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*Everyday Islamic Practices in Central Asia*  
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In Central Asia, as in many parts of the Islamic world, religious practices permeate life. Descriptions of Islam usually focus on the "five pillars": the confession of faith, five daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan, the giving of charity, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. But for ordinary people in Uzbekistan, a country on the northern border of Afghanistan, many other practices and rituals establish community and family identity with Islam. I'll describe some activities I have observed during my research. These are the ordinary practices of Central Asian Muslims, including those in Afghanistan, and provide a better picture of Islam as it is practiced than the rules proposed by the Taliban.

While many Uzbek Muslims do not say all five daily prayers, prayer happens throughout the day. Meals with the family are ended with a short *du'o* (a voluntary prayer) and an *Omin* (amen). Gatherings with friends, and even many business meetings also end with this sort of prayer, which asks good wishes and blessings for those present.

In any Uzbek neighborhood, one is occasionally awakened early in the morning by the sounds of a circumcision feast. For such an event, the neighborhood committee sets up tables and chairs, a performance platform and large iron pots for cooking, all in an open courtyard. The men of the neighborhood, at least one from each family, come to congratulate the boy and his family and to eat *plov*, a rice and lamb dish. The gathering lasts for an hour or two, during which there are recitations from the Qur'an, and musicians (all men) perform traditional religious music. The boy who will be circumcised is the guest of honor; he wears a velvet robe and is brought in riding a horse that has an equally decorative saddle. There is a similar feast for a groom on his wedding day.

Uzbek women sometimes attend their own religious, social events. These include celebrating *Mavlud* (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), attending a session with a religious teacher, or seeking guidance in times of difficulty. The person

who leads these gatherings is a woman, an *otin*, who has training as a religious teacher, Qur'an reciter and prayer leader. Gatherings with an *otin* are social as well as spiritual, and like men's gatherings, include food.

During the second major Islamic holiday of the year, the Feast of the Sacrifice, Uzbek families remember those who died within the past three years. Family members and friends are invited to the home. Men and women sit in separate rooms, where they eat, reminisce, recite the Qur'an and say prayers. While some families may invite a mullah or an *otin* to recite, often these rituals are simply led by the senior family members.

While Muslims from all over the world aspire to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, expense has always made the Hajj impossible for many. In Central Asia, pilgrimages to local shrines are an important part of Islamic practice. *Shah-I Zinda*, which is the tomb of the Prophet's companion, Kutham ibn Abbas, in Samarkand, is one of the most famous and beautiful of these shrines. The saint's tomb itself is built half way up a hill, and its blue-tiled dome is visible from far off. Tourists and pilgrims both go to *Shah-I Zinda* and other shrines in Uzbekistan, but for the pilgrim, the visit begins and ends with prayer, and includes opportunities for communal prayer and religious learning, as well as personal discussion and instruction.

These practices make Islam a part of every day life for Central Asians, linking the seriousness of prayer and Qur'an recitation to the joys of family and community.

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