
Popular Islam in Chinese Central Asia

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Introduction

After the introduction of Islam in Eastern Turkestan or what at present forms Chinese part of Central Asia (Xinjiang), it was expected that the neo-converts, the Muslims, would follow the Islamic laws in letter and spirit. Contrary to these expectations, they juxtapose practiced Islamic culture along with such pagan traditions and rituals that had been bequeathed by their predecessors over the years. Such a mixing is sometimes explained by the term "Popular Islam," the use of which, however, should not be perceived as an intentional endeavour of the present author to hurt any one. The term should be simply taken to mean several pre-Islamic traditions that were popularly followed by the native Muslims, perhaps unknowingly, as

a part of Islam. One can better appreciate this inadvertent mixing by (i) unraveling essentials of "Popular Islam", (ii) measuring extraneous influences on its being, (iii) evaluating its compatibility with the puritan Islam and (iv) distinguishing between the Islamic and the Muslim culture in Chinese Central Asia during the 19th-20th century.

During the aforementioned period, the people of the region professed faith in diverse religions, viz., Shamanism, Manichaeism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Although Islam entered the region in the 8th century, it did not pierce into the soil for the Arab rule was itself short lived (713-51). It was under the Karakhanids (10th-11th centuries) that the new faith consolidated and percolated down to the masses even in those cities and

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towns which earlier constituted the dominant Buddhist centres. Despite the enormous contribution of the Karakhanids to the growth of Islam, several potent threats remained from within and outside the region. Later, however, these were relentlessly reckoned with by the Mongols (13th century) who made Islam the religion of the majority and gave it the official status.

As a result, Buddhism, the former ancient Indian faith, was transformed into a mere religio-cultural identity with a few followers. Following the dismemberment of the Mongol empire, whole region was annexed by the Chinese with their vast empire in 1759. Nonetheless, the native Muslims were permitted to live by their own faith. In 1864, however, a Khokandi adventurer, Yaqub Beg alias Ataliq Ghazi, seized the power from the Chinese and relocated a Muslim state in the region. But, the said state did not last long (1864-78) whereupon the region was re-occupied by the Chinese in 1878. They continue to hold the same till date as an important Chinese province.

Synthesis of Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions

Notwithstanding their varying

political fortunes, the native Muslims acted upon the Islamic tenets with utmost reverence and diligence; held faith in monotheism; offered five time prayers; observed the fast; performed pilgrimage to Makkah and gave alms and bounties. They esteemed the clergy, sought their blessings and received religio-ethical and moral education at their feet. As regards food, they nourished lawful (halal) meat of horse, cow, sheep, goat and camel in preference to the forbidden (haram) meat of pig and donkey. They adhered to the Islamic code of conduct and looked upon the free mixing of their womenfolk with disdain and contempt. While women observed the veil (pardah or hijab), men wore turbans as a mark of humility and respect. In public dealings, they refrained from weighing with short measures and perpetrating acts of adulteration, robbery and murder. To show solidarity with the Muslim fraternity (ummah), they esteemed the Khalifa as the "Sacred Monarch" and a religio-spiritual guide.

While conforming to these and similar other Islamic fundamentals, they worshipped idols, saints and ancestors, a phenomenon quite common to the region before Islam. In fact, the given "polytheistic

“admiration was so deeply entrenched in their psyche that they fashioned their dietary habits after the great saints. Accordingly, they held strong faith in their arboricultural powers to animate the dead and inspire the living with a feeling of reverential awe and mysterious influence. Moreover, they held confidence in their power of intercession, advocacy, interpreting dreams, displaying miracles and foretelling one’s future. Extreme regard for the saints and ancestors was there. They held equal respect for their descendants; hence, perpetrated quite emotional and mawkish acts of prostrating before them and picking up dust beneath their feet as if it was some precious treasure. In the wake of ecstatic expressions, the “way farers still entranced; some hailed them with shouts of delight and others with tears of joy. Some danced wildly and others fell senseless in a swoon”. Little wonder then that one observes the whole region abounding with shrines, scattered here and there, dedicated to imams, saints, sayyids heroes and ancestors. The existence of the scores of great tombs, some built in mud and others with imposing blue and white tile-covered façade, should be viewed in above perspective of extreme popular respect for the being of the

saints, their descendents and the allied tombs.

Since great miracles were ascribed to the shrines, the devotees, men, women and children, disproportionately visited and paid obeisance at these shrines. To invoke their help in the solution of both spiritual and mundane ends, they thronged, encircled, tied tags, lit candles and burnt incenses at the shrines of their dear one’s. The devotees visited the shrine of Hazrat Apak, the saint-king of Kashghar, on Fridays and Saturdays to seek employment, cure of ailment, birth of a child, augur a good harvest for the year, etc. They prayed, wept, donated and distributed the meat of the sacrificial animals at these shrines. On the festive occasions, they removed ordure, excrements and dirt and recited religious literature or tadhkiras or biographies composed by or in memory of the saints. With that, they rejoiced and feasted at the shrines.

Practicing Chinese rituals and customs

Interestingly, the devotees sometimes comprised all walks and shades of people which presuppose a secular socio-psychological fabric. That is perhaps why the devotees

did not address the shrines after the particular name of the saints but rather by their specific titles like "Sultan Buwam"(royal ancestor or ancestress),"Bu Anam"(ancestress mother), "Hazrat Pir"(holy sage),"Qarasakal Atam" (black bearded father) and the "Padshah" (the king). Such being the level of infatuated belief, the curators attending the shrines tailored stories about the miraculous powers of the saints in a manner so as to exactly fit to the purpose of the devotees. For instance, for getting married, the girls were impressed to put their hand in the holes dug in a mud-made tomb of a female saint, "Bibi Khanum". Similarly, those desirous of children were persuaded to pick up and consume a lump of dirt, beetle, etc. from the hole of the shrine of the holy lady saint "Bu Anam". Human ends were numerous. So were the beliefs of the devotees strong in the being of the saints, their shrines or whatever lay in or around them. A huge willow bent nearly to the ground at a shrine in Kashghar was believed to cure rheumatism. The patients went around the tree seven times and rubbed their back against its bark. Some decorated lumps of wet mud at the tiled entrance of a shrine believing it to cure the diseases.

Like saints and shrines, the natives revered the clergy and obtained charms/amulets from them as a safeguard against otherwise vulnerable adventures. In times of scarcity, they invoked their help for rains and enthusiastically participated in special prayers and processions led out by the clergy while holding out a small meteorite trusting it to be a God's gift. They also believed in a good deal of fears and superstitions. Since necromancy and belief in omens and magic was not uncommon, they attributed certain phenomenon to a divine anger and offered animal sacrifice to ward that off. In one instance, they dared not repairing a dilapidated bridge lest the demon's wrath should befall them. True, the king demolished the same and raised a new one in its place but not before sacrificing ten camels, ten sheep and ten bullocks and distributing their meat at the shrine of the great saint of Hazrat Apak. Though the king disregarded the "invisible beings," he strived to placate them by offering animal sacrifices and distributing their flesh at a shrine.

The belief in the multitude of superstitions does not end here. Performing magic for harming others (witchcraft) was as usual as anything else. Witchcraft doctors

performed to expel the demons by continuously singing tambourines, dancing around the patient, whipping his face and the back with the cock's lungs or body, or with a willow wand. Interestingly, superstitions were commonly popular in Khotan where it was believed that large settlements perished for their inhabitants were eaten up by ghosts, though M.A. Stein attributes the reason to political convulsions or to drying down or changing course of the particular rivers running through this major city of Chinese Central Asia. Casting of an evil eye and auguring death spells were not unusual. On wishing death spell for her husband, a woman washed her head on seven successive Wednesday-mornings or else wore two caps, one over another. Likewise, a man combed his own beard with two combs to wish death spell to his wife.

Associating some invisible being with the shoes/slippers (*kafesh massi*), also contributed to the great mass of beliefs. A slipper, if placed upside down on the veranda of a house, was believed to fetch in a new wife to a male and a new husband to a female owner of the house. The belief was at times meant to convey a gentle hint to a caller to avoid

overstaying in one's house or else ensure wishful death of one's enemy.

Whatever the underlying spirit of these rituals, practices and beliefs, one thing is certain that they antedated Islam and were thus poles apart from it. The reason is that Islam prefers monotheism to polytheism and admonishes every sort of saint, idol, ancestral or hero worship. It evenly condemns the power of the saints, priests, etc., to intercede for others, takes strong exception to the pagan act of calling upon the female deities for help, rejects necromancy, fears, superstitions and omens and ridicules the practice of distributing the flesh of the sacrificial animals at shrines.

If not Islamic in frame and nature, what then was at the bottom of these characteristics of "Popular Islam" or where they actually emanated or come from? Exceptions apart, they were the importations from the neighbouring world especially China. Compared to all other peoples, the natives had strong reasons to be influenced by the Chinese on two counts. First, the region's geographical proximity to China proper and secondly, its constant occupation and rule by the

Chinese for a pretty long period of time. Obviously, the Chinese bearing on the natives was so indelible that the Arabs, Uighurs, Karakhanids and the Mongols could not out rightly expunge it. Even the Khokandi Muslims who created an Islamic state in the region were unable to do away with the traditions and beliefs antedating Islam. In this scenario, the Chinese customs and beliefs ran parallel to the Islamic culture in the region and appeared, at times, as its indispensable part. One of the native customs, for instance, was the tomb or idol worship or ceremonies related to the cult of progenitors / ancestors, a practice that dated back in China proper from early historic times.

Later Confucius, the Chinese sage (551-479 B.C), supplemented it by inventing several new ideas and practices to elaborate the life of the dead. He preached that the dead were dependent upon their heirs for their weal and woe and that the death transformed a mortal into a powerful spirit. With the advent of Buddhism, the Chinese began to hold that the dead had three souls; one departed instantly for hell or heaven, another remained in the grave and the third one stayed in the temporary tablet raised along

the grave. Hence, they offered food, meat, etc., to please these spirits (till they disappeared), earn blessings of the dead and organized rituals and congregations to keep the families and clans in tact.

By and large, the native Muslims followed these and other Chinese-borne practices including animal sacrifices. The Chinese held these sacrifices very dear for they, like others, believed that each animal or any part thereof represented a key to the "future" which was to be found in the "signs". While among the Romans, liver organ was symbolic of a good future sign, the Chinese saw the same in the shells of tortoise or the shoulder blades of oxen and deer. Similarly, the practices of the natives to burn incense, lit candles, chant tadhkirahs or biographies of the saints, decorate, clean pellets or excrements and offer food at the shrines on festive and other occasions, must have, in all likelihood, descended from the ceremonies related to the early historic Chinese or Confucian's cult of progenitors. The native custom of employing priests for reciting the holy Qur'an at the graves of the dear one's, must have equally developed on the early Chinese ceremony associated with the ancestral temples. The native

custom of ta'aziya, the payment made in cash or kind, by the kin to the next heir of the deceased, had its prototype in ancient China where enormous expenditure was incurred on entertaining the visiting guests for condolence. Till the final burial practice, months and years after, the kith and kin regularly visited the bereaved families at huge costs. The ta'aziya was, as such, formally paid and ceremoniously received to help the bereaved to set off the huge expenditure on a complex system related to the burial and mourning ceremonies. In the like manner, the expectations of the native Muslims with the heavenly bodies especially the sky and the clouds for rains and other purposes, logical and scientific though, was not devoid of the Chinese influence. Customarily, the Chinese reposed great trust in the being, shape, density and colour of the "clouds" and "vapours" for good and bad fortunes.

There are indeed similar other instances to qualify quite considerable and intimate Chinese connections with native Muslims of the region. The native custom of christening a girl or circumcising a boy on a particular day fixed after the consultation of the stars, was analogues to the Chinese belief in the being and allied motions of the

heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon and the stars, for unfolding the future. To the Chinese, heavenly bodies and the earth were profoundly inter-connected the heavens resembled an egg and the earth its yoke. Quite precisely, the Chinese and the native Muslims considered astrology as a "form of practical psychology" essentially instrumental in guiding a persons for starting a job of whatever nature. Astrology apart, the natives had adequate impact of the Chinese Phenomenalists who trusted that "if the emperor did not follow ethical laws and practiced rites and ceremonies, then excessive gales would follow; trees would not grow, metals would cease to be malleable". The act of the king to sacrifice animals, visit shrines and distribute the sacrificial meat there should be seen in the perspective of the impact of the Chinese Phenomenalists on the life and thinking of the native Muslims. Likewise, the practice of exorcism, removing evil spirits, sacrificing animals, setting out savoury food for the evil spirits and then chasing them with the sticks and swords, was common to both the Chinese and the native Muslims of Chinese Turkestan.. The use of cock's body or lungs for removing evil spirits from an ailing patient in particular,

was certainly the Chinese borrowing. In China proper, cock was highly regarded and its morning herald was perceived to contain good spirits efficacious in removing evil spirits, besides insuring over all well being.

The Buddhist legacy

The Buddhist influences were not far to seek in the "Popular Islam" practiced in the region. The native custom of abstaining from meat on the particular days preceding the birth anniversary of the sufi saints, was probably the adaptation of a Buddhist ritual to refrain from killing animals and taking sacrificial meat on five days of a specific week. This is not to suggest that the Buddhists were originally meat eaters. They became so under the Tantric influence around the 10th century A.D. Similarly, obtaining charms from the priests was no doubt a pervasive phenomenon in the Muslim world and was not that way unique to the region. However, it antedated Islam in the region as charms were prescribed by the Buddhist monks on papers which bore magic characters and symbols. These charms were also fixed on the doors and windows of the residential houses. Sometimes, they were burnt into ashes and mixed in

water to render it sacred for drinking. The popular faith in holding out processions and a piece of space rock to call upon God for rescue from scarcity, transcendental though, obtained in the region from the period earlier than Islam. Marco Polo reports that in the 13th century, the Buddhist monks organized such processions and with their miraculous powers "made the idols to speak and by their devilries brought about weather changes and produced rains amid scarcities".

Again the association of alms and shelter houses with and the grant of revenue assignments to the mosques, shrines and other Muslim institutions was no doubt a practice that was in vogue in the whole Muslim world. But, such a practice existed in the region prior to Islam; hence, can be partly thought of as the continuation of the Buddhist practice of sustaining the needy out of the land grants of the monasteries. Thus, in view of the striking parallels, geographical proximity, constant politico-economic relations with China, the native Muslims had developed an unfailing tendency to copy and adopt pre- and post-Buddhist Chinese customs and beliefs in their own way of life even after the adoption of Islam; a great deal of material exists on the wide

and varied Chinese influences on the individual and collective behaviour of the native Muslims.

Persian influence

This does not mean that other influences were absent from the folk or popular faith practiced by the native Muslims in Chinese Turkestan. The Zoroastrian/Persian influence, for instance, was strikingly visible in their respect for the shrines. They meticulously decorated and surmounted them with ever sparking white washed earthen tripods burning constantly with the fire. The New Year or the Nauroz celebrations also pointed to a great deal of the Persian influence on the natives of Chinese Turkestan. Essentially, this annual national festival, emanated from Persia where the rulers held great feast. The people offered them gifts and presents, lit fires and sprinkled water on one another usually on the very first day of the Persian solar year. The more common ancient usage, however, was to have this festival immediately after the winter and the onset of the spring season. Whatever, this Persian festival, like other parts of South and Central Asia, was in vogue in Eastern or Chinese part of Central Asia from early times.

During the hey days of Buddhism, the Buddhist monks led out special celebratory processions in the first month of the New Year. Such a Iranian rooted customs continued to be celebrated during the 19th-20th century also. The Jahan Ara Bagh Fair lasting for 3-4 weeks in the Yarkand city certifies to the celebration of this yearly festival with great enthusiasm and gaiety.

The Arab factor

Likewise, the custom of mut'a or provisional marriage impacted the religio-marital fabric of the natives of Chinese Central Asia. The term mut'a defining a "temporary marriage of pleasure" for a fixed period, actually emanated from the pre-Islamic Arab societies. However, the Prophet and Caliph Umar finally forbade it on the ethical and moral grounds. Nonetheless, it gained currency during the Caliph Ma'mun's rule in Iran (813-33 A.D.). Little wonder, then, that one notices this practice travelling from Iran across the Amu and Syr rivers into the Western and the Eastern Turkestan. In the later case, it virtually obtained as a "religious prostitution" during the 19th-20th century as it was contracted even for a day or a week: the period was

exceptionally extendable depending on the consent of the parties, and the documents of divorce, in this case, were drafted along with the marriage contract. Given its transient nature, mut'a marriages were "cheap and divorce even cheaper". After divorce, a woman was merely compensated by some gifts and presents, a paltry sum or else a half sack of flour 50-60 pounds in weight thereby making such marriages a source of great moral and ethical degradation in the society at large. Their offshoots, the new-born, were not usually owned but rather secretly thrown on the roadside or at the stairs of the mosques for adoption. On reaching their puberty, these innocents were disposed of like commodities against a few pences.

The reflexes of pagan Arab influence were marked in the custom pertaining to the appearance of the new moon (after the month of fasting, the Ramadhan). The event was celebrated by the native Muslims with jubilation. On its appearance, they jumped up and down seven times facing the moon trusting that the sins of their by-gone years were shaken off: an act of self complacency though, it had its counterpart in the pagan Arab belief

whereby the Arabs entered their houses from the backdoors on the appearance of new moon preceding the commencement of the pilgrimage to Makkah. Incidental to the ritual of fasting was the custom among the well-to-do native Muslim families to sacrifice a sheep on the fourteenth day of the month of fasting. What was the source of this custom and why was it practiced on a particular day of the month, is unluckily not known, though it is certain that it was not an Islamic custom. The issue calls for further research.

Turkish roots

Like other influences, the Turkish influence was equally present in the religio-spiritual texture of the natives of Chinese Turkestan. For example, the custom of hanging animal tales, yak or horse, called tugh, on poles attached to Muslim shrines, was fairly near to the ancient Turkic practice of sacrificing human victims and hanging their heads on poles fixed to the "graves of the great". The native Muslims, being mostly the Uighurs of the Turkic ethnic descent, seem to have upheld this practice. In due course of time, however, they seem to have substituted its form from "human" to the "animal" sacrifice.

Conclusion

In short, "Popular Islam" in the 19th-20th century Chinese Central Asia featured a blend of several pre and post-Islamic beliefs and practices, which, being flexible, were not specific to a particular religion or culture. Quite precisely, they represented a jumble of importations from China, Persia, Arabia, Turkey, and India in general. A "correlative thinking" or "Cultural Matrix" was their natural corollary. As a result, they did not strictly correspond to Islamic tenets; hence, "Muslim" rather than the "Islamic" in nature and form. In other words, they

formed the adaptations from generation to generation and a sort of continuity from paganism, Christianity and Buddhism to Islam. Nonetheless, they were the most indispensable part of a "cultural configuration" that was demonstrative of a rich, harmonious, secular and syncretic thought. Additionally, being associated with the progenitors, the native Muslims pursued them to keep their social and family ties intact, which correspondingly kept scores of divergent ethnic and sub-ethnic Uighur groups under one umbrella in an otherwise "Arcadian" set up. ■