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Popular Islam in Chinese Central Asia (Mid 19th-late 20th century)

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After the introduction of Islam in the region called Chinese Central Asia or Sinkiang, it was expected that the neo-converts, the Muslims, would hitherto follow the Islamic laws in letter and spirit. Contrary to these expectations, they juxtapose perpetuated and practised a host of such pagan or un-Islamic rituals and practices which epitomised what is presently termed as the “Popular Islam” and which characterized a rich-treasure house bequeathed to them by their predecessors in the form of customs and traditions. The present paper intends to:

- i) examine the dominant features of popular Islam in Chinese Central Asia;
- ii) Measure the impact of the extraneous influences on its being;
- iii) Evaluate its compatibility with the puritan Islam;
- iv) Distinguish between the Islamic and the Muslim culture.

Let us begin with the history of Islam and argue that the region was known for several peculiarities¹: one of them was manifest in the faith of

¹ Geographically, this crescent-shaped Region, surrounded by the most famous mountains of Altai, Kunlun, Tangri, Pamirs, etc., was characteristic of dense forests, lonely deserts, fertile oases, impassable rivers and a climate arid, semi-arid and continental in some and warm in others parts. Ethnically, it was inhabited by diverse Turkic and non-Turkic groups, mostly the *Uighurs*, followed by Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Chinese, Indians, etc. Politically, it had changing fortunes and formed a part of Arab, Uighur, Karakhanid, Seljug, Mongol, Khokandi and Chinese empires. Economically, the region was situated along the Grand Silk Route connecting China and Europe and was

its Turkic ethnic groups predominantly the Uighurs, in diverse religions,² viz., Shamanism³, Manichaeism,⁴ Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Although Islam entered the region through the Arabs in the 8th century, it did not pierce into the soil for the Arab rule was itself short lived (713-51)⁵. It was under the Karakhanids⁶ (10th-11th century) that the new faith consolidated and percolated down to the masses even in those cities and towns which earlier formed the Buddhist centres of *par excellence*⁷. Despite the enormous contribution of the Karakhanids to its

endowed with precious under and above ground resources.: Robert Shaw, *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, 1867-69, New Delhi, reprint, 1996, pp.21-37; Bayard Taylor, *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, 1876-81, New York, 1892, pp. 7-8; C.P.Skrine, *Chinese Central Asia*, 1926, London, pp.168-69; P. S. Nazarov, *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, London, 1935, pp.60-64; <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/ET/history/wh-oareuyghur>; <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/economy/economy/html>.

² Mirza Haider Dughlat, *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*, Eng.tr. from Persian, E.Denison Ross & N.Elias, *A History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, Patna, 1973, pp.72-99.

³ Gunnar Jarring, "A Note on Shamanism in Eastern Turkestan", *Ethnos*, 1961, Nos. 1-2, pp.1-4.

⁴ For a detailed account of Manichaeism, see Radha Banerjee, "Manichaen Input to Chinese Culture and Art": <http://www.ibiblio.org/radha/repub014a.htm>.

⁵ Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, Vol. I, ed. & tran., Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, New Delhi, reprint.1998, pp. 207 & note 219& note; *Chinese Central Asia*, p.182; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 64-65; *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. IV., ed. R.N.Frye, Cambridge, reprint, 1999, pp. 1-136; *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, University of Kashmir, Vol. IV, 1993, PP. 41-49.

⁶ The Karakhanids again constituted the major Turkic ethnic group who carved out an empire in the Region while combining together several Turkish tribes under themselves.: For details see *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. IV, ed, M.S.Asimov and C.E.Bosworth, *UNESCO*, 1998.

⁷ On accepting Islam in 934 A.D., the Karakhanid ruler Satuk Bughra Abd-Al Karakaghan, built a large number of mosques, somewhere newly and elsewhere on the debris of the then existing Buddhist structures. In 1014 A.D., Qadir Khan, yet another Karakhanid ruler of Kashghar and the "King of the East" Islamised Khotan, the major Buddhist centre and struck coins at Yarkand and Kashghar in the name of the *Khalifa* integrating thereby his subjects into one Muslim whole.: *A History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, PP.72-99; *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. IV, pp. 101, 120-23, 131-32; W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, Indian edition, New Delhi, 1992, p. 255, 281; <file:///C:/My Documents/Brief History of the Uyghurs.htm>.

growth⁸, several potent threats remained⁹ from within and outside the region. Later, however, these were relentlessly reckoned with by the Mongols (13th century) who made Islam the religion of the majority and gave it the official status. Consequently, the former faith, the Buddhism, transformed into a mere religio-cultural identity with a few followers¹⁰.

⁸ The Karakhanids made Islam the state religion, built scores of mosques, dispensed justice in accordance with *Shari'ah* (Canonical law) and forbade the use of wine and other intoxicants. :*Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, pp. 303-4; <file:///C:/My Documents/Brief History of the Uyghurs.htm>

⁹ The neo-converts being fluidic, intermittently changed their religion suiting to their own convenience than conviction. Even those who followed Islam did not practise it with that sincerity for the custom of marrying father's widow was still in vogue among the 13th century Uighurs. Then the Region was not devoid of the Nestorian Christians and the Buddhists. The latter included the Uighurs who were in the service of the Mongols and who while praying, "turned their faces to the north, knelt down and bowed their foreheads [before]...figures of dead persons in the temples" and used bells in divine service. Besides, Chingez Khan (1216-27), the great Mongol and a firm Shamanist, was in himself a potent threat to Islam.: *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, Vol.I, pp. 187,207 & note; Ellak K.Maillart, *Forbidden Journey from Peking to Kashmir*, London, 1935, pp.295-96; *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, pp.387-91.

¹⁰ H.W.Bellow, *Kashmir and Kashghar: A Narrative of the journey of the Embassy to Kashghar in 1873-74*, Delhi, reprint, 1989, pp.281-82, 303-4, 382-83; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, New Delhi, reprint, 1996, pp.163-64; P.M.Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oasis of Central Asia*, Macmillan, London, 1920, pp. 282-84; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 63-64, 67-71.

Islam marked a real growth under Chingez's son Ogedey (1227-69) whom the Muslim chroniclers like Juwayni hold in great respect for the services rendered and protection offered to Islam in preference to other religions. Several anecdotes testify to his pro-Islamic bent of mind.: Juvaini, *Tarikh-i Jahan Gusha*, Vol.I, ed, Qazwini, pp. 162-64, 179-81; *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, pp.467&n.38. However, under his brother Chaghatay, the Muslims had certain inhibitions in practicing Islam and its allied rituals.: *Tarikh-i Jahan Gusha*, Vol.I, p. 227; *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, pp.467-68&n.41,42; *Encyclopedia of China*, Dorothy Perkins, London, 1999, pp.254-55. Like Ogedey, his nephew Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler of China, also allowed Islam to flourish quite freely in the region. Which is perhaps why Marco Polo noticed in 1271-75 A.D a large population professing *Islam* in Khotan alongside a few Christians worshipping in the churches.: *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, Vol.I, pp. 180-82, 207 n.2 & 220 n.3; Supplement, pp.43-48; *A History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, PP.6-10, 96, 113 ;B *Travels in Cashmere Little Thibet and Central Asia*, 1876-81, pp.1-5, *Forbidden Journey from Peking to Kashmir*, pp. 295-96; *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol.V, pp.203-83, 538-50. Also see, Le Strange, *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1966.

After the dismemberment of the Mongol empire, the whole region fragmented into a cluster of tiny and war-weary kingdoms, an abominable phenomenon that facilitated the Chinese to annex it with their vast empire in 1759.¹¹ Nonetheless, they allowed the native Muslims to live by their own faith of Islam¹². In 1864, however, a Khokandi adventurer, Yaqub Beg alias Ataliq Ghazi, seized the power from the Chinese and relocated a Muslim state in the region which nurtured the new faith to an appreciable extent¹³. But, the said State did

¹¹ After the Mongols, whole Eastern Turkistan was diversified into a number of small kingdoms, each ruled by a Muslim chief. However, in 1759, all were subjugated by the Chinese Emperor Kienlung. W.H. Wathen, "Memoir on the U'sbek State of Kokan properly called Khokend (the ancient Ferghana) in Central Asia", *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Calcutta, No.32-August 1834, p.373.

¹² Islam remained a popular faith and the Muslims were free to frequent the mosques and attend the Friday congregations as is evident from the 17th-18th century records. C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers, 1603-1721*, Hague, 1924, p.8; *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp.382-83, 302-4; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.163-64, 287; *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia*, pp.282-84; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp.63-64, 67-71. The freedom of religion was so marked that in 1826 vide an agreement, all religious affairs concerning the Muslims were conducted by a deputy of the Khan of Khokand in Kashghar. Even by 1834, the Chinese governor, Yunis Wang of Kashghar, was a Muslim by faith. W.H. Wathen, "Memoir on the U'sbek State...", *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, No.32-August, 1834, p. 375. In other matters, too, the Chinese permitted the Muslims to adhere to their own Islamic calendar and dress in traditional fashion. Administration was allowed to be manned by the local Muslim chiefs and justice/punishment was delivered in conformity with the canonical law. To quote Ahmad Shah, "the law is very rigidly administered, even to the nobles, so much so, that if a prince were to kill a poor man, the murderer would on no account be exempted from the punishment of the death." The Muslim clergy and the religious institutions were permitted to be the beneficiary of the rent-free lands as per practice. "Route from Kashmir, via Ladakh, to Yarkand, by Ahmad Shah Naqashbandi", tr. J. Dowson, *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. XII, 1850, p. 383; *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. X, 1800-1911, ed. John K. Fairbank, New York, 1978, pp. 74, 76-77.

¹³ There with that, every sort of patronage was extended to the growth and practising of Islam in the region. In fact, the foundations of the state were laid on the principle of shariah. *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, Vol.I, pp. 180-82, 207 n.2 & 220 n.3; Supplement, pp.43-48; *A History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, pp.6-10, 96, 113; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Tibet and Central Asia*, pp.1-5; *Forbidden Journey from Peking to Kashmir*, pp.

not last long (1864-78) whereupon the region was re-occupied by the Chinese in 1878. They continue to hold the same till date as an important Chinese province.¹⁴

Notwithstanding their varying political fortunes, the natives acted upon the Islamic tenets with utmost reverence and diligence¹⁵; held faith in monotheism¹⁶; offered five time prayers¹⁷; observed the fast¹⁸; performed pilgrimage to Mecca¹⁹ and gave alms and bounties²⁰. They esteemed the

295-96; *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. V, pp.203-83, 538-50. Also see, Le Strange, *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1966.

¹⁴ *Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 302-03; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.402, 418; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.248-49; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p.25; *Forbidden Journey from Kashmir to Peking*, pp.224-25.

¹⁵ *Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 302-03; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.402, 418; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.248-49; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p.25; *Forbidden Journey from Kashmir to Peking*, pp.224-25.

¹⁶ On receiving or giving a present, entering or leaving a house or starting or finishing meals, the name of *Allah*, i.e. *Allah-u-Akbar*, was regularly recited: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.143, 368-69; *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp.115-16; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, pp.185, 198-99, 239-40.

¹⁷ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 465-66.

¹⁸ For instance, in the month of *Ramazan*, the month of fasting, the drums were beaten to awaken the faithful from sleep before the dawn prayers and fast was broken towards evening by feasting friends and relatives or sending them dinner packs at their residences.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.213-14; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.248-49; *Moved on From Kashmir to Kashghar*, p 25.

¹⁹ For this purpose, they traveled long distances on foot, horses and train.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.143, 368-69; *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp.92-93, 115-19; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, pp.185, 198-99, 239-40; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, pp.239-40; *Forbidden Journey from Kashmir to Peking*, pp. 224-25.

²⁰ Such a distribution always made a pleasant, noisy, boisterous and active scene. Beggars stood in long queues for their turn in the distribution of money, bread and rice in return of good wishes. Interestingly, "one beggar on horseback, begged not for himself but for his horse." The *moolas*, in loose sober coloured robes ungirt at the waist and huge white turbans, could be seen amid the huge crowd. In Kashghar, priests and mendicants put on wide-awake hats which looked like ordinary sugar loaves in size and shape.: *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp. 92-93, 118-19; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 368-69; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, pp.239-40.

clergy²¹, sought their blessings²² and received religio-ethical and moral education at their feet²³. As regards food, they nourished clean (*halal*) meat of horse²⁴, cow, sheep, goat and camel in preference to the unclean (*haram*) meat of pig and donkey²⁵. While adhering to the Islamic code of conduct, they looked upon the free mixing of their womenfolk with disdain and contempt²⁶. While women observed the veil (*pardah* or *hijab*)²⁷, men wore turbans as a mark of humility²⁸. In public dealings,

²¹ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p.377; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 195-96; *Forbidden Journey from Peking to Kashmir*, p. 274, 296-98.

²² They sought their blessings on the occasion of the social gatherings related to the death, marriage, burial, Christening a baby or circumcising a boy and above all performing the *nikah* (marriage contract). The services of the clergy were employed in lieu of some fee in cash or kind, a dish of *pullao* and a piece of muslin for the turban.: *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 182-84; *The Pamirs*, Vol.II, pp. 333-34.

²³ Such kind of knowledge was imparted in the traditional Muslim institutions like mosques, *maktabs* (schools) and *madrasas* (colleges) with which were attached free kitchens where two time meals were provided to the pupils, travelers, mendicants and other needy people.: *Kashmir and Kashghar*, p. 322; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p.465; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.194-95, 203-04.

²⁴ Horseflesh was consumed as a delicious food largely by the ruling class. Usually horses were not produced for consumption. But once a horse had broken a leg or got disabled, he was fed up and fattened for consumption in the end.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.396-97; *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp.281-86.

²⁵ *Surat Al-Baqarah* 2, Ayat 168-71.

²⁶ Free mixing was prohibited and the womenfolk were confined to seclusion. To ensure sex purity, public places trading in little girls, boys and grown up slaves, some sold for debt and others for the prize of forays, were done away with. The intermediaries termed *jalab* and *chaucan*, were rounded up.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 319-20; *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp.92-93; *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp.281-86. The guilty, male or female, involved in the acts of fornication, were first publically insulted and then led out through the streets beaten with rods by three men of the *Qazi* and finally executed.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 470-72.

²⁷ Wearing veils termed *chumbal* was usually common among the women of the wealthiest families. The veil was of stiff rectangular shape generally thrown back over the head and on seeing an important personage, be he a local, British, a Chinese official or an *Aqsagal*, it was pulled down hastily and that too for a few minutes.: *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.201-02.

²⁸ The *Qazi* castigated the persons without turban. : *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.465-66

they refrained from weighing with short measures²⁹ and perpetrating acts of adulteration³⁰, robbery³¹ and murder³². To show solidarity with the Muslim fraternity (*ummah*), they revered the *Khalifa* as the “Sacred Monarch” and a religio-spiritual guide³³.

While acting upon these and similar other Islamic requisites, they pursued, perhaps unknowingly, those un-Islamic practices as were related to the idol, saint and ancestral worship. The reverence for these polytheistic entities was so deeply indoctrinated in them that they fashioned their dietary habits after the food habits of the revered saints³⁴. And, accordingly, they held strong faith in their arboricultural powers to animate the dead and inspire the living with a feeling of

²⁹ The mode of punishment was that scales were rolled round his neck and whipped with leather thongs, he was paraded through the streets.: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 400-01.

Scales were made of steel yards, with one long arm for the weight and other short for weighing things. A butcher was punished for falsifying his scales while using the short arm: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.400-01.

³⁰ To preclude adulteration, the *Qazi* marched through the streets while mounting a horse and bearing a long thick whip in hand to punish the guilty on the spot.: *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 73-74.

³¹ The punishment for the theft was almost compatible with the *Qur'anic* rule of cutting ones hands *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp.370,402, 418, 470-72; *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp. 467-68. In this regard, the *Qur'an* is explicit, “As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands, a retribution for their deed and exemplary punishment for *Allah* is exalted in power, full in wisdom. But if the thief repents after his crime and mends his conduct, *Allah* turned to him in forgiveness.”: *Surat Al-Maidah* 5, *Ayat* 38-39.

³² The cases pertaining to the murder, etc., were usually disposed of by the *Qazi-i kalaan* (Chief Justice) *albeit* the King at times heard such cases and awarded the death penalties in public. *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp. 467-68; *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 296-97. This was done so as to ensure terror among the onlookers as called for in Islam.: “Let not compassion move you in their case in a manner prescribed by *Allah*...And let a party of the believers witness their punishment”.: *Surat An-Nur* 24, *Ayat* 1-2.

³³ The *khutba* was read and coins issued in his name. Thus like their brethren elsewhere, the native Muslims held profound faith in the institution of the *Khalifa* presumably under the consideration that without him, the “sun will hide his face, the rain will cease to fall and the plants will no longer grow.”: *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp.67-68.

³⁴ Mushtaq A.Kaw, “Chinese Turkistan and Kashmir: A Study in Cultural Affinities”, *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, Vol. LII, July-Sept, 2004, pp. 63-80.

reverential awe and mysterious influence. Moreover, they held confidence in their power of intercession and advocacy besides interpreting dreams, displaying miracles and foretelling the information about one's past and present. Extreme regard for the saints and ancestors was there. They held equal respect for their descendants which can be gauged from their extreme emotional expressions reflected in their mawkish acts of prostrating before them and picking up dust beneath their feet as if it was some precious treasure. The "way farers still entranced; some hailed them with shouts of delight and others with tears of joy. Some danced wildly and others fell senseless in a swoon"³⁵. In this excessively surcharged ecstatic ambience, it was not surprising to observe the whole region abounding with shrines, scattered here and there, dedicated to *imams*, *saints*³⁶, *sayyids*³⁷ *heroes*³⁸ and *ancestors*³⁹.

³⁵ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, pp. 460-61; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p. 26; *Chinese Central Asia*, p. 182.

³⁶ Kashghar was especially known for innumerable shrines of the *Imams*, saints and heroes like the famous shrines of "Hazrat Sulaiman", Hidayatullah Khwaja known as "Hazrat Apak" and Dava Khan; all the three were the celebrated priest kings from Samarqand and Bukhara. Besides these, there were the reputed shrines of Shihab-u-Din Khawaja, Husain Fazl Khawaja, Qutb-i Alam, Sheikh Habib, Faqih Ibn Bakr. Likewise, Khotan had plenty of tombs belonging to Allaudin Muhammad, Immam Zabih, Jaffar Tayar and Immam Jaffar Sadiq who are reported to have contributed a lot for the spread of Islam in the region. On registering martyrdom, their dead bodies were buried in graves in a manner that revealed their dry up wounds on the body to the devotees.: *A History of the Mughals of Central Asia*, pp.298-99, 302-04; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, p.228; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.182-84. *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.182-84.

³⁷ In village Bora near Kashghar, was a shrine of a Muslim saint, a *sayyid* from Rawalpindi, who after pilgrimage to Mecca, had settled in this village. He was highly revered by the people. He was imbued with filial tolerance, piety and religious knowledge: *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p. 168.

³⁸ Kashghar had the grave, later shrine, of its ill-fated ruler Yaqub Beg Ataliq Ghazi who on consuming poison in 1876, was ceremoniously buried here with pomp and respect. Since the Chinese considered him a rebel, they immediately after the re-occupation of the Region exhumed and burnt his body as retaliation. With the result, only a small mound of mud and a handful of bricks remained there in the form of a shrine for the devotees.: The Earl of Dunmore, *The Pamirs*, (1893) Vol.II, New Delhi, reprint, 1993, p.223.

Since great miracles were ascribed to the shrines, the devotees disproportionately thronged and encircled them, tied tags thereon, lit candles⁴⁰ and burnt incenses⁴¹ to invoke their help in the resolution of a wide variety of ends, related to the curing of disease, bearing of children, auguring a good harvest, etc⁴². Generally speaking, the devotees included women and villagers; the latter more often than not visited these shrines and donated and distributed the meat of the sacrificial animals at these shrines⁴³. On the festive occasions, they removed ordure, excrements and all sorts of dirt from the site of the shrines and beautified and adorned them with a variety of ornaments. With that, they also rejoiced and feasted and recited religious literature or *tadhkiras* or biographies composed by or in memory of the saints of the respective shrines⁴⁴. Interestingly, the devotees comprised people of all walks⁴⁵ which presupposes the prevalence of a secular socio-psychological trend wherein the devotees did not address the shrines after the particular name of the saints but rather by several titles like “Sultan Buwam” (royal ancestor or ancestress), “Bu Anam” (ancestress mother), “Hazrat Pir” (holy sage), “Qarasakal Atam” (blackbearded father) and the “Padshah” (the king)⁴⁶. Such being the level of infatuated belief, the curators attending the shrines, for selfish motives, tutored stories about the miraculous powers of the saints in a manner so as to exactly fit to the purpose of the devotees⁴⁷. In that, the women desirous of children were impressed to put their hand into a hole of “Bu Anam” shrine and consume whatever was

³⁹ Towards the early 20th century, a priest (*mullah*) was observed reciting in the dim light of a candle the *Qur'an* over the grave of a groom.: *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p.38.

⁴⁰ *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp. 302, 310, 324-25, 327; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, p.228; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp.182-84.

⁴¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Chinese: Their History and culture*, New York, 1945, p. 632.

⁴² *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p.460; *Kashmir and Kashghar*, p.327; *Chinese Central Asia*, p.182; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p.26.

⁴³ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 177-78, 182-84.

⁴⁴ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 177-79, 181-82.

⁴⁵ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 179-80.

⁴⁶ *Kashmir and Kashghar*, p.310; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 123, 181-82.

⁴⁷ *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp. 322-27.

there inside, be it a lump of dirt, beetle, etc. For the sake of propriety, the attendants, at times, invented female saints on shrines in order to bring the custom of devotion in accord with Islam⁴⁸.

Like saints and shrines, the natives revered the clergy and obtained charms/amulets from them as a safeguard against otherwise vulnerable adventures.⁴⁹ In times of scarcity, they invoked their help for rains and willfully participated in special prayers and processions led out by the clergy while holding out a small meteorite trusting it to be a God's gift.⁵⁰ They also believed in a good deal of fears and superstitions. Since necromancy and belief in omens and magic was not uncommon, they attributed certain phenomenon to a divine anger and offered animal sacrifice to ward that off. In one instance, they dared not repair a dilapidated bridge lest the demon's wrath should befall them. True, the king demolished the same and raised a new one in its place but not before sacrificing ten camels, ten sheep and ten bullocks and distributing their meat at the shrine of the great saint of Hazrat Apak.⁵¹ Though the king disregarded the "invisible beings," yet he strived to placate them by offering animal sacrifices and distributing their flesh at a shrine. The belief in the multitude of superstitions does not end here. Performing magic for harming others (witchcraft) was as usual as anything else. Witchcraft doctors performed to expel the demons by continuously singing tambourines, dancing around the patient, whipping his face and the back with the cock's body, his lungs or with a willow wand, invoking the help of the saints, ancestors and national heroes like Chingez Khan, etc., and offering animal sacrifices. Interestingly, superstitions were

⁴⁸ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 182-84.

Hazrat Apak was revered more as a saint than a ruler by his devotees. He was buried in a mosque at Kashghar in 1639. The mosque had towers, one each in 4 corners and a large dome covered with green glazed tiles: *The Pamirs*, Vol. II, P. 222.

⁴⁹ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p.377.

⁵⁰ According to Marco Polo, the priests wielded tremendous powers of miracles with which they "made the idols to speak and by their devilries brought about weather changes and thus produced rains amid scarcities.": *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p. 377

⁵¹ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p. 460.

commonly popular in Khotan where it was believed that large settlements perished for their inhabitants were eaten up by ghosts, though M.A.Stein attributes the reason to political convulsions or to drying down or changing course of the particular rivers running through this major city of Chinese Central Asia⁵². Casting of an evil eye and auguring death spells were not unusual. On wishing death spell for her husband, a woman washed her head on seven successive Wednesday-mornings or else wore two caps, one over another. Likewise, a man combed his own beard with two combs to wish death spell to his wife. Associating some invisible being with the shoes/slippers (*kafesh massi*), also contributed to the great mass of beliefs. A slipper, if placed upside down on the *varandha* of a house, was believed to fetch in a new wife to a male and a new husband to a female owner of the house. The belief was at times meant to convey a gentle hint to a caller to avoid overstaying in one's house or else ensure wishful death of one's enemy⁵³.

Whatever the underlying spirit of these rituals, practices and beliefs, one thing is certain that they antedated Islam and were thus poles apart from it. The reason is that Islam prefers monotheism to polytheism and admonishes every sort of saint, idol, ancestral or hero worship⁵⁴. It evenly condemns the power of the saints, priests, etc., to intercede for others including the devotee⁵⁵, takes strong exception to the pagan act of calling upon the female deities for help⁵⁶, rejects necromancy, fears,

⁵² *Chinese Central Asia*, p.186-87, 189-91; *Sand Buried Ruins of Khotan*, pp. 430, 438-39.

⁵³ For further details see, *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 187-88.

⁵⁴ The holy *Qur'an* says, "And they set up (idols) as equal to *Allah*, to mislead (men) from His path. Into hell, they will burn; therein, an evil place to stay in... There is no god but God, the Eternal and Absolute. You should worship none but *Allah*." : *Surat Ibrahim* 14, *Ayat* 29-30; *Surat* 16, *Ayat* 22; *Surat Ta-Ha*, *Ayat* 98; *Surat Al-Ikhlās* 112, *Ayat* 1-4.

⁵⁵ "Men should not rely upon any power or person other than *Allah* to help them out or intercede for them... Advocacy is entertainable only when *Allah* wills and permits. They should not take their priests and anchorites to be their lords" for there only one God worth worshipping. : *Surat Al-Baqarah* 2, *Ayat* 255; *Surat Al-Tauba* 9, *Ayat* 31; *Surat Az-Zumar* 39, *Ayat* 42-45.

⁵⁶ *Surat-Al Nisa* 4, *Ayat* 116.

superstitions and omens⁵⁷ and ridicules the practice of distributing the flesh of the sacrificial animals at shrines⁵⁸.

If not Islamic in frame and nature, what then was at the bottom of these essentials of popular Islam or where they actually emanated or come from? Exceptions apart, they must have been mostly the importations from the neighbouring world especially China. Because, compared to all other peoples, the natives had strong reasons to be influenced by the Chinese on two counts. Firstly, the region's geographical proximity to China proper and secondly, its constant occupation and rule by the Chinese for a pretty long period of time. Obviously, their bearing on the native Muslims was so indelible that the Arabs, Uighurs, Karakhanids, Mongols and the Khokandis could not out rightly expunge it notwithstanding the irresistible measures of the State to enforce Islamic laws with impunity. In this scenario, the Chinese customs and beliefs ran parallel to the Muslim culture in the region and appeared, at times, as its indispensable part. One of the native customs, for instance, was the tomb or idol worship or ceremonies related to the cult of progenitors / ancestors, a practice that dated back in China proper from early historic times. Later Confucius, the Chinese sage (551-479 B.C) supplemented it by inventing several new ideas and practices to elaborate the life of the dead. He preached that the dead were dependent upon their heirs for their weal and woe⁵⁹ and that the death transformed a mortal into a powerful spirit. With, during and after the advent of Buddhism, the Chinese were impressed to believe that the dead had three souls; one departed instantly for hell and heaven, another for the grave and the third one for the temporary tablet. Hence, they offered food, meat, etc., to please these spirits (till they disappeared), earn blessings of the dead and keep the

⁵⁷ "Those who invent them speak a lie against *Allah* and lead astray men without knowledge. For Allah guides not people who are wrong." : *Surat Al-Anam* 6, *Ayat* 138-40, 142-44.

⁵⁸ *Surat-Al Maidah* 5, *Ayat* 12

⁵⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Chinese: Their History and culture*, New York, 1945, pp. 628-30

families and clans in tact⁶⁰. By and large, the natives too were used to all these and other Chinese-borne practices including animal sacrifices which the Chinese held with great respect for they, like others, believed that each animal or any part thereof represented a key to the “future” which was to be found in the “signs”; the Chinese thus used the shells of tortoise or the shoulder blades of oxen and deer: the Romans, their liver⁶¹. Similarly, the practice of the natives to burn incense, lit candles, chant *tadhkirahs* or biographies of the saints⁶², carry out cleaning and repairing, offer food at and decorate shrines on festive and other occasions⁶³, must have in all likelihood descended from the ceremonies related to the early historic Chinese cult of ancestors or the tradition of the Confucian school⁶⁴. The native custom of employing priests for reciting the holy *Qur'an* at the graves of the dear one's⁶⁵, must have equally grown on the style of the early Chinese ceremony associated with the ancestral temples⁶⁶. So was associated with the burial practice of the native Muslims the custom of *ta'aziya*, the payment made in cash or kind, by the kin to the next heir of the deceased for setting of the huge expenditure on burial ceremonies⁶⁷. This given native custom had again its prototype in ancient China where visits of condolence were formally paid by friends and ceremoniously received to bail out the bereaved family from the enormous expenses incurred on a complex system related to the burial and mourning ceremonies⁶⁸. The expectations of the

⁶⁰ *The Chinese: Their History and culture*, pp. 628-33; Richard J. Smith, *China's Cultural Heritage*, USA, 1983, pp. 65, 68-69, 110, 252; John L. Nevius, *China and the Chinese*, Delhi, reprint 1991, 130-48.

⁶¹ *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China*, Vol. I p. 170.

⁶² *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 177-79, 181-82.

⁶³ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 204-5.

⁶⁴ *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, pp. 632-33.

⁶⁵ *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, p. 632.

⁶⁷ *Chinese Central Asia*, p. 204; *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, pp. 630-31.

⁶⁸ The actual burial ceremony in China proper was usually delayed by months and years together pending the selection of a fortunate site and an auspicious day for earning the happiness to the dead and in consequence the prosperity of the living. The long burial and mourning time-span usually spread over three years, exceptions apart. During this period, the heir was subjected to a lot of expenditure, often due to the uninterrupted visits

natives with the heavenly bodies especially the sky and the clouds for rains and other purposes⁶⁹, logical and scientific though, was not devoid of the influence of the Chinese who since long were used to reposing great faith in the being, shape, density and colour of the “clouds” and “vapours” for good and bad fortunes⁷⁰. There are indeed many other examples to qualify the considerable Chinese impact on the life of the natives of the region. To mention one. The natives carried out the custom of christening a girl or circumcising a boy on a particular day fixed after the consultation of the stars⁷¹. The ceremony was analogous to the Chinese belief in the being and allied motions of the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon and the stars for unfolding the future, explaining the nature of things and enabling undertakings to be accomplished successfully. To the Chinese, both heavenly bodies and the earth were intimately connected with each other; the heavens resembled an egg and the earth its yoke. Given the profundity of this kind of relationship, the Chinese considered astrology as a “form of practical psychology”⁷². And so did perhaps the native Muslims of the region. Astrology apart, the rituals and practices of the natives had again a tremendous influence of the Chinese Phenomenalists who trusted that if the emperor did not follow ethical laws and practised rites and ceremonies, “then excessive gales would follow; trees would not grow, metals would cease to be malleable”⁷³. The act of the king to sacrifice animals, visit shrines and distribute the sacrificial meat there, should be seen in the perspective of the impact of the Chinese Phenomenalists. Likewise, the native practice of exorcism was not bereft of the Chinese impact, which is probably why, at both places, the exorcising process for removing evil spirits involved sacrificing animals, setting out savoury food for the evil spirits and then

of the friends and relatives which eventually doomed the bereaved family to the most appalling conditions.: For further details see.: *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, pp. 630-31.

⁶⁹ *Visit to High Tartary and Kashghar*, p.334; *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 20-21.

⁷⁰ *An Introduction to Science and Civilisation in China*, pp. 147-48.

⁷¹ *The Pamirs*, Vol.I, p. 237; Vol.II, pp. 333-34

⁷² *An Introduction to Science & Technology in China*, pp. 131-50.

⁷³ *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China*, Vol.I, p. 210.

chasing them with the sticks and swords⁷⁴. The use of cock's body or lungs for removing evil spirits from an ailing patient in particular, must have been definitely due to the borrowings from China proper where cock as the morning herald of the sun, was highly regarded for containing good spirits efficacious in removing evil spirits and insurging over all well being⁷⁵.

The Buddhist influences were not far to seek in the popular Islam of the region. The custom of Uighur Muslims to kill animals and abstain from taking meat on the particular days preceding the birth anniversary of the *sufi* saints, was probably the adaptation of just a Buddhist ritual to refrain from killing animals and eating the sacrificial meat on five days of a particular week. This is not to say that the Buddhists were originally meat eaters. They became used to it under the Tantric influence around the 10th century A.D.⁷⁶. In the like manner, obtaining charms from the priests was no doubt a pervasive phenomenon in the whole Muslim world and was not that way specific to the region. However, it antedated Islam in the region because charms were prescribed by the Buddhist monks on papers which carried magic characters and symbols and at times were fixed to a door or some other part of the house or burnt into ashes mixed in water and then drunk⁷⁷. The participation in the religious processions spearheaded by the clergy and holding out a piece of space rock to call upon God for rescue amid water scarcity, transcendental though, was demonstrative of the unprecedented popular faith in the clergy and its surprising power from pre-Islamic times. The Buddhism, for one, must have been fairly instrumental in building up such a faith. Quite exactly, the 13th century belief hovered around the remarkable powers of the priests for they "made the idols (the pre-Islamic polytheistic symbols) to speak and by their devilries brought about

⁷⁴ *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China*, Vol.I, pp. 207-8.

⁷⁵ *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, p. 648.

⁷⁶ For details see, Mushtaq A.Kaw, "Chinese Turkistan and Kashmir: A Study in Cultural Affinities", *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, Vol. LII, July-Sept. 2004, pp. 63-80)

⁷⁷ *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, p. 648.

weather changes and produced rains amid scarcities⁷⁸. Last but not the least, the association of alms and shelter houses with the Muslim shrines and their maintenance out of the land grants was no doubt a practice that was in vogue in the whole Muslim world. But, the said practice existed prior to Islam in the Region and can, therefore, be thought of as the continuation of the Buddhist practice of sustaining the needy out of the land grants assigned for the maintenance of the monasteries⁷⁹. In view of the striking parallels, geographical proximity, unabated politico-economic relations with China, the native Muslims had developed an unflinching tendency to copy and adopt pre- and post-Buddhist Chinese customs and beliefs in their own way of life even after the adoption of Islam⁸⁰; a great deal of material exists on the wide and varied Chinese influences on the individual and collective behaviour of the natives of the region⁸¹.

This does not mean that other influences were absent in the folk Islam practised by the native Muslims of the region. The Zoroastrian/Persian influence, for instance, was strikingly visible in their respect for the shrines. They meticulously decorated and surmounted them with ever sparking white washed earthen tripods burning with the fire all the times⁸². The New Year or the *Nauroz* celebrations also pointed to a great deal of the Persian influence. Essentially, the *Nauroz* as an annual national festival, was celebrated by the Persians on the very first day of the Persian solar year though the date of its celebration varied suiting to the convenience of the Persian rulers. The more common ancient usage

⁷⁸ *Kashmir and Kashghar*, pp. 302, 310, 324-25, 327; *Travels in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia*, p. 228; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 182-84.

⁷⁹ *Kashmir and Kashghar*, p. 322; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 194-95.

⁸⁰ *The Pamirs*, Vol. II, p. 329.

⁸¹ The mode of paper making in Chinese Turkistan was styled after the Chinese model. Similarly, on the analogy of the ancient Chinese custom, the debtors for default in the Sinkiang region, were worn a heavy square wooden bolted yoke, termed the *cangu*, weighing 20-60 lbs., around their neck until they paid up. The defaulter though moved freely, was fed by his relatives as his hands were unable to reach out to his mouth due to the broad wooden mould.: *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 111, 124.

⁸² *Kashmir & Kashghar*, pp. 322-27.)

was to have this festival immediately after the harvesting of the winter crops and the start of the agricultural operation for the summer crops. This occasion was celebrated with great festivity in Persia and elsewhere.⁸³ The Sasanids held great feast on the occasion whereupon people offered them gifts and presents and lit fires and sprinkled water on one another in the streets.⁸⁴ The native Muslims of the region also celebrated this Persian national festival with great fervour and gaiety. The Jahan Ara Bagh Fair lasting for 3-4 weeks in the Yarkand city of the region⁸⁵, qualifies the statement. It is worth mentioning that the festivals was common even among the Buddhists. This is why, the monks organized special celebratory processions and plays in the first month of the New Year⁸⁶. The Persio-Arab influence was equally dominant in the religio-marital ties of the native Muslims in the name of what is termed as the *mut'a* and which literary defines enjoyment and a "temporary marriage of pleasure" for a fixed period on rewarding the woman. Such a marriage actually radiated from an old Arabian custom⁸⁷. The traditions suggest that the Prophet^(PBUH) practiced it for some time in return of *udjur* consisting of a robe or a handful of dates but finally forbade it for all times to come. Later, Caliph 'Umar enforced prohibition on it with severe punishment of stoning the guilty. Because of this indifferent state attitude, the custom did not become popular in the Muslim world. However, the *Shia* sect was prone to it probably because Caliph Ma'mun

⁸³ For details see G.E.von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, New York, 1951, pp. 54-55.

⁸⁴ See for details, Bess A. Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Story of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Islam*, London, 1938, pp. 120-23; *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol.VII, ed. C.E. Bosworth & others, Leiden, 1993, pp. 1047-48.

⁸⁵ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 182-84.

⁸⁶ Herbertt Franke, *From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God: The Legitimation of the Yuan Dynasty*, Munich, 1978, pp. 32-35, 60-61; *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. VI, (907-1368), ed., Herbert franke and Denis Twitchett, Cambridge, 1994, p. 609.

⁸⁷ For details see, Westernmerck, *History of Human Marriages*, Part III, London, 1925, pp. 267-68.

(813-33 A.D.) reintroduced it in his own times. Thence from, the *mut'a* was practiced at large by the Persians⁸⁸.

Whatever its source, this kind of “religious prostitution” of the pagan or Persio-Arab origin also saw survival among the Muslims of Chinese Central Asia who adopted it more as a business than a social norm and conducted it for as small a period as a day or a week; the period was extendable depending on the consent of the couple⁸⁹. Given the defined and transient nature of this marriage contract, the papers of divorce were written alongside the marriage deed⁹⁰. After divorce, a woman was compensated for a few gifts and presents, a paltry sum or else a half sack of flour 50-60 pounds in weight⁹¹. Such marriages, were “cheap and divorce even cheaper” which is suggestive of the fact that neither the marital- knot was sacred nor the marriage contract permanent. Moreover, such marriages were reflective of the moral and ethical degradation of the society at large because their offshoots, the little babies, were not usually owned but thrown on the roadside or at the stairs of the mosques for adoption. On their growth, they were disposed of like commodities against a few pences⁹².

While the given marriage practice was actually of Persio-Arab background, that of hanging animal tales, yak or horse, called *tugh*, on poles attached to Muslim shrines, was fairly near to the ancient Turkic custom of sacrificing human victims on the “graves of the great” and hanging their heads on poles fixed to the graves⁹³. The native Muslims, being mostly the Uighurs of the Turkic ethnic descent, must have carried this practice along with through their chequered history. However, over a

⁸⁸ For details see, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, Part III, 1824, pp. 6-8; G.N.Curzon, *Persia and Persian Question*, Part I, London, 1892, pp. 164-65; E.G.Browne, *A Year among the Persians*, Cambridge, 1927, pp. 505-6; *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. VII, New Edition, pp. 757-59.

⁸⁹ *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp. 141-42.

⁹⁰ *Moved on from Kashmir to Kashghar*, pp. 24-25; *The Pamirs*, Vol.II, pp. 336-37.

⁹¹ *Forbidden Journey from Peking to Kashmir*, pp. 243-44.

⁹² *Lahore to Yarkand*, pp. 92-93; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 199-201.

⁹³ *Kashmir & Kashghar*, p. 310; *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 123, 181-82.

period of time, they seem to have substituted its form from “human” to the “animal” sacrifice. Like other influences, the reflexes of pagan Arab influence was marked in the custom pertaining to the appearance of the new moon (after the month of fasting, the *Ramadhan*). The event was celebrated by the native Muslims with jubilation. On its appearance, they jumped up and down seven times facing the moon trusting that the sins of their by-gone years were shaken off⁹⁴, an act of self complacency though, it had its counterpart in the pagan Arab belief whereby the Arabs entered their houses from the backdoors on the appearance of new moon preceding the commencement of the pilgrimage to Mecca⁹⁵. Incidental to the ritual of fasting was the custom among the well-to-do native Muslim families to sacrifice a sheep on the fourteenth day of the month of fasting⁹⁶. What was the source of this custom and why was it practised on a particular day of the month, is unluckily not known, though it is certain that it was not an Islamic custom. The issue calls for further research.

Conclusion:

The popular Islam incorporated several impulses that hearken back to a “correlative thinking” and “universal analogy” to which the pantheistic rituals and customs of the region were no exception. Such an Islam was, therefore, characteristic of a jumble of some chaotic and inconsistent beliefs and practices. Indigenous though, most of them were the importations dating early historic or ancient times. They went along the culture of the natives Muslims, notwithstanding their changing religio-political history. No doubt, a few of them were fallacious, unscientific and absurd and were far from “pure monotheism” or actual Islam; hence, more akin to what should better be termed as a “Muslim” rather than the “Islamic” culture. With all said and done, the adduced rituals and practices featured a silver lining in that they vindicated a universal theory in the being of some one, the most powerful⁹⁷, (the polytheism

⁹⁴ *Visit to High Tartary & Kashghar*, pp. 306-7

⁹⁵ *Surat Al Baqarah* 2, Ayat 189

⁹⁶ *Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 185-86.

⁹⁷ *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, p. 650.

came later with the cult of the progenitors) and ensured harmonious, secular and syncretic thought. They also kept the families and the long aged values and traditions in tact, brought diverse peoples under the umbrella of one “Cultural Matrix” and above all promoted the morale and spirit⁹⁸ of the people who otherwise lived in an “Arcadian Isolation” usually cut off from the then developing Western world.

⁹⁸ *An Introduction to Science & Technology in China*, p.149.