

# THE SPIRITUAL INDUSTRY OF CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANTS IN MOSCOW

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**In this article we look at how Islamic religious services delivered by migrants from Central Asia adjust to new conditions in Moscow. We focus on the activity of establishing a particular locality for a religious practice in the context of the transfer of spirituality by migrants. The new space in which migrants function creates conditions for delocalization of their religious life and imaginaries, which makes them belong to multiple spiritual spaces. Many spiritual practices delivered by Central Asian spiritual leaders go beyond the migrant circle, entering the local market of spiritual services. They adjust to the local conditions, simultaneously influencing the religious industry of Moscow.**

**This article analyses how spiritual products are being ordered, who the clients of spiritual professionals from Central Asia are, and how new places of spiritual industry, where rituals and healing practices take place, emerge. We consider these places to be not only physical spaces, but also ones in which new qualities are being created that combine elements of various interpretations of spirituality. Some forms of spirituality that migrants consider as their traditional practices are intermingled with new and previously unknown elements. In this sense, the local is merging with the global, creating new quality. We argue that through reinterpretation of local realities migrants and their spiritual leaders reconstruct their traditions and practices in order to be able to deliver spiritual services in Moscow for migrant clients, other Muslims, and non-Muslims.**

**Keywords:** Spiritual Industry; Migration; Islam; *Ruqiya*; Talismans

The political thaw that had began in the late Soviet period and continued after the collapse of the USSR brought a spontaneous intensification of various forms of religiosity, such as worship of holy places, alternative forms of healing, life-cycle rituals, mass interest in Islamic education, and development of religious institutions. In Central Asia as well as in other parts of the former USSR, spiritual leaders such as imams, mullahs, female religious leaders, healers, and others came out of hiding.

There was also an expansion of Islamic literature, records, videos, and religious objects disseminated across the region (see, e.g., Cieślowska 2017; Khalid 2007; Rasanayagam 2006).

As migration from Central Asia to the Russian Federation began in the early 1990s, together with migrants came various spiritual ideas and forms of spirituality. They became a part of the spiritual market<sup>1</sup> in Moscow, forming a niche of spiritual services delivered by migrants from the former USSR and other countries. As a result, the local spiritual market has created an increasingly pluralistic religious space, absorbing different cultures and spiritual ideas and triggering the rise of new spiritual services. In this space, Central Asian spiritual professionals and healers perform various forms of activities including recitation of the Koran for healing purposes, expelling the evil spirits (jinns), charms removal, talisman making, and *hijama* (cupping therapy) (see also Oparin 2017).

In this article we look at how the Islamic religious services in Moscow delivered by migrants from Central Asia shape the local spiritual industry and transform the spiritual geographies of the city. We refer to the process of creating a particular locality for religious practices as religious placemaking. The new surroundings, in which migrants function, create conditions for delocalization of their religious life and imaginaries, which makes them belong to multiple spiritual spaces (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010:7–9). This article focuses on the process of placemaking by migrants from Central Asia in Moscow as part of a new geography of the city. It looks at how spiritual products are being ordered, who the clients of spiritual professionals from Central Asia are, and how new places of spiritual industry, where rituals and healing practices take place, emerge. We consider these places to be not only physical spaces, but also ones in which new qualities are being created that combine elements of various interpretations of spirituality. For example, some healing rituals can be performed virtually through Skype or, as in the case of talismans, can be ordered in the country of origin and brought to Moscow for the person in need. Some forms of spirituality that migrants consider as their traditional practices are intermingled with new and previously unknown elements. In this sense, the local is merging with the global, creating new quality.

We argue that through reinterpretation of local realities migrants and their spiritual leaders reconstruct their traditions and practices to be able to deliver spiritual services in Moscow for migrant clients, other Muslims, and non-Muslims. Accordingly, the religious services provided by the migrants go beyond one locality and travel across borders (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010:5–10).

Migration plays an important role in the formation of various codependencies. Relationships that are formed on this basis compete and intermingle with the old

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<sup>1</sup> Due to a different nature of marketing practices and transcendental claims, it is difficult to argue that spiritual services are marketing or spiritual products only. Spiritual services have always expressed spiritual dimension during ceremonies and/or by religious institutions and movements. At the same time, they are sold and bought within the mechanism of capitalism. Hence, in this article we use the terms “spiritual industry” and “spiritual market” interchangeably to describe this phenomenon (see Obadia and Wood 2011:xix).

ones (Vendina and Pain 2018:54). Since migrants belong to many places, the nature of their relationship with a particular place is being constantly reformulated (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:6–23). This study represents a multisited ethnography which has involved not only fieldwork at multiple sites but also looks at the movement of people in the context of migration and globalization (Robben 2012). The concept of “translocal ethnography” is relevant to our study too, as various actors and activities are interconnected and interact with one another in many different sites (Hannerz 2012).

Migrants from Central Asia are not a homogeneous group in terms of their ethnic and national origin or religious affiliation. Moreover, they also differ when it comes to the time of arrival in the Russian Federation. Some migrants came to Moscow long ago and managed to obtain a certain status. Others are newcomers whose situation is still unstable (Varshaver and Rocheva 2018:47). Migrants leave and come back, change their place of residence within Moscow and the Russian Federation, which not infrequently involves changing social and/or professional circles. As Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philip Schröder (2018) indicate, those multi-travels of migrants lead to reconceptualization of translocality and raise questions of the social construction of place and space. Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen (2010:5) perceive translocality as a “multitude of circulations and transfers” that result from the constant movement of people and ideas across various types of boundaries and spaces. Clemens Greiner (2010:137, 2011:610) points out that, along with the physical flow of people, the products of their intellectual and spiritual life “move” with them and “settle” in the new locality, which results in the transformation of both resources and locality. Referring to this process, Greiner conceptualizes “translocality” as the coexistence of “multidirectional and overlapping networks” which are the result of population flows and linking and transforming places and ideas.

This article is based on field research conducted in Moscow for two months in 2017, two and a half months in 2018, and during the month of Ramadan in 2019 as part of the larger project “Changes in Religious Tradition of Migrants from Tajikistan to the Russian Federation.” The research is based on in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews were conducted with various religious leaders: imams, Ismaili *khalifas*, healers, people practicing the *hijama* and their clients, as well as common migrants. The research was conducted among the Sunni population and Ismailis from Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. The participant observation included participation in religious gatherings and classes, various forms of healing, rituals, exorcisms, *hijamas*, recitations of the Koran for medicinal purposes in private apartments, mosques, and facilities for alternative medicine where spiritual professionals from Central Asia work. To ensure the safety of interviewees, their names have been changed and the exact locations of research sites are disclosed only if absolutely necessary.

Moscow is a special field for research. It is not a *mahalla* (a neighborhood community), a *kishlak* (a village), not even a small town or city in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, where we had done research previously. Moscow is a big urban conglomerate characterized by dynamic transformative processes. Thus, the field of this research included

many sites such as mosques, bazaars, shops, restaurants, private apartments, but also streets and other public spaces where migrants are in constant motion interacting with other nations and ethnic groups.

Therefore, Moscow appeared to be a large research site regardless of where we were going and what activities we were undertaking. Our research also took us out of Moscow to places where migrants live or which they visit, where we also participated in religious events. However, Moscow remains a point of reference that has a different meaning to everyone with whom we interacted, as well as for us. In total, we worked at about 70 sites and among people who are not always related to each other and belong to various networks.

There are several places in Moscow with a high concentration of Islamic infrastructure. They include Islamic and cultural organizations, mosques, informal prayer rooms, halal food stores, shops with Islamic accessories, cafes, and markets. Spiritual activities are performed in formally registered religious facilities as well as in apartments and other sites. There are also places such as facilities for alternative medicine that function at the crossroads of cultures, attracting Muslims as well as non-Muslims who become the new clients of "Asian spirituality." All those places are related to each other in terms of their functions, location, and people (Oparin 2017; Turaeva 2019; Varshaver and Rocheva 2018). Moreover, the availability of new technologies has created opportunities to perform spiritual services online. It has generated one more space of interaction and played a role in changing religious practices by virtually "connecting" people and the spirit (see Meyer 2013).

In this article we use three different case study examples presented within two sections. The first case describes the practice of healing using the Koran and exorcisms performed by mullah Rustam from Tajikistan who works mostly among Sunni Muslims of various ethnic groups in a mosque in the suburbs of Moscow. The second case study presents a healer from Kazakhstan named Nurlybek who provides healing services and exorcisms to multiethnic and multireligious clients. The third case focuses on talismans and *teshtob* writings (washed-off Koranic verses used for medical purposes) offered by Ismaili *khalifa* Usaynsho from Gorno-Badakhshan to his fellow countrymen and sometimes to people of other national and religious origins. We chose these specific cases to show the different aspects of religious practices in motion and their adaptation to the host country. The three subjects of our case studies vary in terms of producing social interactions as well as in their approaches to healing practices. Each of them also works for a slightly different clientele. Therefore, they create their social and spiritual spaces in dissimilar ways, using various forms of religious and spiritual expression.

In the first section of this article we show that the relationships of the spiritual leaders go beyond their ethnic/religious group and migrants' circle. This stems from the increasing demand for alternative healing services in Russia and beyond. As a result, various forms of unconventional medicine have gained popularity on the local spiritual market (Krashennnikova 2015:110). However, there are also people who provide services only for migrants belonging to a certain group and their activity is limited to a narrow circle, as shown the second section of this study.

## RUQIYA AND EXORCISMS IN MOSCOW

In the entire Muslim world men and women use the power of Koranic texts for healing purposes or to remove bad energy. Spells can be also recited in local languages using various formulas and spiritual practices. Thereby, people ask God, Muslim spirits (jinns), or other spirits for support (Bowen 2012:103).

One of the popular practices among Muslims is *ruqiya*, which is a form of spiritual healing. It is based on the reading of particular suras (Koran chapters) and other religious sequences to a person for the purpose of healing. The reading can be also performed over food or water. *Ruqiya* is aimed at expelling jinns, who are believed to be evil spirits harming people. In Central Asia the category of jinns includes various spirits such as *pari*, *dev*, *alabasti*, *shaiton*, *ajina*, and others that traditionally belong to a pantheon of pre-Islamic deities mentioned in Avesta<sup>2</sup> and probably known in earlier periods. At present, *ruqiya* is criticized by various Muslim modernists, but most Muslims continue to perform it since they believe in the healing power of the words of Allah (Babadzhanov and Kamilov 2006:336–337; Sukhareva 1975:11–24).

In Central Asia *ruqiya* is read in various places such as mosques, private homes, and *mazars* (sacred places), where it is recited by *mazars'* sheikhs. People bring with them not only water and bread, but also other food products, such as tea, flour, sugar, salt, and so on. Apart from suras, other Koranic texts are also being recited, including: *duoi dafi jin va dev* (prayer to expel jinns and devils), *duoi talabi shifoi bemor* (a request to be cured of disease), as well as special healing/magic *qasidas* (petitions), for example *Qasida Burda Shareef* and *Qasida al Amali* (Babadzhanov and Kamilov 2006:336–337; Latypov 2010:443). The collection of healing *qasidas* is referred to as *qasida-noma*—various texts written by the seventeenth-century Sufi mystics, including Attor Nishopori, Rumi, and other authors.<sup>3</sup> Apart from official imams expelling jinns and purifying the person from bad energies, *qasidas* are performed by shamans (*bakhshi*, *kuuchu*), healers (*qasida khon*, *azani khon*, *tabib*), informal religious leaders *ishans*, *moldo*, female spiritual leaders, and the like. In order to expel evil spirits and heal the patient from bad energies, traditional healers use magic formulas and perform various rituals outside of mainstream Islam (Latypov 2010:443; Manichkin 2019:38–40, 81–82; Penkala-Gawęcka 2006:7–97).

Informal spiritual leaders (*bakhshi*, *kuuchu*, etc.) believe that in the process of healing and expelling jinns they are helped by supporting spirits referred to as *pari*, *perste*, *ak-shaiton* (white satan), *kishi/adamlar* (people),<sup>4</sup> *devs* (see, e.g., Basilov and Karmysheva 1997; Manichkin 2019; Penkala-Gawęcka 2006). However, these spirits

<sup>2</sup> Avesta is the collection of texts of Zoroastrianism, a pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia, on various religious, cosmological, and legal aspects.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Kibridjon Atayeva, PhD, who specializes in Sufi practices in Tajikistan; Khujand, Tajikistan, June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Kishi/adamlar* can be considered as ancestral spirits, however their relationship with a healer is not always clear. It can be changed and transformed depending on the context. Basically, they are spirits who assist the healer during a healing session. Some healers call them “my spirits” using a variety of terms in the local languages describing them as their ancestors; others say “my people” without indicating who those “people” are.

are sometimes included in the category of jinns especially by the “official” representatives of the clergy who criticize these healing practices calling them *shirk*.<sup>5</sup> People performing them are accused of cooperating with the jinns or suspected of being possessed by evil spirits. Nevertheless, despite the pressure from scriptural Islam, various rituals are still being practiced in Central Asia and a number of people consider them as belonging to the Islamic tradition.

This further highlights the question of the “Islamic orthodoxy” and what is considered “traditional Islam” or “Islamic traditions.” On the whole, orthodoxy can be defined as adherence to the Koran and Sunna of Prophet Muhammad. However, due to multiple interpretations of the Koran and the Sunna, this explanation does not provide a satisfactory answer. As Talal Asad (2009:22) writes, “orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power to truth. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.”

Therefore, in this article, while seeking connections between various traditions and practices and searching for their meaning in the context of migration, we adopted Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka’s (2006:85) approach to the Islamic tradition of Central Asia. She believes that from the anthropological perspective, it is important to look at how people who consider themselves Muslims interpret their religion and what role religion plays in their lives, regardless of the extent to which it differs from the ideal (orthodox) model. Consequently, practices connected with expelling jinns, *ruqiya*, as well as healing with talisman or *teshtobs* (see below), reflect the diversity of spiritual traditions of Central Asia. Together with migrants they are transferred to Russia and transformed under the influence of the receiving culture and individual spiritual pursuits of people.

In Moscow the reading of the *ruqiya* and expelling of jinns are performed by spiritual professionals from Central Asia as well as local Muslims: Tatars, Bashkirs, and the representatives of various ethnic groups from the Caucasus (Avars, Chechens, Ingush). In Central Asia *ruqiya* is conducted in mosques, prayer rooms, but also in private homes and other places. It is performed by both official imams and the so-called folk mullahs and healers. Moreover, in local shops with Islamic accessories one can buy various items and herbs that are meant to protect one from bad energies, DVDs with information on the topic, books, and so on. There are also talismans that are meant to provide protection against the jinns and other malicious spirits (see below). Removing bad energies can be supported by the *hijama* (cupping therapy), performed on certain body parts.

The local Moscow *ruqiya* is performed by Tatars and representatives of other ethnic groups, but Central Asian migrants prefer their own spiritual leaders. This is because migrants often do not speak fluent Russian and choose to speak their own languages. Moreover, their “own” imam can better understand their problems and

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<sup>5</sup> *Shirk* is a term of Koranic origin that means the presence at God’s side of other divinities or associates, who are understood as forms of worship that are additional to the faith placed in God. *Shirk* is the worst form of disbelief (Gimaret 1997:484–486).

there is a chance that he or she would agree to recite prayers over food products or add certain Central Asian practices to the ritual of *ruqiya*, which Tatar imams are categorically against. Moreover, Tatar imams have the reputation of being too secularized, accepting the Russian infidel lifestyle (see also Oparin 2017).

The following section of this article presents the stories of two healers living in Moscow. One of them works at a mosque near Moscow, and the other one is an independent healer from Kazakhstan, whose practices go beyond mainstream Islam. Syncretic character of his practices allows him to work with non-Muslim clients. Both of them come from Central Asia but differ in their approaches to healing practices as well as in the ways of transferring their spiritual practices onto the Moscow ground.

### CASE I

Rustam, who is 43 years old, works in a mosque near Moscow, where he teaches Islam to children and performs *ruqiya* reading. He came to Moscow 20 years ago and soon after married a Russian woman. Sometime later his parents in Tajikistan found him a Tajik wife. For 15 years he was in a relationship with two women. Eventually, his Russian wife decided to divorce him and now Rustam is with his Tajik wife only. He has nine children from both relationships. He has a small workshop where he makes keys, does small repairs, and he works in the mosque. He comes from an old Tajik family of religious leaders. His grandfather was a famous *qasyda khon*, who was healing people reciting the Koran and magic *qasydas*. In Rustam's words, his grandfather accepted patients who suffered from serious psychological issues that psychiatrists were unable to treat. The grandfather read to them religious formulas, which sometimes took weeks. Many of them regained psychological stability.

Rustam does not recite the *qasydas*, but he plans to learn them one day when he goes back to Tajikistan and has access to his grandfather's books. As a child he studied Islam in his family in a way that until recently was a standard of classical Islamic education in Central Asia. His mother took care of the children's Islamic upbringing. Therefore, in the beginning he learned to recite short suras, then the whole Koran (but without *tajwid*<sup>6</sup>), *chor kitob*,<sup>7</sup> and classic Sufi poetry—that is, Hafiz, Bedil, and other poets. Then he began to study more complicated religious rules. Rustam thinks that one has to possess certain skills, which are passed from generation to generation, to be able to expel jinns and heal people using the Koran.

There are people who do it for money, but most of them do not have enough power and lose their mind. Why such skills are passed from generation to generation? Because people know that for generations there have been *ishans* or mullahs in the family... They were not simple people... They knew the Koran and Islam and had the fear of God in themselves.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Tajwid* is a set of rules for the pronunciation of the Koran.

<sup>7</sup> *Chor Kitob* (Tajik: four books) is a set of books of describing rules of Muslim prayer and ritual (see Abdirashidov 2011:66–67).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Rustam, conducted by one of the authors, Moscow, August 2018.



Rustam began to recite the Koran for people several years ago. At first, he treated his own children and friends. Then, when it became known that his practices were successful, other people started visiting him. Currently, he is well respected and has a lot of clients. Rustam thinks that if a person lives according to the principles of Islam—prays regularly, reads the Koran—bad energies will stay away from them.

Many different people visit Rustam: Tatars, sometimes Caucasians, Russians who converted to Islam, but mostly migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The last feel safe with a migrant spiritual leader they can talk to about their problems and how difficult it is to live in Moscow, far away from their families, which often causes psychological tensions.

Rustam reads the Koran in various situations. For instance, one afternoon he was visited by a young Uzbek man working as a security guard in Moscow. The young man was sent to the mosque by his mother. According to her, he misbehaved, argued with others, and his family could not stand him. Rustam performed a long ritual reading the Koran during which the Uzbek man was squirming, saying that he was hallucinating, sometimes spoke with other voices, and screamed. In addition to reading suras, Rustam put a knife to the man's body to scare the jinns who were tormenting the client. In the end his client calmed down. The man came back the next day. As Rustam explained, the jinns did not leave the client's body and the exorcism had to be repeated in Uzbekistan, which the man was soon to visit.<sup>9</sup> The Moscow mosque where the initial exorcism took place became a starting point for religious placemaking, which was later extended across borders since the ritual had to be repeated in Uzbekistan.

Various spiritual practices are "traveling" together with migrants to Russia, but also sometimes (as in the case of Rustam's client) "leave" Russia and are transferred back to the countries of their origin. As Michael Lambek (2010:17) argues, "Spirit possession really follows international path." The spirit does not need a visa, a ticket, or luggage to travel from one country to another. For example, in 2015 in Bishkek one of the authors of this article was told about an exorcism performed on a Kyrgyz man, who after his stay in Russia was possessed by a jinn invited by a Russian witch doctor. The ritual of expelling the jinn took place after the Kyrgyz man's return home, the mullah-exorcist spoke to the jinn in Russian because, as the author was told, "the bad spirit was of Russian origin."

Thereby, the spirit becomes present in a few places at the same time, gaining an international dimension, moving across nations and religions, and thus a spiritual space appears in several places simultaneously (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010; Wong and Levitt 2014). Even if spiritual professionals perform their rituals in one place, the space is reproduced by their clients and other rituals' performers in other places.

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<sup>9</sup> Information about Rustam and his activities was obtained during conversations with him, his wife, and other family members, and also through observations by one of the authors, in 2017 and 2018, of the rituals he conducted.



Despite competition among spiritual leaders performing *ruqiya*, Rustam has earned his position since he works in the mosque where he provides spiritual services to migrants and local Muslims. He maintains his family traditions but at the same time follows a certain religious framework accepted by all his followers. In a way, Rustam creates his own space that connects two worlds: migrants and Muslims from Moscow. The mosque in which he works is a central space of his performance, which is not common among migrant-healers who, in most cases, operate in private informal spaces, limiting their activity to migrant circles.

### **CASE II**

The 58-year-old Nurlybek is a healer from Kazakhstan. He has a cozy office in central Moscow, where apart from a regular therapeutic bed he keeps a Kazakh instrument called *kobuz*, whose creation is attributed to the mythical shaman Korkut (see, e.g., Basilov and Karmysheva 1997), a historical saber used in exorcisms, candles, a bell from a Russian Orthodox church, and a tin gong helping in treatment. On the walls there is a photograph of a tiger and a lion (the symbols of power), a mandala, a copy of Nicholas Roerich's<sup>10</sup> painting, a mountain landscape, and a photograph with Sai Baba, who is one of Nurlybek's spiritual masters. Outside of his office, the man grows tomatoes in a small glasshouse. He provides services to Kazakhs, Russians, and people of many other nationalities.

Nurlybek holds a postdoctoral degree and works as an academic at one of the universities in Kazakhstan. In addition, he is a healer, as he had received the gift of healing from his ancestors at the age of 33. In his youth he partied hard, played the guitar, sang, and often worked as a *tamada* (toastmaster, emcee) at weddings. One day he returned home drunk. He wanted to go to sleep, but he froze half paralyzed as he realized that he was surrounded by spirits, who kept saying: "You will not drink anymore, you will be healing." Nurlybek was drunk and terrified and agreed to everything. The spirits then disappeared, and he fell asleep. In the morning he woke up and went to another wedding. He returned home drunk late at night. When he was trying to fall asleep, the spirits showed up again, but this time they were more determined. Nurlybek was paralyzed; he could not move and felt that something was strangling him and sucking out his life. The surrounding spirits spoke about him, discussing what to do and threatening that if he did not agree to heal people, they would take his life away. Nurlybek started begging them to spare his life and promised that he would accept his gift, but the spirits were offended since he had initially ignored them. Negotiations lasted for about five hours, during which he thought he would die. In the end, he accepted his fate. Nurlybek mostly treats joint diseases, migraines, spinal and infertility problems, conducts exorcisms, removes spells, and clears people from evil energy. Apart from healing people, Nurlybek also clears offices and homes from bad influences. He also has clients he treats over Skype.

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Roerich, also known as Nikolai Rerikh, (1874–1947) was a Russian painter, writer, archaeologist, spiritual figure, and philosopher famous among the so-called spiritual seekers from Russia and the West.

Nurlybek has been working in Moscow for the past 16 years. His former wife—a Kazakh—is a well-known healer and clairvoyant who has many clients in Russia and Kazakhstan. Nurlybek travels between Moscow and Kazakhstan, where he teaches at the university. He has also visited India, Tibet, Turkey, Israel, and other countries. He is influenced by the teachings of a famous Indian mystic Sai Baba, who has been his great inspiration. Contact with him helped Nurlybek to develop his spiritual path. At the same time, Nurlybek is a devoted Muslim who fasts during Ramadan, does not drink alcohol, and for whom Prophet Muhammad is a great moral and spiritual authority.

Nurlybek draws on various traditions depending on the needs and the culture of his clients. In the healing process, he cleans chakras, lights Russian Orthodox candles blessed in the church, chants Buddhist mantras, recites suras from the Koran, and so on. He sometimes plays *kobuz*, mainly for his clients from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for whom the instrument is part of their spiritual tradition. Nurlybek says that spirits advise him what to do. “The more you pray, the more protection you receive,” he says.<sup>11</sup> Nurlybek has to treat others, otherwise he would fall ill. According to him, there is too much evil and jealousy in Moscow, many people throw spells and get involved in black magic, and that is why he is constantly overworked trying to reverse the evil effects.<sup>12</sup>

Penkala-Gawęcka (2006:250–256), who conducted research on complimentary medicine in Kazakhstan, writes that contemporary healers use various techniques thereby enriching their traditions and adjusting them to their clients’ needs. Moreover, what is considered “traditional healing methods” is complemented by the elements of Chinese, Tibetan, and conventional European medicine. Healers introduce various innovations, as they have greater access to new sources of knowledge, but also because the competition on the spiritual market is fierce. Penkala-Gawęcka describes the example of a female shaman, who, just like Nurlybek, visited the Indian guru Sai Baba and, just like Nurlybek, maintained that the famous mystic gave her his blessing. Nurlybek believes that in the process of treatment religions and spiritual systems have a transcendental dimension and are interconnected. In this sense, both he and the healers described by Penkala-Gawęcka are part of the globalization process, as they absorb various influences. Nevertheless, Kazakh healers are still strongly rooted in their own tradition, treating it as a legacy that remains the entry point for their work.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Nurlybek, conducted by one of the authors, Moscow, July 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Information about Nurlybek and his work comes from conversations and interviews with him, as well as from one of the authors’ observation of exorcisms he conducted, this author’s own treatment, and the process of removing a charm from her friend from the Caucasus (which was conducted three times via Skype), all taking place in 2018.



**Figure 1.** Nurlybek's studio in Moscow (photo by Anna Cieřlewska)

Nurlybek is in constant motion between Kazakhstan and Russia, living in two social realities. He performs healing practices in different geographies and spaces. It requires great flexibility and ability to adapt in terms of social interactions and in approach to rituals. Nurlybek's individual healing model allows him to negotiate between his ritual expression and the spiritual views of his clients.

Although Nurlybek is embedded in religious practices of the Kazakh tradition, entering other spheres allows him to interact with the multiethnic city beyond the circle of Central Asian migrants or people closely linked to Islam. As a foreigner, he developed his own model of interaction with the locals, adapting his practices to the specific needs of different clients, including Christians. Still, Nurlybek emphasizes that he is a Muslim and that he lives in harmony with the tradition of his ancestors. In addition to his office, he uses Skype, as he believes that his healing methods extend beyond borders. In this sense, translocality takes on one more dimension, connecting healer and patient through new technologies.

Both Nurlybek and Rustam have introduced their own understandings of spirituality to the Moscow market, adapting it to the local conditions. The way both men transform their practices is a product of their approach to their own traditions and the social circles in which they operate. Howard Aldrich and Roger Waldinger (1990) acknowledge that representatives of ethnic groups tend to use the resources made available by their environments, looking for a niche in which they can function in a

competitive labor market of the host country. Consequently, their ethnicity determines the nature of services they provide to others. Even if Rustam and Nurlybek differ in their approaches to healing practices, both of them refer to the spiritual traditions of their ethnic groups, transferring and changing them according to the needs of the local spiritual market. At the same time, they both go beyond the closed circle of their ethnic groups, unlike the Ismaili religious leaders described in the next section of the article, whose services are most often provided exclusively to the narrow group of Ismaili migrants.

### ISMAILI KHALIFAS AND MEDICAL SUPPORT

Ismaili migrants from the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region constitute in Moscow, just like in Tajikistan, a separate and hermetic group.<sup>13</sup> As a religious community (*jamat*), Ismailis, unlike Sunni migrants from the Central Asian republics, rarely establish relationships with Muslims from other branches. This is because the religious views and customs of Ismailis are often criticized by orthodox Sunni Muslims. Moreover, Ismailis do not attend mosques that act as places of meetings and interaction for Muslims of different origins. Likewise, in most cases Ismailis do not use the services of non-Ismaili healers, mullahs, or other religious practitioners. Moreover, the activities of the Ismaili community are financed by his highness Aga Khan IV and private contributions and therefore outsiders have no access to Ismaili events. With regard to healing, Ismaili religious leaders—*khalifas*—are convinced that their healing practices help regardless of the client's confession or origin. With some exceptions, they provide services only to their fellow believers.

The use of talismans and *teshtobs* is common among Ismailis of Gorno-Badakhshan, as it is in many cultures of the Muslim world, from South and Southeast Asia through Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus to Arab states and North Africa. They are meant to protect the body and soul from various diseases, misfortunes, bad looks, and evil spirits, or to help in reaching happiness, love, peace, and the like (Gruber 2016; Nieber 2017; Penkala-Gawęcka 2006). Ismailis from Gorno-Badakhshan use talismans mainly for support and protection and *teshtobs* for healing purposes. The latter are meant to treat both physical symptoms, such as headaches or toothaches, and psychological problems such as anxiety, nervousness, or depression. In Gorno-

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<sup>13</sup> The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region is an autonomous province in the Republic of Tajikistan. It is the biggest, the least inhabited (the population of Gorno-Badakhshan is estimated to be around 224,000 people), and the least developed province of the country. The ethnically dominant group in the region is the Pamiris. Unlike the Sunni population prevailing in the rest of Tajikistan's provinces, Pamiris are Ismaili Shia Muslims from the Nizari branch. The spiritual leader of all Nizari Ismailis around the world is Aga Khan IV who is considered the Imam of Time (*Imam-i Zaman*). There is no official data on the number of Ismaili migrants from Gorno-Badakhshan in Moscow, since the statistics related to migration conducted by Russian and Tajik statistical offices do not distinguish between different provinces of the Republic of Tajikistan. According to data obtained from an employee of Nur, the only Ismaili regional-social organization in Moscow, the total number of Ismaili migrants from Gorno-Badakhshan is estimated at around 18,000 people in Moscow and around 40,000 in the entire Russian Federation.

Badakhshan talismans and *teshtobs* are prepared by local spiritual leaders—the *khalifas* or mullahs.<sup>14</sup> The content of talismans and *teshtobs* consists of Koran's verses and/or wishes or spells. It is advised to cover the talisman with a piece of material and carry it close to the body, on the neck or arm, sewn into the clothes, or placed at home, as physical closeness with the user activates its powers. *Teshtob* is a Tajik name for a specific form of a talisman which is a piece of paper with Koran's verses or other words with spiritual meaning dissolved in liquid (so-called drinking Koran). The power of the Koran's words is transmitted by drinking the liquid (Andreev 1953:47–49; Gruber 2016:33). They are written on lengthwise-cut pieces of paper and divided into several smaller pieces. The person in need should take one single piece of paper on the specific day and at the time designated by the *khalifa*. Before drinking the *teshtob*, the person should put it into a bowl with a small amount of water, wait until the ink dissolves, and then drink it. The remains should be burned or thrown away in a clean place.<sup>15</sup> Writing talismans and *teshtobs* requires literacy in Arabic. As some *khalifas* claim, there can be no mistake in the writing as it would lower or destroy their power. Over time, the techniques of making talismans and *teshtobs* have changed. Traditionally, *khalifas* used to write the content of a talisman or *teshtob* on birch bark (Andreev 1953:48) with ink made of the soot from the ceilings of Pamiri houses. Currently in Moscow, the birch bark has been replaced by lengthwise-cut pieces of smooth paper (several centimeters wide and a few dozen centimeters long). Some *khalifas* in Moscow still import the ink from Gorno-Badakhshan; others have replaced it with pens.

Among Ismailis from Gorno-Badakhshan, *khalifas* are considered to be the representatives of the Imam of Time. Their duties include conducting mass prayers, reading out the Imam's speeches (Arabic: *farman*) to the believers, marrying and divorcing people, heading the ceremonies of births and funerals, and explaining and interpreting the meaning of devotional music—*maddah* (Koen 2003:107). Benjamin David Koen (2003:84) points out that *khalifas* in Gorno-Badakhshan are considered healers since they engage in treatment with written prayer with the help of talismans (called in Tajik *tamar* or *tumar*) and *teshtobs*; they rarely perform exorcisms and adjuration.

As part of the waves of migration from Gorno-Badakhshan, some *khalifas* came to Moscow. Eight of them hold official positions and they are commonly known as "official *khalifas*," which means that they are associated with the official Ismaili structure in Moscow, whose headquarters is located at the Nur organization.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> In Ismailism of Gorno-Badakhshan *khalifas* and mullahs have similar roles but the former have a higher level of knowledge of the Koran and theology. In this article we refer only to *khalifas* since this is what all the spiritual leaders whom we interviewed in Moscow called themselves.

<sup>15</sup> For a general overview of the procedure of using *teshtobs* see Andreev (1953:47–49, 58–60).

<sup>16</sup> The Nur organization was founded in 2002 in Moscow by migrants from Gorno-Badakhshan and is nowadays strongly associated with its religious activity. It is the headquarter of Moscow ITREB (Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board), which functions under the supervision of the Aga Khan Development Network and focuses, among other things, on the religious education of children and youth, providing teacher trainings in religious ethics and training the *khalifas*.

other *khalifas* either completely abandoned their practices or work unofficially. They, in turn, are commonly referred to as “unofficial *khalifas*.”<sup>17</sup> The formalization of the function of the *khalifa* has resulted in the division of their duties between official and unofficial ones. Official *khalifas*’ duties include reading out the imam’s speeches to the members of their communities, as well as performing marriages and funerals. Treatment with talismans and *teshtobs* is no longer part of their responsibilities. However, official *khalifas* who learned the art of preparing talismans and *teshtobs* from their masters<sup>18</sup> and used to do that before they joined the official Ismaili structure in Moscow continue these services. These kinds of practices are not banned because, as *khalifas* argue, they are part of the tradition. Nevertheless, just like the practice of visiting holy sites, the cult of stones, trees, and water springs, popular in Gorno-Badakhshan, writing talismans and *teshtobs* is seen as an unnecessary interference in the relationship between the believers and God.<sup>19</sup> As such, it is treated with reservations by the representatives of the official Ismaili structure, including the Nur organization in Moscow.

The increasing rationalization of the worldview, health awareness, and changing patterns of health practices contribute to the decrease in the belief in healing or supportive powers of talismans and *teshtobs* and their popularity among Ismailis from Gorno-Badakhshan, including Ismailis living in Moscow. Many of our interlocutors stressed that in case of illness, one needs to go to the doctor and take medicine instead of asking the *khalifa* for a talisman or *teshtob*. Sometimes *khalifas* who try to treat people with serious conditions using traditional curative agents are harshly criticized or referred to as charlatans or businessmen.

Despite this, some Ismaili migrants in Moscow still use talismans and *teshtobs*, although they are treated more as a form of psychological support than as a curative agent. Our interlocutors who believe in the power of talismans and *teshtobs* admitted that they go to the *khalifa* in search of peace and to calm down the nerves. As one of them said: “When I am restless or nervous, I prepare the *teshtob* that I received from my *khalifa*, drink it, and it helps me to calm down.” Likewise, the majority of *khalifas* whom we have interviewed stressed that their talismans and *teshtobs* do not help with serious, chronic diseases and in such cases they refer the clients to a doctor.

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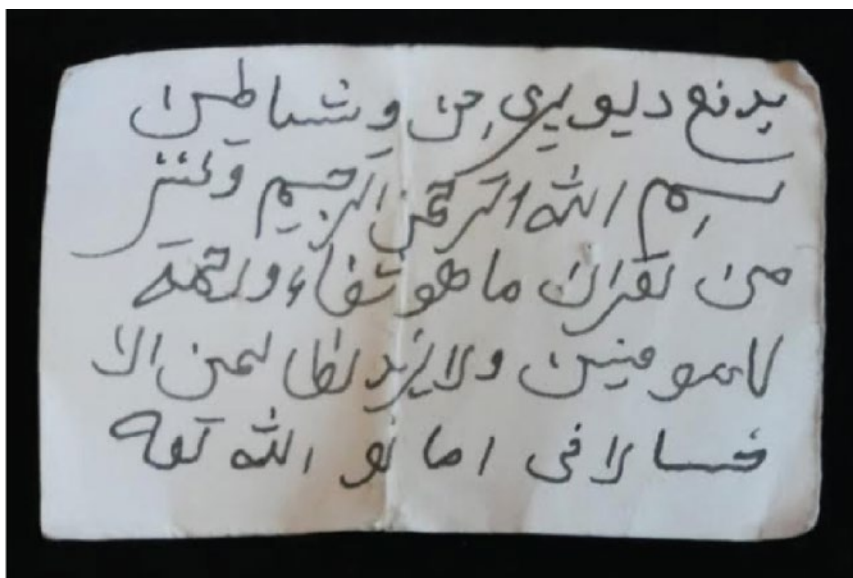
<sup>17</sup> The adjectives “unofficial” and “uncertified” are used by people associated with the official Ismaili structure in Moscow in reference to *khalifas* from outside of the structure. Sometimes, the unofficial *khalifas* are referred to as mullahs.

<sup>18</sup> Traditionally the function of the *khalifa* is passed from father to son or between other men in the family. The student receives a transfer of knowledge from a master, which legitimizes him to serve as a *khalifa*. The student inherits books from the master, which he uses in writing talismans and *teshtobs* (Koen 2003:158). Nowadays any man can become a *khalifa* after completing the appropriate courses and passing exams carried out by ITREB. Regardless of whether the *khalifa* is officially recognized by ITREB or not, he enjoys more respect and trust if he comes from a respected Pamiri family of religious leaders.

<sup>19</sup> According to the representatives of the Ismaili structure in Moscow whom we interviewed in 2017–2018, at a current stage of development only the imam can mediate between a man and God.



They also do not consider themselves as healers, but rather as psychologists. According to them, the most important stage of the diagnosis and treatment itself is the conversation with the person in need, getting to know their life situation and the issues they face. Therefore, talismans and *teshtobs* are meant to provide spiritual support and direct the patient's attention to the desired physical or psychological transformation (Koen 2003:157).



**Figure 2.** A *teshtob* (in Gorno-Badakhshan pronounced as *tekhtov*) that one of our informants brought with her to Moscow to protect her from evil powers. It reads: "For exorcising demons, peri, jinn, satans. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, and 'We send down in the Koran healing and mercy for the believers, but it increases the wrongdoers only in loss.'<sup>20</sup> Trust in God's protection."<sup>21</sup>

### CASE III

Khalifa Usaynsho comes from one of the oldest and most respected families of Gorno-Badakhshan, the descendants of Prophet Muhammad. The family is famous for many noble religious leaders. Usaynsho is over 50 years old. He began to study to be a *khalifa* at the age of 10. His first teacher was his grandfather from whom he received the first transfer of knowledge at the age of 14. After that Usaynsho began preparing talismans and *teshtobs* for people in need. From the very beginning he was good at it, and, as he asserts, he owes it to his genes. According to Usaynsho, a *khalifa* should definitely have a gift and be a decent, pure person. He is currently teaching one of his teenage sons, and he claims that the young man also has a gift. Usaynsho has been living in Moscow for the past 20 years. Several years ago he closed his small

<sup>20</sup> Sura Al Isra', Koran (17:82), translated by Talal Itani.

<sup>21</sup> Translated by Ignacy Nasalski and Mirosław Michalak.



business (he was selling food products) and his only work at the moment is helping others. He is a very well-known and respected *khalifa*, but he is not affiliated with the Nur organization. There is a rumor among the Ismailis living in Moscow that Usaynsho's talismans and *teshtobs* have a great power and that he is also able to conduct exorcisms and cast spells that have a negative effect on people's lives. Usaynsho claims that he has no influence on the way his talismans and *teshtobs* work, because he is only a medium and the power of each talisman or *teshtob* comes from the words written as its message.<sup>22</sup>

Usaynsho lives in an apartment building in one of Moscow's southern areas. He runs his practice from his apartment. The hall serves as a waiting room for clients. He agreed to meet us at the request of our other informant, Rangina. Otherwise, he would not have agreed for an appointment. His practice is so successful that he only accepts acquaintances or people recommended by them. When we came, his son welcomed us and escorted us to his father's office. It is a small room with a couch, an armchair, and a low table. There are pictures of Kaaba, a holy Muslim site in Mecca, on the walls; a framed image of Jesus with a pigeon and a photograph of a little boy with a boa snake around his body are placed on the plaque next to his desk. Next to the photographs there is a small pile of books. The TV in the corner was on. Usaynsho was sitting in his armchair behind the table. He was wearing loose black trousers, a sweatshirt, and an oriental scarf, keffiyeh, nonchalantly tied around his neck. According to Usaynsho, among his clients are not only Ismailis from Gorno-Badakhshan but also representatives of other nationalities and religions. He says that the words written in the books he uses in his practice of preparing talismans and *teshtobs* do not refer to any specific religion. As he told us: "It does not matter what you believe in. It does not matter if you believe at all. What is written in the books is universal and works for everyone."<sup>23</sup>

Rangina is an attractive, well-groomed woman around 50. She comes from a well-off Pamiri family from one of the remote villages of Gorno-Badakhshan. She has been living in Moscow for almost 20 years. She has a good job with a decent salary. She knows the Russian language very well, and her closest friends are of various nationalities: Russians, Tajiks, including migrants from Gorno-Badakhshan, and representatives of various ethnic groups from the Caucasus. She is sociable, open, and self-confident. She has been married twice, but neither of the marriages lasted longer than several years.

Recently Rangina experienced a serious life crisis caused by an unhappy relationship with a married man. When the relationship began to deteriorate, Rangina fell into despair. She obsessively thought about the man, she did not eat or drink, and she was

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<sup>22</sup> Moscow Ismailis believe Usaynsho to be a so-called left-hand *khalifa* (Tajik: *chap navis*, person writing with the left hand). "Left-hand" *khalifas* can write protecting and/or healing talismans and *teshtobs* using their right hand and cast negative spells with their left hand. Such detrimental spells are written on a piece of paper or bone and have to be hidden in the house of a person against whom the spell is directed. This person will suffer as long as the cursed item is not removed from their home (Bliss 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Usaynsho, conducted by the authors, Moscow, June 2018.

waiting for a phone call from him to no avail. Her state was so severe that her family decided to intervene. Rangina's sister went to Khalifa Usaynsho whose services she was regularly using for herself and on behalf of other family members. Khalifa Usaynsho, having learned about the issue, prepared a set of three *teshtobs* for Rangina. Her presence was not even necessary. Through her sister, Usaynsho ordered Rangina to take one *teshtob* a day, for three days in a row. After drinking the water with dissolved message of the *teshtob*, she should burn the remaining piece of paper and throw the ashes away in a clean place, preferably into flowing water so that it goes away with the current. Rangina wondered where she could find a river with clean water in Moscow. Usaynsho advised her that if she does not find an appropriate river, she should bury the *teshtob's* remains among trees. Rangina drank three *teshtobs* according to the *khalifa's* advice, burned the rests, and buried the ashes under a tree in a park next to her block.

I met Rangina several weeks after her healing provided by Usaynsho. She claimed that she was feeling much better and began to forget the man. However, she believes that she does not owe her better mood to the *teshtobs* alone and her recovery requires a lot of concentration and self-discipline.

The change in the understanding of the function of talismans and *teshtobs* from healing to psychological support may be perceived as a way to maintain traditional practices in the face of rationalization and increasing knowledge about health and medical treatments. While *khalifas* and their practices that travel across geographical borders may have lost their medical role, they have become increasingly used as supplementary treatment and psychological support. The roles of talismans and *teshtobs* are reinterpreted so that they become consistent with the current worldview and fit in the new sociocultural context (Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018:31). Moreover, while the awareness of mental problems among migrants from Gorno-Badakhshan is low and the profession of psychologist is often misunderstood and ridiculed, migration poses many challenges that migrants face on a daily basis: disintegration of their social networks, loneliness, low social status, and hard physical work. In such conditions the need for psychological support seems urgent, and this can be seen as one of the reasons for the popularity of talismans and *teshtobs* among Ismaili migrants in Moscow.

Similarly to Rustam and Nurlybek presented in the first two cases, Usaynsho's practices are entrenched in the Gorno-Badakhshan tradition while being performed in Moscow. Usaynsho employs ideas inherited from his ancestors and uses books and materials for creating talismans and *teshtobs* brought from his homeland. As he argues, words written in his books have power regardless of place and time. Thus, they can be used in various sociocultural contexts. Sometimes, however, some practices need to be transformed and adapted into the context in which they are currently placed. Hence, if, for example, depositing *teshtobs'* leftovers in clean flowing water may seem impossible because of contamination in a big city, one may come up with a substitute practice, like burying them in a park.

The pace of life in the Moscow metropolis determines the creation of new spaces in which traditional healing or supportive services are provided. It is very rare for Ismaili *khalifas* living in Moscow to have their own offices where they would see

clients or to visit their clients at home, as is the case in Gorno-Badakhshan. Except Usaynsho, all *khalifas* we met are labor migrants and perform their religious functions outside of business hours. This fact, as well as the fast pace of life and huge distances in Moscow, makes *khalifas* unable to devote enough time to performing religious services. For this reason, several of the *khalifas* we interviewed considered abandoning this occupation completely. Others find new spaces that enable their contacts with clients. Often, these spaces are created ad hoc or on the move, for example, in the stands of a sport's tournament, in a fast food restaurant, or randomly selected spaces during occasional events or community gatherings. Sometimes *khalifas* do not have time to meet with their clients, so they ask them to describe the person's situation and needs by phone or text message, and only then they arrange to hand over the talisman or *teshtob* at, for example, a metro station. Therefore, Ismaili *khalifas* function in a so-called invisible layer of the city. The only visible place of the followers of Ismailism in the public sphere of the city is the headquarter of the Nur organization, which does not recognize traditional healing or mental support practices and thus contributes to placing these practices in the invisible layer of Moscow's geographies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Transferring spiritual services into different places always carries a risk that they would not be accepted by the receiving societies. Consequently, for spiritual leaders from Central Asia shaping their spaces under the new circumstances is a constant process of negotiations with local actors and their worldviews. Spiritual leaders adjust the content of their services to the demands of the local clients, at the same time altering their form (Van Dijk 2010:101–105).

In all examples presented in this article spiritual practitioners pursue their actions in connection with the traditional practices and religion of their region of origin. At the same time, however, they respond to the requirements and limits of the conditions in Moscow. They provide individual and communal healing rituals as a means to support people in their problems related to health, love, work, and so on. Nevertheless, they adopt a flexible approach to certain issues, reformulating their original meanings and forms to be able to serve migrants, as well as other Muslims and even non-Muslims.

Based on three examples of spiritual leaders, this article argues that there is no single pattern of placemaking when it comes to transferring spiritual services from Central Asia to Moscow. The pattern depends on the migrant healer's social position, their interactions with people, and on the model of spirituality adopted by them. The activity of Nurlybek is rooted in the Kazakh spiritual tradition and Islam, but he also engages in practices that constitute a fusion of various religious systems. It allows him to create a new quality for a wider circle of his Moscow clientele. Rustam, on the contrary, does not go beyond the Muslim circle. Among his clients are migrants from Central Asia as well as local Muslims, and over the long period of living in Moscow he has adjusted his religious view to the local conditions in order to function in both

circles. Although Nurlybek and Rustam provide similar services such as exorcisms, they differ in the form of religious expression, interactions with the clients, and their approach to spirituality. The way in which Ismaili *khalifas* operate differs as, with few exceptions, they function within the circle of Ismaili migrants. Nevertheless, as the activity of Khalifa Usaynsho demonstrates, their pattern of work has also been transformed since the conditions in Moscow require reconfiguring the space and relationships with people.

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## ДУХОВНАЯ ИНДУСТРИЯ МИГРАНТОВ ИЗ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ В МОСКВЕ

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В статье анализируется появление исламских религиозных услуг, предоставляемых мигрантами из Центральной Азии, и способы их адаптации мигрантами к условиям Москвы. Особое внимание авторы уделяют теме создания мест для религиозной практики, которые рассматриваются как новое пространство, используемое мигрантами. Эти места создают условия для делокализации их религиозной жизни и включают в себя символы, характерные для различных духовных пространств. Многие религиозные практики, распространяемые духовными лидерами из Центральной Азии, не только реализуются среди мигрантов, но и выходят на местный рынок духовных услуг, влияя на религиозную индустрию в Москве.

В статье рассматривается, как продаются эти услуги, кем являются клиенты религиозных лидеров из Центральной Азии, как формируется пространство, в котором происходят ритуалы и практики исцеления. Такие места мы видим и как физическое пространство, и как локус, в котором создаются новые практики, сочетающие элементы духовных практик различных форм. Некоторые формы традиционных практик смешиваются с новыми и ранее неизвестными элементами. Местные традиции впитывают глобальные, образуя новые практики. Авторы делают вывод о том, что, переосмысляя местный контекст, мигранты и их духовные лидеры реконструируют свои традиции и обычаи для того, чтобы иметь возможность предоставлять религиозные услуги в Москве не только клиентам-мигрантам, но и другим мусульманам, а также представителям иных верований.

**Ключевые слова:** духовная индустрия; миграция; ислам; *рукия*; талисманы