviews, for example, a majority of respondents told us that Kazakhs, almost by definition, are Muslim. For example, Muratkh, a middle-aged man, noted: ‘All Kazakhs are Muslims. You don’t have to do Islamic practices or say you’re Muslim. If you are Kazakh, you are Muslim.’ Given their minority status in a country where the dominant ethnic group is not Muslim, Mongolian Kazakhs are in an unusual situation regarding the links between religion, ethnicity, and national identity (e.g., Islam on a national level, personal ties and ties to the homeland). The realities of ‘return’ from the Sunni faith (often with assimilation into Islam into the mosque) has been observed for example, in the wearing of headscarves, adoption of kyrgyz names, and observing some aspects of Kyrgyz culture, such as vodka during the New Year festivities.

During our fieldwork in Western Mongolia, we compared these processes to those in Russia. Some religious practices are more commonly practiced during the Post-Soviet period. For instance, the mosque (masjid) is today an active space for religious and social activities; it is a focal point for local Muslims during ritual fasting (Ramadan) and other religious events. During social and religious events, such as Muslim weddings, a fast time is observed several times a year (Zhan 1999).

Similar to the Islamic religious practices in Western Mongolia, some of the most well-known practices include the celebration of the New Year and Ramadan. There are no official dates for the celebration of the New Year, but the date is chosen by community leaders and is often associated with the celebration of the end of the long winter, the start of spring, and the reawakening of nature. The celebration often includes feasting, the exchange of gifts, and the celebration of the new year with family and friends. During the New Year, the mosque is an active space for religious and social activities, with people coming together to celebrate the new year, share a meal, and perform prayers.

During our interviews, we observed the importance of the mosque as a focal point for social and religious activities. The mosque is a place where people come together to perform prayers, share a meal, and celebrate the new year. The mosque is also a place where people come together to discuss community issues and to plan for the future. The mosque is an important space for both religious and social activities, and it is a place where people come together to celebrate the new year and to share a meal.
ethnicity, and nationalism. As suggested above, their religious identity is strongly linked to their ethnic identity as Kazakhs. Nevertheless, Mongolia’s Kazakh population are also connected to Islam on a national scale through their linguistic and cultural ties to Kazakhstan, as well as their personal ties to the Mongolian Kazakhs who migrated to Kazakhstan since 1991 (Finke 1999; Diener 2007).

The reality of local post-socialist religious change is far more complicated than the collective ‘return’ from atheism or a gradual transformation from ‘Islam without belief’ to a more unitary Sunni faith (Roberts 2007). Individuals and communities appropriate the polyvalent symbols of Islam into their beliefs, practices, and identities in unique ways. Scholars have made numerous observations about the wide range of religiosity in Central Asia. As in many Muslim countries, for example, one sees women in miniskirts walking side-by-side with friends wearing hijab headscarves, with both considering themselves to be Muslims (Abazov 2007). It is possible to observe some people fasting during Ramadan, and others quoting the Prophet with a shot of vodka during Kurban Ait, also known as Eid al-Adha (Ar. 'id al-'fitr) (Montgomery 2007).

During our interviews, we asked people to talk about how their own religious practices compared to those of other family members, and how they have changed in the post-socialist period. Some religious practices, such as male circumcision, shrine visitation, and almsgiving, were commonly practised by Kazakhs during the socialist period, but only in private spaces. In the post-socialist period, these religious practices are taking place in more public spaces, such as the mosque (Breda, Barcus, and Werner forthcoming). As Finke (1999) notes, male circumcision was one of the few Muslim customs that was strictly observed by Mongolian Kazakhs during socialist times. This wasn’t easy for all families, however, as one of our interlocutors explained. Esimkhun, for example, worked as a mining engineer at the time, and remembers circumcising his sons in the middle of the night so that his supervisors (who were also Kazakh) would not find out. Kazakhs feared possible repercussions for circumcising their sons, but as Privratsky (2001) notes in the case of Kazakhstan, Kazakh families who did not circumcise their sons were accused of betraying their ethnic heritage. Burial practices were another custom that was maintained during socialism. The body of the deceased was prepared for burial in a way that locals identify as Muslim practice. Then, after a secular funeral service, families typically returned to the burial site several times to recite prayers: 7 days, 40 days, and one year after the person’s death (Finke 1999).

Similar to circumcision, visiting shrines was something that Kazakhs could do without a central place of worship such as a mosque. The importance of shrines, especially the shrines of well-known saints, is well documented in the ethnographic literature on Central Asia (Privratsky 2001; Fathi 2006; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006; Low 2006; Abramson and Karimov 2007). There are no historic mosques or notable saintly shrines in Western Mongolia; however, Mongolian Kazakhs do perform acts of devotion at the burial sites of family members and other sacred sites. As Privratsky (2001) notes, the shrines that occupy Kazakh cemeteries serve as foci of religious territoriality, providing a historical connection to religious tradition through family lines. Kazakhs often visit shrines prior to any new undertaking (such as marriage, a journey, etc.). During the shrine visit, they ‘read ayat’ (a Koranic verse such as the Ayat al-Kursi) or they pay a molda or inam a small amount to recite ayat on their behalf. As in most Muslim societies, many Kazakhs believe that reciting verses from the Qur’an is beneficial for (and earns spiritual merit for) the individual who recites it as well as for the spirits of the dead to whom the recital is dedicated (Kalanov and Alonso 2008).

During the socialist period, families often sacrificed a sheep during Kurban Ait (in the privacy of their own home). This custom continues to be practiced by most of Mongolia’s Kazakh population, but now donations are channelled through the mosque. Once a year, families that can afford to do so will make a donation to the mosque that is then distributed to the needy
during the period of Kurban Ait. Urban families might provide cash donations, while rural families usually provide sheep, which are then slaughtered at the mosque to provide food for those who participate in the ritual festivities.

In contrast to these practices, several other Islamic religious practices were less frequently practised during the socialist period. This includes three of the five 'pillars' of Islam: reciting namaz, fasting during Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage (or hajj) to Mecca. To varying degrees, these practices have become more frequently practised in the post-socialist period. Most of the Kazakhs we interviewed also acknowledged that they are more pious during the month of Ramadan. Some of them fast from dawn to dusk every day and recite the special tarawith prayers at the mosque every day, while others participate in the breaking of the fast, especially on the 27th night of Ramadan.

While Ramadan is becoming a popular practice, the other two pillars are only practised by that small segment of the population who are considered exceptionally pious. According to one of our interlocutors, 'If you recite namaz, you are a very religious person.' Given the cost of travel, it is not surprising that participation in the hajj is limited to a small number of people. Between 1989 and 2008, only about 150 Mongolian Kazakhs participated in the hajj (Brede 2010). Despite the demographic limitations of these practices, respect for the pious is widespread. For example, one of our interlocutors, Muratbaatar, does not pray himself, but he praises individuals like his nephew, whom he considers to be 'very religious'.

The construction of new mosques in the town of Ölgii and the soum centres is certainly one of the most visible signs of an Islamic revival in Western Mongolia. Interviews with imams in Ölgii and surrounding soums revealed that there are now over 30 mosques in Bayan-Ölgii aimag, and all but one of them were constructed in the post-socialist period. The newly constructed mosques have become centres of piety. The imams affiliated with each mosque use this public religious space to provide instruction in reciting the namaz, to lead the Friday noon worship (zhuma namaz), and to coordinate donations during the period of almsgiving associated with Kurban Ait. This co-option of religious authority and religious space by new institutions represents a change in public and private religious expression in Mongolia. It is worth noting, however, that boys and men are more likely than girls and women to take part in religious activities at the mosque, such as taking extracurricular courses at the Muslim school or participating in the Friday noon prayer. The imams also provide a number of services that no longer have to be performed in secret, such as organizing mass circumcision rituals and performing wedding rites.

One of the most striking changes to the religious landscape throughout Eurasia has been the explosion of foreign influences. This includes Islamic missionaries who provide spiritual advice, Islamic organizations that offer educational opportunities for young people, and wealthy Muslims who provide financing for the construction of new mosques (Roberts 2007; Ghodsee 2009; Liu 2011). All of the imams we interviewed for this study had received Islamic training abroad, typically in Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Several had also travelled to religious schools in Pakistan and Kazakhstan to strengthen their knowledge of Islam. Further, almost all of the mosques in Bayan-Ölgii aimag were financed primarily through governmental and private donations from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. This is especially true for the mosques affiliated with the Mongolian Islamic Association (MIA), an organization that replaced the Central Islamic Committee in 2007. Both organizations provide administrative oversight of religious activities in the country, but the newer organization is more explicitly transnational. The leader of the MIA has served as Mongolia's ambassador to Egypt, and remains actively involved in local and national politics. Among other things, the MIA appoints imams and distributes funds to member mosques. In the following section of this essay, we profile several imams to illustrate how the revival of Islam in Mongolia is contributing to the social and material well-being of this new social group.
Profiles of Kazakh imams

The new cohort of relatively young imams has been replacing a previous group of religious authorities known as moldas. During the socialist era, moldas tended to be elderly men who learned and practised Islam at home and passed on this knowledge clandestinely. In the socialist period, the moldas risked their own lives and the lives of their family members to keep the religious heritage alive (Privratsky 2001). In the post-socialist period, the region has become open to outside religious influences, and it is young people who are taking the lead in gaining new forms of religious knowledge from outside. Although we met several elderly imams in private mosques, the imams we interviewed in MIA-affiliated mosques were all relatively young men, in their thirties or forties. In this context, traditional moldas are losing their authority, since their primary activities – reciting ayat at shrines, preparing amulets with Koranic verses, performing the Islamic marriage ceremony (neke, Ar. nikah), and helping to bury the dead – have been taken over by the new class of religious professionals (Privratsky 2001). Below, we present profiles of three imams who work in rural MIA-affiliated mosques and we argue that this new cohort of imams is experiencing a sense of social and economic well-being.

Alibek is the head imam in one of the soum centres. He was 36 years old at the time that we interviewed him. Alibek initially studied at a technical institute. In 1991, when he was about 18 years old, he remembers meeting a Kazakh writer who first sparked his interest in religion. Religious freedoms were increasing at that time, and he started to learn about Islam independently, reading the books that were becoming available. From 1998 to 2000, he served as the soum’s assistant imam. His formal training started in 2001, when he completed a short 45-day course on Islam in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. The following year, he went to Kazakhstan for three months for additional training. He remembers getting loans from his relatives to help cover expenses. In 2005, he went to Turkey for an additional three months of training, with expenses paid by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı) of the Turkish government. He travelled to Turkey with 10 other Kazakh imams, including some who stayed in Turkey for nearly a year.

The mosque where Alibek works first opened in 2004 and remains affiliated with the Mongolian Islamic Association. Although the region was previously served by moldas, this was the first of three mosques to be constructed in this soum (and the only one in the soum centre). The mosque is in very good condition. His office has large windows, a nice carpet showing Mecca, and new furniture. Alibek explained how the mosque was constructed with funds from multiple donors, including donors from Saudi Arabia who apparently wanted to perform a good deed for their own personal salvation. The mosque also has financial ties to Turkey, in that Turks have provided supplies and operating expenses. For example, Alibek showed us the imam’s hat that he had received from Turkish visitors, as well as posters and books from Turkey. During the previous year, a Turkish religious organization provided funds for 100 sheep during Kurban Ait.

Alibek provides a number of services for the local community. He provides religious instruction at the mosque for anybody who is interested. On the day of our visit, 16 children attended the lesson (15 boys and one girl). During the school year, he also visits the public school to provide children with secular lessons on how to behave well and respect others. Every Friday, he leads the Friday noon prayers at the mosque. He told us that there are about 10 regular attendees (mostly young men), although the number varies from yecek to yecek. He also told us that attendance increases to approximately 50 people (in a town with about 1500 residents) during the month of Ramadan. Each year, he coordinates the donations during Kurban Ait and hosts the Turkish specialist who performs the circumcisions. He told us that the specialist was able to circumcise 50 boys in just 3 hours. Every day, he is on call to provide blessings for various things,
During our one-hour interview, he was interrupted twice by women who stopped by to ask for a quick blessing. Both women left a small amount of money (MNT 1000) in a collection box. He also received a phone call requesting his presence at an event outside of town. He explained that he serves the entire region and is often asked to provide a blessing (ayat) at various events outside of the soum centre, such as funerals and memorial events.

Alibek made it very clear that he reports to religious authorities in Ölgii, who have the power to replace him if he is not doing a good job. He regularly holds meetings organized by the Mongolian Islamic Association; it is this organization that provides plans for all of the mosques. The organization also provides him with a budget that he uses to cover his own salary, to pay several assistants, to pay operating expenses, and to pay for building renovations. The MIA, in turn, receives some of its funding from international religious organizations, especially in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Alibek also relies on donations from the local community to support some of the mosque’s activities. Typically, members of the community provide alms during Kurban Ait and small token amounts for blessings.

Like Alibek, Sabir is the head imam at the only mosque in one of the soum centres. He was also in his mid-thirties at the time of our interview. He doesn’t remember the particular moment that led him to become an imam, but he does remember that his interest started in the early 1990s. At first he learned how to recite the namaz and how to fast during Ramadan. He wanted to learn more. Like Alibek, Sabir started his studies in Mongolia, studying at the central mosque in Ölgii. After that, he went to the city of Turkestan (in Kazakhstan) for about a year to expand his knowledge of Islam. From there, in 2007, he went to Turkey for about five months. Like Alibek, his trip to Turkey was funded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Turkish government.

Sabir’s mosque was founded in 1992, but was initially located in what appeared to be a normal house. In 2003, with funding from a wealthy sponsor in Saudi Arabia, they were able to build a small mosque in the town. The mosque currently has about 20 regulars who come for Friday prayers. In this town, most of the regulars are men over the age of 40. Children come for religious instruction during the school year. Sabir is also available to give blessings for special purposes (such as a trip) or for special occasions (such as a memorial). He told us that he often has to turn down requests because he doesn’t have enough funds to travel to the countryside for these activities.

Zhandos is an assistant imam in a different soum centre. He was 31 years old when we interviewed him. He grew up in a family with six children. One of his ancestors had been a famous imam in the region, and this led to his initial interest. After studying Islam in Ölgii, he went to Turkey for four months of study. Turkey’s Ministry of Religious Affairs paid for his living expenses, but he had to cover his own airfare to Turkey.

Zhandos works at the larger, MIA-affiliated mosque in a town that also has one private mosque. Founded in 1992, the mosque is named after an important religious leader from China who lived during the nineteenth century. Funding to build this mosque was also provided by a donor from Saudi Arabia, who donated approximately USD 17,000 through the Mongolian Islamic Association, which then allocated funds for the construction of the mosque.

Alibek, Sabir, and Zhandos occupy a new social role in western Mongolia. They represent the public face of the new religious changes that are taking place in the region. During the socialist period, moldas did not enjoy the same level of well-being, given the constant fear of being persecuted by political authorities. The stark difference between the past and the present is best illustrated through the personal tragedy of an elderly imam we interviewed named Kaldybai. Kaldybai descended from a long line of religious leaders. His grandfather was an imam in pre-socialist times, and was one of the first Mongolian Kazakhs to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. His father was also an imam who had a small mosque in the countryside. In 1938, the authorities arrested and killed his father and destroyed the mosque. Kaldybai told us that his father was taken away for religious changes that belonged to the mosque not the region. The study centres in the capital and the region, Ölgii and Mongolia Islamic organizations are not for his family. In the community, and religious and community education, they are funded by locally trained and experienced Islamic. Questions were charged discourses and religious authorities like the family ancestry, modern advance and Islamic. Different imams are introduced by local religious authorities like the pre-socialist times the pre-socialism Karimov 2003. Many major events in the region people find becoming religious. The local community, in particular, many religious and expenses such as electric and mosqui are not enough. Many imams have
taken away one day and simply never returned. Until the end of socialism, Kaldybai avoided religious life because of his father’s experience. He worked as a schoolteacher and even belonged to the Communist Party. In 1989, however, he retired and decided to build a mosque near his home to continue his father’s legacy. Around this time, he devoted his life to the study of Islam. He read a number of books (in Kazakh) that were becoming available in the region, and he studied with his uncle. In 1994, he opened a private mosque in the town of Olgi and named it after his father. Although the mosque is not formally affiliated with the Mongolian Islamic Association, Kaldybai feels that he has a good working relationship with the organization. More importantly, he does not have to worry about his safety or the safety of his family. On the contrary, Kaldybai’s job provides him with a measure of respect in the community, and this contributes to his sense of well-being. As with the other imams, members of the community regularly visit him to learn more about Islam and to request his services as a religious specialist.

In addition to experiencing greater personal security and greater respect within the community, the new cohort of imams also benefit socially from their ties to the transnational Muslim community. Throughout Mongolia (and the former Soviet republics), individuals in general are able to acquire social status through travel abroad. Throughout our fieldwork, parents would proudly tell us if they had a child who had studied in another country. Indeed, we often heard people talking about their neighbour’s child who was studying in Kazakhstan, Turkey, or the United States. All of the imams who are affiliated with the MIA have studied abroad, and many of them have been on multiple trips to multiple countries. Typically, they receive a grant from an organization in the host country. Trips to Turkey, for example, are sponsored by the Dijane organization. These trips contribute to their social status within the community and the respect they receive as a learned religious leader. Thanks to their formal education, their knowledge of Islam is generally considered to be greater than the knowledge of locally trained moldas.

Transnational discourses have become an increasingly powerful influence on local religious experiences. In some locales, tensions have emerged between transnational and local forms of Islam. Questions of authenticity and sectarianism remain at the forefront of these highly charged discussions of locally accepted practices and ideas. Whereas traditional Islamic authorities like moldas commonly recognized practices such as visiting the shrines of saints or family ancestors, tying ribbons to sacred trees, and lighting candles for the dead, some modern advocates of transnational Islamic ideas consider such activities to be heretical pre-Islamic survivals (Fathi 2006; Abramson and Karimov 2007). As new beliefs and practices are introduced through increased contact with the broader Muslim world, the new cohort of imams are playing a role in how Mongolian Kazakhs are renegotiating their relationships with Islam. For example, some Mongolian Kazakhs believe that reciting ayat at the gravesides of their ancestors can help their ancestors get to Paradise, and in return this can provide them with help in the present. These beliefs were taught by Hanafi and Naqshbandi Sufi leaders in the pre-socialist period and continued throughout the socialist period (Abramson and Karimov 2007). This helps explain why many Kazakhs visit graveside shrines before any major event in their life. The new imams, however, have tried (with limited success) to discourage people from asking favours of their dead ancestors.

Becoming an imam does not make one wealthy. However, relative to other members of the community, they do have a measure of economic security and well-being. In rural areas in particular, many individuals are unemployed, and many households struggle to pay for basic expenses such as food and clothing. In this context, the imams affiliated with the MIA mosques are relatively well off: they receive a regular monthly salary. In other words, the imams have a modest but comfortable standard of living compared to their neighbours,
similar to school teachers in rural areas, who also have a regular salary. In addition, the imams have access to resources from the transnational Muslim community, the national Muslim organization, and local community members. The transnational Muslim community provides donations, such as the cash necessary to build and maintain their mosques and to purchase sheep for Kurban Bayram festivities. The MIA also provides them with resources to purchase supplies and to pay employees. These are new sources of income that did not exist in the pre-socialist period. The importance of these resources is revealed by a comment made by an employee at one of the non-affiliated mosques: ‘We are not rich like the other mosque.’ Finally, members of the local community provide imams with steady (though small) amounts of income in exchange for performing services, such as reciting aya. The imams explained that this money is typically used to help maintain the mosque, to help the poor, and to provide food and refreshments to people who visit the mosque. Through all of these financial resources, it is possible to say that the new cohort of imams, especially those affiliated with the MIA, have a relative sense of economic well-being.

Conclusion

We started this essay by providing a few snapshots of Islam in the daily life of Western Mongolia. As these examples illustrate, the end of socialism has led to greater religious freedoms for the Mongolian Kazakh population and to greater ties to a broader Islamic community. In this essay, we focused on a new group of imams who are playing a role in how local people renegotiate their relationship with Islam. We described how this new cohort of Kazakh imams is experiencing a sense of well-being and how their transnational ties to a broader Muslim community are contributing to this sense of well-being. We chose to focus on the imams as a way to counter representations of Central Asia that tend to link the revival of Islam to negative things, such as the rise of fundamentalist and militant Islam. It is presumed that the new group of imams are probably finding spiritual well-being through their religious journeys. In this essay, however, we chose to focus on how the revival of Islam is contributing to their social and economic well-being. We argue that opportunities to study abroad and in particular financial aid from transnational organizations have provided these imams with social status in the community and a relatively secure economic life. In addition, they are contributing to the subjective well-being of community members by sharing their knowledge of Islamic beliefs and practices.

As we noted at the beginning of the essay, well-being can be elusive and quite difficult to evaluate or measure. Our observations, as detailed in the snapshots at the beginning of the essay, suggest that religiosity is deeply embedded in the cultural practices of Mongolian Kazakhs and that these practices, while varying across generations and levels of adherence, are gradually re-emerging in Western Mongolia, nurtured by a new generation of imams and what seems to be an eager populace.

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Notes

1. Following disciplinary norms in anthropology and geography, pseudonyms are used throughout this essay to protect the identity of the people we interviewed.
2. In the late fall, when the livestock are relatively fat from summer and fall pasture, Kazakh families slaughter a sufficient number of animals to provide meat throughout the winter. The meat is cured with salt and stored in a cold storage area to prevent the growth of microorganisms.
3. This essay is based on fieldwork conducted by all three authors in Western Mongolia. Comments about life in Kazakhstan are based on previous fieldwork experiences by one of the authors (Werner).
4. In Mongolia, the socialist assault on ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, and ‘backwardness’, called the *hjum* in Turkic languages, began in 1926 under the Mongolian dictator Choibalsan (Diener 2007; Khalid 2007). During socialist rule, people throughout Central Asia managed to find creative ways to continue practices associated with Islam, such as disguising a circumcision ceremony as a birthday party (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006).
5. In Kazakh, the plural of *imam* is *imandar*. In this essay, we use the English plural ending (*imams*) to make the text more intelligible for readers who may not be familiar with Turkic languages.
6. ‘Turkish’ schools associated with the Fethullah Gulen movement have developed throughout Central Asia and other regions of the world (Khalid 2007). Kristin Ghodsee’s book, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe* (2010), provides a thorough description of how foreign aid from a variety of Islamic sources has similarly helped finance the revival of Islam among Bulgaria’s Muslim populations.
7. Other regions of Central Asia are characterized by similar transformations in the level of religiosity (Hilgers 2009; Khalid 2007; McBrien 2009; Privatsky 2001). McBrien’s article (2009), for example, describes how the decision to wear a hijab is part of a larger decision to become more pious, while Irene Hilger’s book, *Why Do Uzbeks Have To Be Muslims?* (2009), captures the diversity of religious practice and belief in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan.
8. Fosse (2010) provided a broad historical context for understanding religious syncretism in Central Asia, emphasizing the role that transcontinental trade played in spreading new religious ideas. Abramson and Karimov (2007) noted how some religious leaders, inspired by transnational Islamic ideas, consider certain activities, such as shrine worship, to be heretical pre-Islamic survivals. Other scholars, such as Khalid (2007) and Rasymayagym (2012), have maintained that these traditions are integral to local conceptions of Islam and ‘Muslimness’, whether or not they have pre-Islamic origins.
9. Our research team consists of three Americans, including one individual who is able to speak comfortably in Kazakh. Local research assistants were used to schedule interviews and to assist with translation. One of the authors (Brede), a recent graduate of Macalester College, joined the research team during the summer of 2009 and conducted interviews on religious practice as part of his undergraduate senior thesis (Brede 2010). Celia Emmelhainz, a graduate student at Texas A&M University, was also part of the research team during the summer of 2009 and contributed to the data collection for this study.
10. The repatriation programme was ‘temporarily’ suspended in 2012 in connection with the violent riots in Zhanaozen, which some Kazakhs attributed to repatriated Kazakh. During the suspension, migrants are allowed to arrive in the country but they no longer receive government benefits as repatriated persons.

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