

Research Report

Women, Islam, and politics in Samarkand (1991–2021)

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Abstract – This article is devoted to the analysis of the following issues: state policy in Uzbekistan in the field of Islam and gender, the modern understanding of local Muslim societies' traditions, the spread of the hijab in Samarkand, and discourses around the hijab. There are various interpretations of religious practices in which women are involved. Some of these rituals are considered non-Islamic by the official Muslim clergy. We argue that the various discourses that existed around the Muslim societies' tradition contributed to the emergence of different motivations for wearing the hijab. In different eras, various symbolic meanings were attached to the hijab, with religiosity, modesty, backwardness, traditions, etc. If in the 1990s the hijab meant a return to pre-Soviet gender traditions for certain groups of women in certain regions of Uzbekistan, now it is perceived as part of modernity, which is understood differently by Muslims of Uzbekistan. For every one of these women, the hijab has its own personal meaning and there are various reasons for wearing it such as to consider it related to Islam or a symbol associated with Islam and the symbolization of moral categories of the spiritual purity and good manners.

Keywords: Samarkand, women, hijab, gender relations, gender politics, Uzbekistan, traditions, identity.

Introduction

The Islamic world exhibits an amazing variety of local religious practices and rituals. Different groups of Muslims express their opinions on the different discursive traditions of Islam in their local context. Much depends on the specific historical circumstances and power configurations (Khalid 2021: 8).

Religion remains an important organizing factor in the hierarchy of identities (Peek 2005: 219). To understand the place of one type of identity in the hierarchy of multiple identities, in our opinion, the concept of identity salience is useful (Peek 2005: 217), because takes into account the factors and processes that make one identity — in this case Muslim — more important in the hierarchy of multiple identities.

Over the past 100 years, Uzbekistan, where large centers of Islamic culture can be found in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, has experienced complex and acute transformation processes due to the significant influence of the state and its secular ideology. After the fall of the USSR, the study of the consequences of these transformations and emerging new phenomena in culture, the re-Islamization of society and gender relations, aroused great interest among researchers. Modern approaches to the study of Islam in Uzbekistan and the complex processes of transforming society from the second half of the 19th century to the present day are reflected in the publications of Khalid (1998; 2003; 2007; 2014; 2021). A group of researchers have studied Islam and its practices in the Bukhara and Khorezm regions of Uzbekistan (Louw 2007; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006). The population of Central Asia expresses Islam in a variety of ways, seemingly arbitrarily rather than according to certain criteria (Ro'i and Wainer 2009: 318). Rasanayagam analyzed the religious policy in Uzbekistan and the application of the idea of a moral community by the Muslims of Uzbekistan (Rasanayagam 2011).

Different interpretations by Islamic theologians offer different perspectives on the status of men and women in Islam, leading to different discourses on gender issues. The position of women in Samarkand in the modern period cannot be understood without its historical context: the socio-cultural transformations of the Soviet period.

For decades, the communists of the USSR pursued a policy of transformation, which led to serious changes in the Muslims' societies of Central Asia. The most significant phenomenon in Soviet politics was the *hujum* movement ("liberation of women"), which has been the subject of research by a number of scholars (Aminova 1985; Alimova 1991; Northrop 2004; Kamp 2006). Keller, on the basis of historical materials, showed the complexity of the Soviet period during which the communists pursued a tough policy to transform the Muslim society in Uzbekistan (Keller 2001: 65).

Different forms of patriarchy require women to adopt different strategies to maximize security and optimize life opportunities (Kandiyoti 2007; 2009). A brief analysis of studies on gender issues in Central Asia is provided by Kamp (2009). The issues of women in the social life of the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent province of Uzbekistan during the Islam Karimov era (1991-2016) have been studied by a number of researchers (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004; Fathi 2006; Tokhtakhodjaeva 2008; Peshkova 2014). When studying promoted gender norms within national ideologies of the modern period, some researchers emphasize a break with the Soviet era, while others emphasize continuity with the previous period (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 195–206). The hijab in Tajikistan and debates around it were studied by Nozimova (2018).

Women's issues and the perception of them by the political elites of Uzbekistan, along with new approaches to the religion, religious dress, socio-cultural changes in the society over the years of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership of the country require deep research. To complement the study of gender politics in the framework of the nation-building process, our goal is to analyze material concerning the role of women in Samarkand in historical terms and the present. Various aspects of the problems of women, Islam, and Central Asian states, proposed by Kandiyoti, were very useful in organizing our research (Kandiyoti 2009). From a large number of questions some were selected that allow studying in the context of Samarkand and taking into account its specifics. Our research will focus on the following issues: state policy in the field of Islam and gender, the modern understanding of Islamic tradition, the religious identity of women, the spread of the hijab, and the discourses around the hijab. Has the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a return to more conservative or "traditional" gender practices? Was it related to the revival of Islam or were there other factors involved (Kandiyoti 2009: 114)?

This study was carried out in the city of Samarkand, which was in the pre-Soviet period one of the major religious and cultural centers of the medieval Islamic world. During the Soviet period, the Muslim society of Samarkand underwent significant social and cultural transformations, which led to changes in the ideas about the local tradition. The main material for this research was collected using participatory observation methods,¹ the participation of one of the authors in women's rituals, and individual interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021.

Historical review

The issue of women and their rights in Islamic societies of the past is a complex and large topic. The study of written sources shows that women, depending on their social origin, each had a different status in society. For example, women from the political elite played a certain role in the politics of the Central Asian khanates. They patronized literature and were the initiators of the construction of madrasahs, mausoleums, and mosques. Some women practiced Sufism (*tasawwuf* – mysticism within Islam). Written sources of the 15th–16th centuries confirm the existence of Sufi women in Maverannahr (the area between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya). For example, Alisher Navoi (1441-1501) gives the names of 35 holy women of the Muslim world, among whom were Bibiyaki Marvia from Merv and Imraatun Khorazmiya from Khorezm (Navoi 2001: 491,495). In the Middle Ages, Samarkand was known as the capital of Timur's empire (1370–1405) and the Islamic holy city (Malikov 2017).

In 19th century Samarkand, along with schools (*maktab*) for boys, there were schools for girls. In the second half of the 19th century, in the quarter (*guzar*) of Mulla Kalandar, there was a school for girls headed by Bibi khalifa. The school was attended by ten girls from different places. They paid for their studies with bread (Scientific archive of the Russian National Library, fund 940, item 135, fol. 1).

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However, in the Muslim society of Central Asia in the pre-Soviet period, there were restrictions on women's rights, such as covering a woman's face with a veil, gender segregation, lack of rights to participate in political life, public activities, etc.

The existing problem of gender inequality began to be discussed by Islamic reformers (Jadids) starting in the late 19th century. Like modernists in other parts of the Muslim world, Jadids in Central Asia criticized the practice of polygamy, the mistreatment of women, and other issues ([Khalid 1998](#): 222).

For many Bolsheviks, a veiled woman was an obviously oppressed being, symbolizing the most backward practices ([Northrop 2004](#): 347). The *hujum* (attack) movement was aimed at freeing women from veils, polygamy, bride price and other traditional practices ([Keller 2001](#): XV). As a result of the *hujum*, hundreds of thousands of women were involved in labor, which, however, was not accompanied by a solution to the issue of gender equality ([Khalid 2007](#): 133). Since the mid-1920s, the shedding of the *paranja* has come to be seen as a defining trait of the Uzbek nation and the modern Uzbek woman ([Kamp 2002](#): 271). The *paranja* was a wide and long robe with a wide collar, with narrow and long false sleeves thrown over the back and fastened at the bottom. The face was covered with a net of black horsehair: a “*chashmband*” (a blindfold) ([Lobacheva 1996](#): 79–80). The wearing of *chachvan* (*chashmband*) and a *paranja* began in the 17th-18th centuries ([Pugachenkova 1952](#): 195; [Lobacheva 1996](#): 90). As Lobacheva pointed out one cannot associate the veil “with women throughout Central Asia, which is incorrect, since in the past the pastoralists of this region never had it” ([Lobacheva 1996](#): 79).

The discourse on the emancipation of women was used by the communists to achieve a variety of goals, but the main task was the socialist transformation in the region. Soviet secular laws supplanted the Sharia judicial system. Polygamy, child, and forced marriages were banned ([Kandiyoti 2009](#): 97). Although some of these Soviet secular laws seem to be against the ancient beliefs in some Muslims societies, they are compatible with some modern rereading of Qur'an: for example according to Chaabani, (1) Shari'a is the product of a human work and never represent the real eternal Shari'a of Allah” ([Chaabani 2017](#); [2019](#):22), and (2) the correct serial monogamy is the principal model of marriage in Islam, and polygamy is exceptionally possible in only two situations aiming the protection

of widows and orphans and/or for giving freedom to slave women. Thus, currently in absence of slavery and presence of social security structures in Muslims societies, the polygamy should be banned ([Chaabani 2019](#): 24-26).

After the collapse of the USSR, the question arose to what extent Uzbekistan would continue or reject the Soviet legacy on religious politics and women's issues. In Uzbekistan, the generation now aged over 40 years old had grown up in the context of Soviet gender secular discourses, national traditions, and Soviet education. As researchers correctly point out, the coexistence of Islam and secularism in post-Soviet Uzbekistan has generated streams of discourses about rights, traditions, and family values ([Peshkova 2013](#): 689). There has been a pluralization of Islamic knowledge, which is associated with secular politics in the context of Uzbekistan, along with the growth of modern technologies and new ways of communication. Religious knowledge is disseminated through websites, Facebook, social media, Telegram channels, and Islamic videos on YouTube.

Samarkand is a multiethnic and multi-confessional city. The majority of the Samarkand's Muslims is Sunni and regard themselves as followers of the Hanafi branch of Sunnism. Currently, the main ethnic groups forming the core of Samarkand's population are Tajiks, Uzbeks, Ironi, Tatars, and Russians. It has Sunni and Shiite mosques, Orthodox churches, a Catholic church, an Armenian church, and a synagogue. During the Soviet period, a certain distinction remained between the Muslim (old) part of the city, where mainly Tajiks (regarded as being of mostly Sunni Muslim background) lived, ([Sukhareva 2011](#):15) and the "European" (new) part of the city, which was dominated by the Russian-speaking population and had a significant Turkic-speaking population represented by Irani and Uzbek residents. On the territory of the "old" city, there were also Uzbeks ([Sukhareva 2011](#):15), Turkmens and even people from Kashghar, who formed the Kashghari quarter ([Sukhareva 1976](#)). During the 30 years of Uzbekistan's independence, most of Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Kazan and Crimean Tatars, and others emigrated from Samarkand for various reasons. Simultaneously, the Uzbek rural population was migrating to the city. At present, although the Russian-speaking population remains in the "European" part, nevertheless, the Uzbek-speaking and Tajik-speaking population dominates, represented by Uzbeks, Iranians, Tajiks, Arabs, etc. In 2021, 551,900 people lived in Samarkand (*Osnovnyye demograficheskiye pokazateli Samarkandskoy oblasti 2021*).

Several tens of thousands of Samarkand Tajiks and Uzbeks emigrated to the United States under the green card program ([Yakh'yaev 2019](#)). A considerable number of Samarkand residents live permanently in the Russian Federation. Samarkand residents are seasonal workers in Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, South Korean and European countries. In 2018, the borders were opened and visas were canceled with Tajikistan, where a considerable number of people from Samarkand live. This change has improved cultural and social ties between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In different countries, Samarkand residents get acquainted with different discourses and local practices of Islam. In the daily life of Samarkand residents, a strong influence of foreign Islamic practices has not yet been observed. Islamic practices among urban Uzbeks and Tajiks do not differ. Separately, the Shiite community of Iranians in Samarkand stands out, who adhere to customs which differ from the Sunni Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Gender Politics in Uzbekistan

Gender policy is defined as the process of developing, challenging, and rethinking positions on gender relations and women's rights by state and non-state actors ([Kandiyoti 2007](#): 601). The official position of the post-Soviet states is to declare the promotion of women's rights and gender equality in societies. As Kandiyoti notes, post-Soviet gender ideologies represent the purposeful creation of new ideas about cultural authenticity in order to serve new ideological goals ([Kandiyoti 2007](#): 601). During the Soviet period, state resources were mobilized for the creation of strong secular ethno-national identities ([Khalid 2014](#): 2) and the emergence of local nationalisms. In the context of nation-building, state narratives about gender norms are complex and occupy an important place in the public sphere. On the other side, they are discussed, adapted, or challenged by women themselves ([Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016](#): 195–206).

In Central Asia, gender relations have been influenced over the past twenty years by a number of factors: the growing participation of women in the informal labor market,

migration flows to Russia, Turkey and foreign countries, and the growth of religious consciousness and practice (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 195–206). Islam is deeply intertwined with powerful national myths. For most people, Islam is an idealized version of the true past of Central Asia (Khalid 2003: 586).

Uzbekistan is characterized by the main trends typical of both other Central Asian countries and their own special features. After the collapse of the USSR, there has been an increase in poverty, migration of the population due to labor, emigration of the Russian-speaking population, the formation of a monolingual society, the growth of the influence of Islamic ideas, increased penetration of global ideas of individualization, Islamic ideas of various nature through migration links, and the Internet. Over the 30 years of Uzbekistan's independence, there has been a slow pace of urbanization and most of the population lives in rural areas. Since 2000, there has been an increase of female participation in labor migration (Maksakova 2006: 133–145). The degree of religiosity of the population of the regions of Uzbekistan also differs. Compared to other regions, the population of the Ferghana Valley is considered more religious.

In the first years of Uzbekistan's independence, there were discussions among intellectuals and representatives of the political elite about which strategy to choose in the gender issue; to what extent to follow Soviet norms or return to “traditional” gender roles (Louw 2007: 73–74). The Uzbek authorities said they would promote gender equality and ensure the protection of women's rights.

Under Karimov, a contradictory gender policy was pursued. On the one hand, access to education for girls was expanded, Islamic secondary specialized educational institutions were opened, equal rights were ensured; and, on the other hand, there was harsh persecution of certain groups of believers. Uzbekistan has retained a number of features characteristic of the Soviet era, such as the absence of gender segregation in transport, theater, cinemas etc. In the first years of independence, the state ideologies of the Central Asian countries were brought together by such features as the limited promotion of Islam; the emphasis was on the external ceremonial aspects of religion, as well as on its moral code (Akiner 1996: 106–107).

There is a wide variety of interpretations of Islam and what it means to be Muslim (Rasanayagam 2011: 230). In Uzbekistan, the state seeks, through the muftiate (Muslim

Board of Uzbekistan, formally a non-governmental institution, but under the control of state authorities) (Louw 2007: 35), to control manifestations of local Islamic traditions by appointing imams and registering mosques and madrasahs. The understanding of Islamic traditions and its interpretation occurs in the process of social interaction with other people (marriages, funerals, social events, and the rituals of Bibi Seshanbe, Bibi Mushkilkushod, and Mavlud), as well as visits to Islamic shrines (Rasanayagam 2011). In the discourses of Uzbekistan, Islam is portrayed as a component of national identity. One of the forms of Islamic self-expression is pilgrimage to holy places, the most important of which have been taken over by the state in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the regimes (Fathi 2006: 303).

The Uzbek authorities paid special attention to the Islamic education of women, albeit on a very limited scale. In Uzbekistan, during the years of independence, two women's four-year state secondary special Islamic institutions were opened, where girls can learn the basics of Islam. The first women's secondary specialized Islamic institution (madrasa) was opened in Bukhara in 1992 and was named "Juybari Kalon." It is under the jurisdiction of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. The institution was named in honor of the medieval dynasty of Sufi sheikhs of Juybari, as it is located in the Juybari Kalon madrasah, which was built with the active support of the mother of the Bukhara khan Abdulazizkhan (1645-1680) Oyposhshabibi (Muminov *et al.* 2009: 270). The second women's secondary specialized Islamic institution madrasa was opened in the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, in 1993, and in 1998 it was named Khadichai Kubro (Muminov *et al.* 2009: 270). It should be noted that the female students of these educational institutions wore and are wearing the hijab, which is also an example of the perception of the hijab as an integral part of religious identity.

Gender policy is reflected in the cultural policy of Uzbekistan. The first postage stamp issued in Uzbekistan in 1992 was dedicated to the poetess Nadira (1792–1842), who tragically died at the hands of the Bukhara Emir Nasrullah (1827–1860). Thus, in the early years of Uzbekistan's independence, there was a strong influence of Soviet ideology, which highlighted the plight of women in the pre-Soviet period. The medieval conqueror Amir Timur (Tamerlane) was chosen by the leadership of Uzbekistan as a historical symbol of the country and a source of legitimation (Adams 2010: 147). Much attention to the Timurid

era was accompanied by the study and popularization of the Timurid queens and princesses. The image of Timur's older wife — Saray Malik khanym (Sarai mulk khanym), also known as Bibi-khanym — was present in the public consciousness of Samarkandians already in the pre-Soviet period. In the era of independence, books were published about her, plays were written, etc. (Fayziev 1994:5–12).

The researchers note that in certain contexts, the state seeks to control women by developing a legal framework for birth control and maternity support (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 195–206). The main difference between gender policy in Uzbekistan in the era of Karimov and the Soviet era was the forced sterilization of women (Antelava 2013; Snyder 2015).

The policy of empowering women, after the election of Mirziyoyev as President of Uzbekistan (December 2016), acquired new dynamics. Thanks to a certain liberalization of the political life of Uzbekistan, for the first time in the history of independent Uzbekistan, a female deputy of the national parliament, Maksuda Varisova, a representative of the People's Democratic party of Uzbekistan, was nominated as a candidate for the presidency of Uzbekistan. In the elections for the President of Uzbekistan in October 2021, Varisova took 2nd place among five candidates for the presidency of Uzbekistan (TsIK ob'yavil Shavkata Mirziyoeva izbrannym prezidentom 2021).

Among the top government officials of Uzbekistan, there is a female minister for preschool education, (Agrippina Shin becomes Minister of Preschool Education of Uzbekistan 2017) and who is of a non-Muslim religion, which indicates a policy aimed at ensuring tolerance and a certain religious pluralism in the country.

Under the conditions of an authoritarian system, the first President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov (1991–2016) initiated the restoration of a number of large Islamic shrines, abandoned or destroyed under the Soviet rule (Malikov 2010: 123). In the first decade of Uzbekistan's independence, local mahalla committees and individual sponsors were given the opportunity to contribute to the restoration of local shrines (Rasanayagam 2011; Malikov 2018). At the same time, there is a debate in society about whether the shrines are part of the Islamic tradition or if it is idolatry (Rasanayagam 2011: 139).

A certain subsection of women receive religious knowledge and the concept of piety in them is formed through interaction with religious authorities (Jouili and Amir-Moazami

2006: 619). One of the female rites is the rituals of Bibi Seshanba and Bibi Mushkilkushod, performed, as a rule, under the guidance of a *bibi halfa*. According to Fathi, the terms *otin-oyi* (in the Uzbek language) and *bibi khalifa* (in the Tajik language) are used for a female mentor in religious rituals (Fathi 2006: 303). In the Samarkand context of today, the term *bibi khalifa* is used by both Tajik-speaking and Uzbek-speaking mentors.

The official clergy of Uzbekistan — in 1989–1993, the grand mufti (a head of the Muslim Spiritual Administration who has authority to issue a *fatwa*) of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was the authoritative theologian Sheikh Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf (1952–2015) — on the basis of the absence of any mention of this rite in the holy Qur’an, hadiths, or Shariah considers Bibi Mushkilkushod ritual non-Islamic (Shayx Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf 2020). According to one of the women, these women’s rituals are a feature of Islam in Central Asia. She explained her statement by the fact that according to the accepted oral and written tradition, Saint Bibi Seshanba was the aunt of the leader of the Sufi order of Naqshbandiyya-Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–1389). It is known that in Uzbekistan, Bahauddin Naqshband is officially recognized as a Sufi saint. Therefore, she believes that Bibi Seshanbe is also part of the local Islamic tradition (Interview, April 2019).

In the context of Samarkand, women also take part in funeral rituals. Moreover, food for women is prepared by a woman who is called *khodim*. One of the features of the mourning rituals of the women of Samarkand was mourning celebrations or dances (*sadr*), in which only women participated (Sukhareva 1960: 23). According to our data, during the Soviet era this practice continued, albeit on a limited scale. In the first decade of Uzbekistan’s independence, this ritual began to be used more widely, but later, on the recommendation of the official clergy, the number of practicing this custom decreased (Interview, April 2019). There are women’s shrines in Samarkand, which are visited by women on certain days of the week (Malikov 2020). Women hold an important role as experts on marriage rituals and healers. There are ambiguous assessments of the activities of healers, or “shamans” (*bakshi, folbin*) (Louw 2014: 57–61), some of whom are women. The official clergy consider their activities non-Islamic and condemn people who turn to them.

Hijabs in the culture of Samarkand

There are visible markers (language, clothing) of identity, which create and define the boundaries of belonging to a social group or religious community. In a multicultural social context, there may be different interpretations of the meaning of identity markers. One of these markers is the hijab. Various discourses about identity have arisen, which are expressed in what the hijab means to those who wear it, as opposed to how the image of women's clothing is presented in public discourse.

This paragraph intends to answer the following research question: what does the hijab mean for those who wear it? The hijab is the subject of many public discussions about identity, national traditions, cultural differences, gender roles, and so on. In different eras, different symbolic meanings were attached to the hijab, starting with modesty, backwardness, religiosity, tradition, etc., so that for every woman the hijab has its own personal meaning, because behind every hijab there is a person's biography ([Sibai 2015: 264](#)). The hijab is a piece of woman's clothing that must cover the entire body and hair of a woman; only the face, hands and feet below the ankles can be left uncovered ([Yarlykapov 2016](#)). The hijab differs from the *paranja* worn by Muslim women in Samarkand in the pre-Soviet and early Soviet periods.

There are various public discourses regarding the Soviet *hujum* movement of the late 1920s and the issue of hijab wearing today. According to Northrop, in the mid-1990s, Tashkent city intellectuals regarded the legacy of the liberation of the *hujum* as one of the most positive outcomes of the Soviet period ([Northrop 1999: 353](#)). This discourse is also adhered to by Dadabaev, who believes that the purpose of the *hujum* was to provide women with more opportunities for integration into public life ([Dadabaev 2014: 339](#)). Despite the *hujum* movement, women in some regions of Uzbekistan retained the tradition of covering their faces even before the 1980s. In the 1980s, some intellectuals in Samarkand expressed their admiration for women in some districts of Namangan (province in the east of Uzbekistan), who maintained the tradition of wearing light headscarves to cover their faces.

For another group of Uzbeks, this phenomenon was an indicator of the fanaticism of the Namangan people.

There is currently a disagreement about the meaning, the exact shape or color of the hijab (Amer 2014: 59). In light of religious policy in Uzbekistan, the spread of the hijab custom can be divided into four stages: the first in the early 1990s, the second from 1998 to 2018, the third from 2018 to 2021, and the fourth from 2021.

On the one hand, the living conditions of women after 1991 have deteriorated compared to Soviet times, which influenced the revival of ideas about conservative gender roles (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016: 195–206). On the other hand, in the early years of independence, with a relatively liberal political climate, many women in Uzbekistan, especially young women, began to wear the hijab (Louw 2007: 38). However, as Northrop notes, the hijab was more popular in Tashkent and the Ferghana Valley (2004). According to Adams, in the mid-1990s in Tashkent, in some religious families, men persuaded their mothers and sisters to wear the hijab (Adams 2010: 64). During this period, women demonstrated their commitment to Islam through religious clothing, which had been prohibited in the Soviet past (Abramson 2000: 8). Young women abandoned European clothing in favor of the hijab in order to identify as strict Muslims (Corcoran-Nantes 2005: 141). It should be noted that in the 1990s, in Samarkand, the hijab was not as widespread as in the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent.

Most of the hijabs in Tashkent in the 1990s were different from those of the 1920s, in that the hijab forms of the mid-1990s were borrowed from other parts of the Muslim world (Northrop 2004: 356). The new hijab (according to Kamp, in the 1990s was termed *yopinichik*, “veil” in Uzbek) included a white, blue, green, or black scarf tied under the chin (Kamp 2006: 233). According to Anvar, to designate women wearing hijab, in Tashkent such terms are used as *orangan* (covered), *hijoblik* (woman in *hijab*), *romollik* (woman covered in scarf), or *islomiy* (Islamic) (Anvar 2015: 76–77).

The hijab has become an expression of rethinking national and religious-cultural identities (Northrop 2004: 357). According to one discourse, women defined hijab as their right and duty in Islam (Peshkova 2020). According to Kamp, wearing the hijab was a public expression of piety, as well as a reflection of Islamist international movements that encouraged the adoption of clothing that was not related to local traditions. Wearing the

hijab has also been a political statement in many contexts (Kamp 2006: 134). We agree with the view that the modern hijab movement is being rethought as an integral part of a certain modernity (Kandiyoti 2009: 95).

In 1998, the Uzbek government passed laws against the wearing of religious clothing in public. The wearing of the hijab in public came to be viewed by state officials as “extremism” (Louw 2007: 38), therefore, the wearing of the hijab was severely restricted. In 2012, the sale of hijab by private sellers was virtually banned (Obiya 2016: 7). In 2015, according to researchers, local police in Tashkent began to prey on those wearing the hijab and forced women to take off the hijab (Obiya 2016: 15). As noted by researchers in 2016, the Uzbek government was suspicious of religious traditions and prohibited the wearing of the hijab at universities (Kamp 2016: 274).

The situation changed after 2017, when the liberal policy of Mirziyoyev opened up new opportunities for the expression of the religious identity by the population, including women. In Samarkand, since 2018, there has been an increase in the number of women wearing the hijab (*hijobga kirgan* or *uralgan* in Uzbek, *hijobdor* or *rumoldor* in Tajik). After 2020, this number has increased significantly, which respondents associated with the pandemic. According to them, the pandemic with its tragic consequences and the stress of the population led to an aggravation of religious feeling, and the desire to cleanse all bad things and follow the rules of Islam (Interview, April 2021).

On July 5, 2021, the President of Uzbekistan signed a new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, according to which the wearing of religious clothing, including the hijab, has been allowed (Sirazieva 2021). Due to the lack of a legal definition of the concept of “cult attire” in the current legislative acts, the ban on the appearance in public places in religious attire has been excluded from the Law (Kommentariy k Zakonu Respubliki Uzbekistan «O svobode sovesti i religioznykh organizatsiyakh» v novoy redaktsii 2021).

The question arises: is there eagerness in Muslim society in Uzbekistan to “return” to pre-Soviet gender roles, with an emphasis on home life and motherhood? It is clear that the market economy and the economic crisis diminish the opportunities for such a transformation (Khalid 2007: 135). Analyzing materials from Tajikistan, Nozimova came to the conclusion that for women the hijab seems to provide maximum protection and

support for the status of a “respected woman” and the protection of feminine purity and honor (Nozimova 2018: 276). It should be noted that not all Samarkand women who strictly follow Islamic customs wear hijab (Interview, March 2021). According to our observations, in Samarkand, women of different ages, from young girls of 18 to older women, are beginning to wear the hijab. According to the respondents, the forms of the hijab do not differ. Depending on the age of the hijab wearers, there is a difference in the preferred hijab colors. Young people wear brighter colors, while older women wear darker hijabs (Interview, April 2021). The hijab has been brought to Samarkand from Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The increase in the number of women in the hijab does not mean that they lead a home-bound lifestyle; many work in private institutions, and since September 2021 it has been allowed to wear a hijab in public spaces. There are no officially regulated rules for wearing a hijab, just like there are no rules for the preliminary preparation of a girl for wearing a hijab. Apparently, this is why there are different interpretations and opinions on how to switch to wearing the hijab. One of the wearers of hijab shared her visions with us; she believes that a woman needs to prepare for wearing a hijab from several months to a year. During the preparation period, the woman wears something like a scarf, and then goes on to the hijab (Interview, Irani woman, April 2021). Thus, there is an opinion of certain groups of women in Samarkand about the stages of transition to wearing the hijab. Since religious identity has a visual manifestation, women’s clothing—the hijab—is becoming the subject of public debate. Muslim women have formed an ambiguous attitude towards the hijab. Some of them believe that hijab does not define faith, and every Muslim woman should have deep faith. In Kazakhstan, wearing the hijab, some women attached special importance to their national identity (Dosanova 2010: 10). In Samarkand, when characterizing the custom of wearing the hijab, ethnic categories are not used. Although in everyday life people sometimes say: “according to our Tajik or Uzbek customs,” we have never heard them say that they wear the hijab according to Tajik or Uzbek traditions. Currently, in the Samarkand society there are conflicting views on the spread of the custom of wearing a hijab.

In the ideology of Uzbekistan, there are components of the Soviet legacy in the form of the celebration of the New Year and the celebration of International Women’s Day

on March 8, introduced in the 1920s. Uzbekistan continues to celebrate the International Women's Day on March 8, but while in the Soviet period of Uzbekistan it was attached to the symbolic meaning of the liberation of women from the veil (Kamp 2016), now this holiday has turned into the worship of the image of the Mother, and women.

Conclusions

The complex and multifaceted transformations of Muslim society in Samarkand over the past 100 years have led to changes in ideas about local Islamic traditions, and the role of women in Muslims societies. The fall of the Soviet Union and the relatively liberal policy of the state in Uzbekistan led to the revival of some pre-Soviet traditions. In the 1990s, for certain groups of women from Uzbekistan, consider one of these traditions, the hijab, as related to Islam, and therefore they try to emerge it as a symbol of a revival of Islamic traditions. At the same time, the attitude towards the hijab in society was contradictory. However, since the late 1990s, the leadership of Uzbekistan, headed by Karimov, preserving certain Soviet traditions, pursued a policy of state control over religion and limited the spread of the hijab. The state proclaimed a tough fight against Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. At the same time, the women of Samarkand had no limitations in making a pilgrimage to the Islamic shrines of Samarkand and continued to conduct women's rituals such as Bibi Seshanbe and Bibi Mushkilkushod, which the official clergy of Uzbekistan considered non-Islamic. After the election of Mirziyoyev as President of Uzbekistan, Muslims were given the opportunity to openly express their religious identity, which, in particular, manifested itself in the wider spread of hijabs both in Uzbekistan and in Samarkand. The motivations for wearing the hijab by women were different and related both to the expression of modern religious identity and the creation of the image of a respectable woman. The intensification of the hijabization process has been observed since 2020, which respondents associated with the onset of the pandemic. In July 2021, the state allowed the wearing of the hijab in public places, which is due to the desire to ensure freedom and the right to wear any form of clothing in society. Nevertheless, in the Uzbekistan's society there are ambiguous and contradictory views on the custom of wearing a hijab.

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