

Research Fellow

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Research Project Title

Islam, the State and the Transformation of Rural Space in post-Soviet Central Asia: a Study of the Family Through its Exchange Strategies

Project Overview

This project aims to study new relationships developing between independent states and Islam, from the perspective of social change. It begins by exploring family structures in the rural areas of post-Soviet Central Asia. The following topics will be covered: the role and status of religion in the context of nation-building; the impact of land privatisation on rural dwellers; and, the Muslim actors within society who are involved in these processes of social change. More generally, it will analyse relations between the religious, political, and economic fields. To this end, the project will take into account both local and national levels affected by rural transformation of Post Soviet Central Asia in order to identify endogenous factors that may influence the redefinition of the norms, socio-cultural and religious values of a given group.

At the state level, this project will explore to what degree individuals are able to have access to land as set out in the new law related to agrarian reforms launched after 1991. At a local level, the realisation of this new possibility for rural families will be examined, and the local conditions of receiving a plot of land and using it discussed (the contract signed between a peasant and the rural governing authorities that allow them to become a 'private' farmer or a smallholder, and 'private' farmers or new smallholders' duties and possibilities related to the use of their parcel of land).

The socio-anthropological approach favoured here will allow us to shed light on the processes of rural transformation in Post-Soviet Central Asia and to examine its implications for the wellbeing of the Muslim population. After describing changes in the agricultural sector, we will try to determine whether land reforms can lead to new forms of 're-traditionalisation' within families that used to hold memberships of two Soviet rural enterprises (kolkhozy-collective farms and

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sovkhozy-state farms) and that have recently become 'private' or 'independent' farmers and smallholders. The launch of land reforms, with the aim of encouraging the emergence of a free market, requires the gradual dismantling of these two rural enterprises (collective farms and state farms) both created during the Soviet policy of collectivisation at the time of Stalin. Although former Soviet rural structures of production are now being modified, they still characterise the command economies of, for example, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where the creation of new farmer family organisations has deeply affected households' ability to meet their basic consumption needs. As family-based coping strategies are exhausted against a backdrop of high levels of vulnerability, affected rural and Muslim people of Post-Soviet Central Asia are compelled to find different forms of religious support.

Exploration of the above will be attempted through an analysis of family exchange strategies that correspond to specific social relationships and belong to different spheres. The development of these exchange strategies will be illustrated through studies of family networks carried out in various rural and geographical areas in Central Asia. These collective strategies will be observed in families who received a parcel of land within the framework of the agrarian reforms launched after 1991 by Central Asian leaders, and will be analysed on the basis of different exchange modes stemming from three domains: that of the State; kinship, and the market economy.

This study will analyse modes of intervention in the various exchange relationships mentioned above. Accordingly it will a) evaluate the nature of changes from a socio-economic point of view in the daily lives of rural dwellers, and b) consider the forms of re-composition arising from a 'return' to ancient values within rural Central Asian families.

Rather than deploying a political science approach, this project focuses on the link between religion and social practice, and the manners in which this contributes to the evolution of post-Soviet Muslim societies.