

A Different Kind of “Scripture”:

Women’s Access to Religious Knowledge Without the Written Word

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Prologue

It was on the second day of my fieldwork stay in a remote mountain village in Kyrgyzstan in 2004.¹ My hostmother² Nurgul and her best friend Ainura decided to show me an important site just outside the village. Together with my two hostsisters, nine and fourteen years old, we set off and twenty minutes later we arrived at an overgrown site: a field, the size of a football pitch, surrounded by what could have been the overgrown remainder of ruined walls. It was an awe-inspiring sight – the snowcapped Altai-mountains in the background, lush vegetation around us, an azure sky above, and not a sound to be heard. This was, my hostmother explained, the place where Manas, the Kyrgyz national hero, had built a fortress, and it was a sacred site. We circumambulated the site while listening to more stories about Kyrgyzstan’s hero of a thousand years ago. Then, just before we turned to walk home, my hostmother suggested to her friend to “read the *Qur’an*”. We squatted down in that typically Central Asian way and fell silent. Then Ainura cupped her hands in her lap and began to “read the *Qur’an*”. Only there was no *Qur’an*. And her recitation was in an Arabic I could not even remotely recognise. We finished our prayer with the “*omeen*”³ gesture and made our way home.

Texts and Contexts

Islam is often described as a scriptural religion, and the past few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the core texts in an effort to reinterpret them and reform Muslim practice. Increased literacy and a shift towards Islamic basics have led to increased access to religious knowledge, and women and other previously marginalised groups seem to have benefited from this. Women have begun to claim rights in the name of Islam – sometimes referred to as a “gender *jihad*” (Wadud, 2006) – and scholarship by and about Muslim women has increased dramatically. There can be no doubt that “scripture” has taken centre stage again across the Muslim world. Or has it? The episode described above seems to tell a different story. In a Kyrgyzstani context this was not an exceptional incident, and I suspect Muslims in other parts of the world have a similarly unorthodox access to scripture. In this paper, I explore situations where scripture is absent, where context, not text, is everything, and where oral culture and (religious) illiteracy inform Muslim practice. I refer to incidents that trouble the smooth “success story” of empowerment through access to scripture and religious knowledge. Emerging from my observations is a more complicated picture

1. The ethnographic data, on which this discussion is based, is mainly from fieldwork I conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2002 and 2004.

2. I was “adopted” into a family in the village and took on the role of a “daughter” in the household; I refer to the female head of household as my “hostmother”.

3. *Omeen* or *Amen* in English refers to wiping over your face with usually both hands, pronouncing “omen” (often silently).

that cautions us not to lose sight of different kinds of “scripture”, different kinds of “access” to religious knowledge, and different ways of constructing power and authority beyond the primacy of the written religious word. This shift in focus has both methodological, theoretical, and epistemological connotations as I will explain in what follows.

Anthropologists have historically conducted research in societies where the written word – “text” in a very narrow sense of the term – was either absent or access to it limited to a literate elite (Fischer, 1992 ; Jones, 1992). Needless to say that this exclusive anthropological focus on “oral cultures” holds no longer true, and boundaries between “oral” and “scriptural” traditions have become rather blurred in today’s world. Non-anthropologists have also reminded us that it is sometimes useful to go beyond the bias of considering written sources as our primary data (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1978). Furthermore, the “literary turn” in anthropology has reminded us that scholarly activity amounts to “writing culture” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Behar & Gordon, 1995).

What these debates have highlighted, amongst other things, is the fact that a scholarly focus on “texts” in the narrow sense of ink-on-paper, especially when taken out of context, does not capture the full picture and can, thus, be rather misleading. Context is crucial to our understanding of how power relationships are enacted, authority assigned, and knowledge constructed, as every aspect of human behaviour is embedded in socio-cultural contexts and in webs of power relations. Human beings are essentially relational and narrative beings (Joseph, 1999). Taking behaviour out of context – in laboratory situations, for instance – thus constitutes an epistemological and methodological fallacy.

What I would like to reiterate here is the argument that “text” needs to be understood and studied in its broadest form and shape, beyond its written form. The contexts, in which “texts” are produced and used, are absolutely essential for our understanding of the dynamic power relationships between those engaged with and through “texts”. In what follows, I will explore the opportunities and challenges of “texts in contexts” and of reading and texts as events or performance, particularly as they occur in situations, where oral culture predominates either due to the absence of the written word, or the inability to read (and write), or due to cultural preferences.

4. *Moldo* describes the function and position of someone otherwise known as *imam*. The religious terminology of Kyrgyzstani Muslims is largely influenced by Turkish and Farsi, and it thus differs greatly from Arabic terms used elsewhere in the Muslim world.

5. *Namaz* is the Central Asian/Farsi/Turkish word for the Arabic *salat*, (i.e. prayer).

Interlude

A couple of weeks into my stay in the Kyrgyzstani mountain village I paid the local mosque a visit. It had been built a few years earlier by a “son of the village”, who had become a wealthy businessman in the country’s capital. The mosque was usually locked, and even on a Friday it hardly attracted any worshippers. The few who came were elderly men. I had patiently waited for the young *moldo*⁴ outside the mosque after Friday *namaz*,⁵ when he finally emerged to greet me. He let me in and after a few minutes of meditative silence we started a conversation. I explained my background and research, and he asked if I could read Arabic. To test me he asked me to read the writings on the wall in the prayer hall – the name of the Prophet, God, the *basmallah*, and a few other things. He seemed impressed and obviously decided to test me further. He left the room and came back with a battered old copy of the *Qur’an*,

the only one in the mosque as it turned out. He handled it with utmost reverence and said he liked reading it. Only he could not read Arabic well, let alone understand it.

Literacy and Modernity

What the two episodes I recorded in Kyrgyzstan show quite clearly is that Muslim practice in this remote part of the former Soviet republic is informed by religious scripture in what would commonly be labelled an “unorthodox” way. I and others have taken issue with this labelling elsewhere and it shall not concern me here (see Droeber, forthcoming; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008). I am also not concerned with the scriptural focus of Muslim theological scholarship, which places great store in textual “authenticity”, linguistic exegesis, and scriptural evidence, particularly in the legal sphere. What is at issue for me here is the question of how we account for a situation where there is no written text to inform religious practice, or when there is a text, but people cannot read it. Given the focus on written/printed texts in much scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies, are we effectively marginalising the religious experiences of those for whom access to scripture in its written/printed form is not the norm? And if we take these experiences seriously what do such situations teach us about the relationship between scripture and religious practice?

It has been argued that both literacy and print technology have had a crucial impact on the ways in which human beings thought and organized their societies (McLuhan, 1962), and that the emergence of literacy has historically been closely linked to the creation of social difference (Goody, 1968; Goody, 1977). With its emphasis on objectivity and progress, the project of modernity has been squarely founded on the codification of knowledge in the written word, and on the ability to access it. In a variety of contexts, including academia and religion, writing subsequently acquired a status of objective medium of knowledge and facts, rather than a way of knowing in and of itself (Williams, 1983). Access to such codified knowledge, in this case reading, thus became an essential tool of empowering oneself through “objective” knowledge. Especially as a consequence of colonial encounters – as in much of the Muslim world, literate classes came to enjoy considerable privileges. In other words, the modern emphasis on codified language privileges certain kinds of knowledge production and transmission over others, thus marginalising some groups and empowering others. This is often reflected in religious contexts, where some scriptures obtain their “neutrality” and infallibility through divine origin, and the ability to read them has become an essential pillar of piety. I am, however, interested in the practices in the margins of literacy.

Going back to the two episodes I recorded in Kyrgyzstan, we can then see that both Ainura and the village *moldo* can, on the surface, be considered religiously illiterate, as they had no access to the core Islamic texts, and their practice as “unorthodox”, as it was only superficially informed by Islamic texts. Although they were both educated to secondary level and literate in Russian and Kyrgyz, and the *moldo* had received some local religious training, the printed religious sources remained closed to them. This lack of access is in part due to historical circumstances, as the Soviet regime tried to strictly control people’s access to religious knowledge and Soviet Muslims were in effect cut off from the rest of the Muslim world (Ro’i, 2000). Yet, both the *moldo* and Ainura were considered religious “experts” by most fellow villagers. Their religious knowledge and

authority was based largely on oral transmission of memorized formulae and passages, and the skill to use them in appropriate moments.

At least in part due to the specific historical circumstances – I refer mainly to Soviet and nomadic legacies here – religious knowledge in Kyrgyzstan could not rely on the written word, and was instead passed on orally from generation to generation. The two main avenues of transmission have been in the family, on the one hand, or through “apprenticeships”, on the other. Soviet policies further encouraged the already existing practice of the (extended) household being the main hub for religious practices. The (male) head of the household presided over the execution of religious rituals (unless an imam was required, such as for wedding or funeral ceremonies), and passed this on to his son(s). My host-grandfather, for instance, was the one who conducted the name-giving ceremony for his newborn grandson, as well as the circumcision ceremony for another grandson, and freely recited formulae appropriate for the occasion. He had passed this on to his youngest son, who, on another occasion, took over the task of praying with the family, again completely without access to the written word. Women, on the other hand, were often knowledgeable in healing practices that combined religious, spiritual, and medical knowledge. One of the young women I met in the village told me how her grandmother had trained her in both finding appropriate herbs and the correct formulae and practices for healing, and one of our neighbours was well-known for her healing skills. That such healing procedures often bore resemblances to shamanistic practices was locally not considered a contradiction to their Muslimness.

This access to and application of religious knowledge was inextricably linked to bodily performance and the physical environment. In the Kyrgyzstani mountains, much of the environment carries spiritual significance for the people living there. Knowing which places are particularly beneficial – whether that is a saint’s shrine, a wellspring, a tree, or a cemetery – and controlling access to them is just as essential as the knowledge of “texts”. When I visited a spring in the mountains with two women neighbours and one of their young sons, who was suffering from eczema, he was not simply washed with the water, hoping for healing. The actual contact with the water was embedded in a whole set of physical rituals and prayers, which the older of the two women led. No written word was required; instead a thorough knowledge of the environment as well as the appropriate formulae ensured the procedure was conducted in the correct way.

One of the issues arising from this conceptualisation of religious expertise is, of course, the question of controllability. If there are no “texts”, against which authenticity and “orthodoxy” can be measured, can not just anyone declare themselves “experts”? Obviously, the *moldo*’s command of religious knowledge only appealed to a limited group of people. In the remote areas of Kyrgyzstan, the “orthodox” interpretation of Islam – institutionalized in mosques and scripture-based – did not enjoy much esteem.⁶ Thus, people were quite critical and selective in bestowing trust and authority on those they deemed spiritually knowledgeable. Checks and balances were in place, and just like Wolf’s (1990) woman who did not become a shaman, social control and local expertise ensures the reliability of religious knowledge. In other words, while both the project of modernity and the Islamic tradition of scripture-based scholarship privilege literacy over oral and performative culture, in some contexts, different systems

6. In urban centres and the south a more scripture-focused interpretation of Islam gained currency, yet, for most of the Kyrgyzstanis I spoke with, this practice seemed “alien” to their culture and self-perception and was therefore not particularly attractive.

of expertise have developed outside the written word. In such circumstances, it is particularly performativity and bodily practice that mark “religious literacy”.

Orality, Performance, and Authority

Access to knowledge is linked to power and authority. As I have outlined above, literacy and access to the written word have become essential pillars in the ascription of both religious and secular authority in many contexts. The proliferation of printed material and people’s ability to access it has meant that an increasing number of people could check claims of knowledge, authenticity, and authority. These developments can be celebrated as a success and as empowerment of the underprivileged, among them women. However, does this mean that religious practice and religious knowledge, which is not directly based on the written word, becomes *per definitionem* inauthentic and therefore non-authoritative? How are authority and authenticity constructed in the absence of the written word?

Following on from the discussion in the previous section, I now want to focus more closely on orality, performativity, and embodiment of religious knowledge, and how this is tied to authenticity and the ascription of authority. It is well established that “texts”, once they have left the author’s cognitive, unspoken realm and enter the public domain, take on a life of their own. Authors always, if at times unconsciously, engage with an imaginary or real audience and adjust texts – written, oral, or otherwise – accordingly. In other words, texts, written or spoken, are embedded in human relationships.

Abu-Lughod (1993) in her work on Egyptian Bedouins, for instance, describes her dissatisfaction with writing a “standard anthropological monograph”, as this often does not sufficiently convey “context”: “I felt, however, that there was so much more richness in people’s conversations and complexity to their lives than I had managed to convey in that [first] book that I had to try again” (p. 1). She is not alone in discovering that the “vividness and style with which women recounted stories of everyday life” were essential to understanding their production and use of “text” (Abu-Lughod 1993, p. 2). It is the performed and embodied character of their “texts” that told the stories, not the words alone. While Abu-Lughod’s “stories” were not explicitly religious in character, they dealt with issues that had both Islamic connotations and concerned women’s personal lives, such as polygyny, marriage, or reproduction. Thus, religious knowledge for these (largely illiterate) Bedouin women was conveyed and negotiated orally and bodily, it was essentially performed. The transcription of the words used was insufficient for understanding how both religious knowledge and social relationships were constructed and negotiated.

Another example of how codified words are insufficient for understanding the significance of the entire “text” and the authority of the performer can again be found in Kyrgyzstan, where there has been a centuries old tradition of narrating and performing the nation’s history, the epos of the hero Manas.⁷ This story could only be performed by specialists, the *manaschys* (i.e. reciters of the Manas epos), who, not unlike Siberian shamans (i.e. spiritual specialists), had undergone an experience of being chosen by the spirits for this calling. Their profession and reputation was purely based on orality and performativity. The authority of the *manaschys* was on the one

7. Longer than Homer’s *Iliads*, this epos tells the story of how the hero Manas first united the different Kyrgyz clans more than a thousand years ago, and thus formed a unified and prosperous nation.

hand grounded in their knowledge of and ability to perform the details of the epos. On the other hand, it was the experience of being called by the spirits that legitimised their position of authority. Given the divine calling and the spiritual content of the epos, the *manaschys*' role and their performances can be considered "religious".

When the Soviet regime took control over Central Asia, its mission was to "modernize" the regions' "backward" societies, and introducing literacy was an important propaganda tool. One such project was to collect and codify the Manas epos. Since that time, the significance of the *manaschys* has declined rapidly. With the existence of the story in its written form and increased levels of literacy, anyone could read or recite it. What was lost in the process was the experience of community that emerged between the *manaschys*, who would adapt the story to the mood of their audience, and the listeners who "lived" through the story. Codification meant the epos had become disenchanted, stripped of its spiritual significance, and it does make for sterile reading if taken out of the performative context.

While this situation is not directly linked to Islamic scripture, it highlights three aspects that are relevant for the current discussion. Firstly, it illustrates that the codification of narratives and an exclusive focus on the written word miss a crucial element in the role played by stories and texts: that negotiation of authenticity, ascription of authority, and manipulation of power relationships via "texts" are dynamic processes. Stories and texts are events that evolve between author, narrator, and audience. Secondly, this oral tradition might have an important influence on current Muslim practice in Kyrgyzstan, where religious authority is not commonly ascribed on the basis of access to and mastery of the written word. Thirdly, the authenticity of religious knowledge is measured against different benchmarks, largely tied to performativity and narrativity, and possibly to a notion of divine calling or at least special giftedness.

That authority is not necessarily ascribed through scriptural knowledge was brought home to me, when I was asked by my host family – knowing that I could read and speak Arabic – to "read the *Qur'an*" with them in a situation where blessing was sought for a sick newborn. When it turned out that I could do so only with the written word in front of me, they quickly dismissed my "expertise" as useless and asked another family member to perform the prayer instead. His Arabic was again non-discernible, but the entire extended family was raptured by his incantation.

Thus, it appears that in the context of rural Kyrgyzstan, the ascription of religious authority is less determined by access to the written word – although this may be changing with the growing impact of "scripturalist" Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia – as by performative criteria and notions of spiritual giftedness, even divine election. This authority is marked by age with elders being considered more knowledgeable and experienced. As my examples show, religious expertise is also gendered in a peculiar way: performative knowledge can be acquired by both men and women in almost equal measure. However, the scripturalist approach to Islam, as exemplified in the *moldo* and the male worshippers, appears to be an almost exclusively male domain. This distinction is not clear-cut, however. A useful way of approaching this question is by considering the significance of knowledge and "text" production for the experience of gendered selves.

Gender, Narrative Selves, and Knowledge Production

It has been widely assumed that the production, dissemination, and interpretation of religious texts, especially in their written form, was thoroughly embedded in a patriarchal social system, being dominated by males and elders. This ties in neatly with the view that women's religiosity is less "orthodox" and scripture-based than men's. Against this background, the "rediscovery" of women in religious history and women's increased access to religious scripture provides a welcome change. However, my experiences with more performative religious practices make me wonder if the recent scholarly focus on "scripture" does violence to the "unorthodox" religious experiences of marginalized groups. By privileging "scriptural" interpretations of religion, do we inadvertently reinforce gender inequalities and marginalize those groups who choose not to adhere to them? Or, if on the contrary we focus on the "unorthodox" religious practice of those at the periphery (women among them), do we further buttress gender stereotypes?

Deeb (2006), in her analysis of *shi'a* women's modern piety, has shown the struggles of her respondents to integrate their new, and more publicly visible understanding of piety, and the prevalent view that this practice has some "distinctly masculine" qualities (p. 213). Similarly, Mahmood (2005) points out that women *da'iyat* in Egypt "continue to evoke skepticism, if not outright condemnation, from the religious establishment" because they are female (p. 64). In Kyrgyzstan, the motivation of women to enrol in the capital's Islamic Institute, join Islamic study groups, and/or take to wearing *shar'i* dress (i.e. dress code according to *shari'a*), is often questioned.⁸ In other words, there is a widespread notion that women do indeed enter foreign territory – be that in gendered, class, or ethnic terms – when they engage with "scripturalist" interpretations and practices of Islam. But regardless of what kind of religious practice women choose and of how they engage with "scripture", it is essential that their own understanding of their behaviour guide our analysis. And here narrativity and the production of "texts" play an important role, as it is through narratives and "writing" that people make sense of their experiences, craft their selves, and (re-)produce knowledge.

In the light of my discussion above, writing and the production of "text" must be seen not only as the particular technique of inscribing words onto a material surface, but in much broader terms, including phrases, music, symbols, art, or physical behaviour. They could take place on all kinds of surfaces, be that bodies, spaces, or memories. In other words, religious experience is inextricably linked to performance and event beyond the written word. Writing in this sense is more than a technique of communication, it becomes a mode of cognition which makes experience meaningful (Rapport and Overing 2007). Despite modernity's emphasis on the ability to put pen to paper and to decipher the written word at the expense of all other kinds of literacy, the skill of inscribing and reading the human body, for instance, can make a person a highly effective communicator.

The performativity of "text" is vital for women's religious experience also in another sense: performance and narrative have been found to be essential for the construction of selves, here religious and gendered selves. In fact, it has been claimed that the ability to narrate experiences is the one criterium that makes us human, and neurobiological research suggests that the need to narrate and produce "text" has

8. It is often alleged that students enrolled at Islamic Institutions obtain material benefits, such as money, books, or clothes; furthermore, it is argued that women benefit from the Islamic ban on alcohol, which would limit domestic violence in families plagued by the ubiquitous consumption of vodka.

neurological bases in the human brain (Wapner, 2008). It seems therefore justified to focus on women's religious performances and narratives in our efforts to understand how they construct their religious and gendered selves, arguably in different ways from men, whose religious experiences may be tied more closely to the written word.

Epilogue

The lack of access to the written sacred word – be that because of an absence of books or the inability to read – and the existence of strong oral traditions, are a useful reminder of the need to understand “text” and “literacy” in their broadest possible sense. Widening the scope of what counts as “text” beyond the modern emphasis on ink-on-paper makes our analysis more inclusive of underprivileged social groups, women and Muslims “in the margins” among them. This inclusion of practices of performativity, “writing”, and narrating that are perhaps commonly considered “unorthodox” counteracts any claims of illiteracy and embeds both the production and the reception of “texts” in their appropriate socio-cultural contexts, without which they would be meaningless. As meaning and authority are created through the process of narrating, paying attention to this process, in its socio-cultural embeddedness, is the *sine qua non* of our analysis of “texts”, both sacred and profane. This focus on narrativity and performativity of religious knowledge becomes particularly salient given the significance of narration and stories in the crafting of (gendered) selves and the construction of relations of power. One area, where this performance of religious knowledge becomes especially manifest, is the human body as an inscriptive surface. As most religions consider the body an essential tool (or hindrance) for attaining spiritual goals, it is to be disciplined, tamed, and inscribed in the effort to lead a life that is pleasing to the gods or that is worthy of salvation (Mahmood, 2005). The emerging disciplined body becomes “legible” to others, including researchers, making piety an event beyond the written word.

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