



*An Exploration of the Spiritual Roles of
a Woman in the Central Asian Family:
The 'Emitting the Fragrance' Rite*

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Abstract

In a typical Central Asian family, a woman has important spiritual roles in addition to other traditional roles in everyday life. From the lens of Muslim background women believers in Christ, this paper focuses on the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite which is a traditional Islamic practice in Central Asian families. Drawing from learning gleaned from informal conversations with four Central Asian women, this article suggests three spiritual roles of a woman related to the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite including spiritual honour keeper, spiritual mediator and spiritual nurturer. Missiological reflections and insights concerning contextualisation issues in relation to women’s spiritual roles in the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite are presented in a letter addressed to the Central Asian churches.

‘We say that a woman has forty souls’, said Gulzira with a smile, a young Kazakh shopkeeper at a big modern shopping centre who grew up in a village and came to the city to work. ‘You see, a woman has so many things to do and roles to carry in her life as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, then mother-in-law and grandmother. She has to make sure everything in the family runs smoothly and no bad words are spoken about the family... It is also the woman’s role to plan and schedule the weekly ‘emitting the fragrance’ to remember and honour our ancestors. This involves preparing *shelpek* (fried flat bread) and reciting the Quran which bring protection and blessing over our households. You see, this is our Muslim way’. Though said with a smile, the weight of life as a Central Asian woman is well captured in the saying above. How does a woman negotiate the everyday expectations, needs and responsibilities from and for the world around her in Central Asia? How is her pursuit of life that is shaped by her sense of meaning, values and the transcendence (in other words, her spirituality) expressed in her daily roles?

Understanding the spiritual life and role of a woman in the Central Asian family relates closely to the social, cultural, and religious context in which she is deeply rooted in everyday life. It is often said that ‘To be Kazak is to be Muslim,’ or ‘To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.’ This Muslim-ness is lived and observed in homes more than attending the mosque in Central Asia. The Muslim piety is regularly observed through a series of funeral meals and other memorial feasts in Central Asian homes. In commemoration of ancestor spirits special meals are prepared on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth days after death by the family members in their own homes. These occasions are usually well attended by relatives, friends and neighbours of the hosting family. The memorial meal is concluded with Quran recital in Arabic followed by a blessing in local language dedicating the food and Quran reading to the spirits of the

deceased. Then throughout the year these memorial feasts are repeated on a much smaller scale around the family meal table with the flat bread fried in oil specially prepared in honour of ancestor spirits and some verses of Quran recited over it by one of the family members. Embedded in the everyday life, this rite is practiced weekly in some families or more intermittently in others, including any other sad and happy occasions. The responsibility of observing this rite primarily lies with the women. The Inner Asian²² heritage of ancestor practices and Islam are often conflated in the mind of Central Asian Muslims. This is especially true for women who often have little contact with the mosque, the formal religious institution²³. Although there is a continuity with Inner Asian ancestor practices, Privratsky points out the obvious influence and relationship with Islam and Muslim tradition elsewhere²⁴ in these Muslim memorial feasts and its replica of domestic ancestor rite. Reconfigured in a visibly Islamic mode of religiosity, the Muslim ancestor practice in Central Asian homes is a contextualization of Islamic belief and ritual. With this complex reality of Muslim domestic ritual life relating to ancestor practices in mind, Islam in Central Asia may be better understood as a lived religion²⁵ in the memory and daily life of Muslims –

²² Inner Asia denotes a broader description than Central Asia. Geographically, it usually includes the 'heartland' of the Eurasian landmass, corresponding to the present-day Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang in China, former Soviet republics of Central Asia, and some portions of Siberia, as well as European Russia. Culturally, Inner Asia includes the region of Turko-Mongolian culture. See DeWeese, D 1994, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, pp.7-9; Privratsky, BG 2001, 'Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory', Cruzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, p.2.

²³ Sauma, R 2002, 'Ancestor practices in the Muslim world: a problem of contextualization from Central Asia', *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, p.339.

²⁴ The similar concepts of the spirit-world that honor ancestors and saints with the Quran and food are known across the Muslim world from Java to Lebanon to Morocco (Privratsky 2001, p244).

²⁵ See McGuire, MB 2008, *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.185.

‘Muslim way’ as phrased by Gulzira. Thus, the spiritual life of women in Central Asia is vividly captured in the domestic setting through Muslim ancestor practices.

In summary, in order to understand spiritual role of a woman in the Central Asian family this paper focuses on the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite, named after the aroma that results from frying flat bread in oil which takes place in memorial meals, also called the Thursday rite²⁶. The views of four Central Asian women who have had first-hand experience of this rite are examined using semi-structured interviews. Through a lens of Central Asian women believers from Muslim Background (BMBs) in Christ, findings from these interviews highlight three dimensions of a woman’s spiritual role in the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite including spiritual honour keeper, spiritual mediator, and spiritual nurturer. Then, further missiological reflections on the findings are summarised, addressing issues of contextualisation of the rite with its connections to discipleship of Central Asian BMB women in particular.

Research methods and Participant introduction

This research was carried out using semi-structured interviews, with four Central Asian women from Kazak, Kyrgyz and Uyghur ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, views from other Central Asian ethnic groups such as Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen are not directly represented due to the limitations and scope of the research.

Among the four participants are Gulzira²⁷ and Gauhar who are both are Kazaks, Mihrigul is Uyghur and Altynai is Kyrgyz. Gulziar grew up in a close family and

²⁶ Privratsky, BG 2001, ‘Turkistan: Kazak religion and collective memory’, Cruzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, pp.128-134.

²⁷ All names have been changed.

community network in her village yet is familiar with city life and in touch with younger generation. Therefore, her participation is valued as it informs the life of Central Asian Muslim women from Muslim perspective. Apart from Gulziar, three other participants are mature BMBs who have chosen to follow Christ. These three BMB participants were purposefully selected for interview because they were not only born in Central Asia and grew up in traditional Muslim families of their respective ethnicities and familiar with Muslim traditions but also for their years of experience in working with and discipling other BMB women as well as in the life of their own Uyghur, Kazak and Kyrgyz BMB communities. The ages of the participants vary from 22 to 50 years old. Interviews were conducted at home, in a café and in a place of work which provided space for the women to share openly and freely. The aims and purpose of the study were explained to the participants and their consent to share their thoughts and experiences was given on the condition that their personal information and identity is kept confidential in any published materials or public presentations.

History and description of 'Emitting the fragrance' rite

In recent years there has been a noticeable rise in numbers of Central Asian Muslims observing orthodox Muslim practices, including women wearing head coverings, men growing beards, and increase in participation of mosque-centred rituals such as the praying five times a day (*namaz* or *salat*) and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Gulzira, who has long wavy hair reaching down to the elbow, wears modest make up and has a smart casual look suitable for a shopkeeper, remarks, 'These people (women with head scarfs and men with beards) are not extremists. They have decided to be more serious about who they are as Muslims. But they consistently remember the

ancestors at the end of the *namaz* just as I would do at home with my family after the meal.' Honouring the ancestors is at the heart of Muslim Central Asians' devotion.

Remembering the ancestors through 'emitting the fragrance' is one of the principal practices among the Muslims of Central Asia, and is observed and celebrated at least intermittently in most homes²⁸. The rite survived through the Soviet era, despite concerted efforts by the Soviets to stamp out religiosity and the spirituality of the people²⁹. Maintaining this rite acted as an identity marker for Central Asians, in particular Turkic ethnic groups with Islamic heritage, in the context of harsh Soviet rule and colonization.

On Thursdays or Fridays seven pieces of deep-fried round-shaped flat bread called *shelpek*, also called *qudayi nan* (the bread of God), are prepared in memory of the ancestors and placed in the middle of the family meal table (*dastarhan*). When all the members of the family sit around the table, some portion of the Quran is recited in dedication to the ancestor spirits, then the names of the ancestors are recalled. Finally, the bread is broken and the family meal begins. Some families eat the food first and at the end of the meal do the Quran reading, blessings and breaking the *shelpek*³⁰; the participants in this research confirmed that the meal can be eaten before or after the recitation and blessings. After the meal on the same evening, the remaining *shelpek* is distributed to neighbours, often by the children of the household. Gauhar, a teacher at a Kazak-speaking public school, says that when the recipient of the *shelpek* is a young

²⁸ Privratsky 2001, pp.132-133.

²⁹ Privratsky, 2001, p.146.

³⁰ Privratsky, 2001, p.131.

child it is considered to be better. Children are thought to have purer souls and intentions, and when they pronounce the blessing for the family with ‘May it be accepted!’ or ‘May it touch [them]’, this is said to be more readily received by the ancestors and touches the unseen world.

There are variations in details and nuances of the practice among different ethnic groups of Central Asia and from family to family. However, the general patterns of ‘emitting the fragrance’ ritual are similar, and most importantly, in relation to the main focus of this paper, the consistency of women’s active participation in the practice is found across Central Asia³¹. So, what are the specific spiritual roles of women in observing this rite in the Muslim homes of Central Asia?

The role of women in the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite

Spiritual honour keeper

In carrying out the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite a woman acts as a spiritual honour keeper for the family.

The ‘honour (*namys*)’ and ‘shame (*uyat*)’ undergird the everyday life context of Central Asian homes. Altynai, a mature Kyrgyz BMB, explains, ‘*Namys* means honour, reputation and dignity. Sometimes people kill others who disgraced them to restore their own honour. It belongs to a nation, community, tribe and family. And it belongs to girls who will grow and become wives, hence it is said “The

³¹ Bellér-Hann, I 2008, *Community matters in Xinjiang: 1880-1949: towards a historical anthropology of the Uyghur*, BRILL, Boston, Massachusetts; Dubuisson, E-M 2017, *Living language in Kazakhstan: the dialogic emergence of an ancestral worldview*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Privratsky 2001.

household's honour is kept by women"... It is a norm of life, especially in Central Asia. *Namys* is not what people talk about, it is what they keep and how they live their daily life.'

A woman has to keep the family from others' bad and dirty words. This keeping of the family honour is primarily tied to the purity of young girls before they are given in marriage. A young girl carries a very important responsibility to keep the family's and her father's good reputation and honour by behaving with modesty in her clothing and in her social interactions. When a woman gets married, she is to keep her husband and his family's honour by learning from and following the instructions of her mother-in-law. She is to be a good wife who places her husband in a high position of respect in the home. 'A good wife takes her husband to the high place of the house but a bad wife takes him to the grave,' is another widely known saying among Central Asians. When children are born the mother carries the main responsibilities of bringing them up, their discipline and education. She has to cover any shameful situations within the family and solve things in such a way that no bad words go outside the gate of the house. The list goes on, as the expression of 'forty souls' of women portrays well.

She is to be a good host in showing family hospitality. Culturally, in Central Asia, guests who visit a home are honoured by the degree of hospitality shown by the host which means providing food (*chai*) at any time of the day³². It doesn't matter when the family have their regular meals, if any visitor comes to the

³² Dubuisson 2017, p.29.

house, whether relatives, family members, neighbours, friends or travellers, tea and food should be prepared for the guests who have come. ‘Sometimes, we cook and serve 6 or 7 meals a day!’ says Altynai. It is the woman’s responsibility to show hospitality to family guests. Neglecting guests is considered an offence and it brings shame to the host. In a similar vein ‘emitting the fragrance’ is showing hospitality and respect to ancestor spirits³³. It is believed that these spirits visit the family every Thursday and Friday to be fed and it is the woman’s role to conduct this spiritual rite of ‘emitting the fragrance’.

The word used for the ancestor spirits in Central Asia is ‘*aruaq*’ which is an Arabic collective noun and is conceptually united with the spirits of Muslim saints and prophets. Hence, this term *aruaq* makes the ancestors into Muslims. When the ancestors are called *aruaq*, therefore, they are conceived as living spirits possessed of *bereke* (divine blessing), the same spiritual power that resides in Muslim saints and their shrines. These Muslim ancestor-spirits are considered as mediators between men and God, asking blessing and protection on their behalf. As Gauhar explains, ‘these people went to God and met God in other world after the death... They can ask and make request before God on our behalf. “Please, my daughter has emitted the aroma, and she is going through hardship, give me favour to intervene.” Because these spirits are close to God they can pray for and ask on behalf of the living.’

³³ Dubuisson 2017, p.30; Privratsky 2001, pp.133,134.

Offering honouring hospitality to ancestor spirits is a way to ensure the blessing and favourable intervention on behalf of the family in the unseen world. This reciprocal connection between the dead and the living is highlighted in the following well known Central Asian saying: 'Unless the dead are satisfied, the living cannot become rich'³⁴. It is believed that if a family neglects their ancestors by not practicing the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, it is seen shameful (*uyat*) for the family³⁵. There is also fear of misfortune due to causing dissatisfaction and offence to ancestors, who will then no longer protect the family from bad luck and calamity caused by evil spirits³⁶.

The spiritual honour of the household is upheld by remembering the ancestors who come as spiritual visitors and agents of blessing. Drawing from her tight community upbringing in her village, Gauhar says: 'when a family has peace and their life goes well, people talk about the woman of the house (may it be referring to the wife, the daughter-in-law, the mother) as God given. God has blessed [the man/the household] with the woman who prays to God always.' Thus, the fragrance of the fried bread and then the bread shared in neighbourhood upholds moral integrity of the household and serve as spiritual merit to the family. On the other hand, 'if she neglects and does not prepare the bread, when something bad happens in her family, it is assumed to be the fault of the woman,' Altynai points out and continues with evidently heavy emotions in her tone, 'shockingly enough, in some

³⁴ Privratsky 2001, p.133.

³⁵ Privratsky 2001, p.140.

³⁶ Privratsky 2001, pp.136-138.

families, if the husband decides to beat her no one would defend her. Because it is assumed that she deserves it. Even her children will blame her.’

The cultural, social, and spiritual contexts of Central Asian Muslim women’s everyday life demonstrates that the crux of women’s role is honour keeping. Throughout different life stages, a woman serves as an honour keeper of her family socially and spiritually. She carries the honour of her father’s house in her physical body as young girl. As a married woman, she is an honour keeper of her husband and his household. The flip side of this responsibility is that she is also the bearer of shame when things go wrong. Or, at least, she is the first one to be blamed for bad things and misfortune.

Spiritual mediator

From her kitchen to the family meal table, a woman serves as spiritual mediator with a priestly-type role in dedicating the fragrance to God and ancestor spirits in her own home.

Fragrance of frying oil

For most Islamic ceremonial occasions where animals are slaughtered as sacrifice, men are in charge of the food and women are excluded from the process. In contrast, women take the lead role in the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite³⁷. It is considered a sacred practice and therefore the woman who prepares and fries the bread should have pure intentions and

³⁷ Bellér-Hann 2008, p.370.

attitudes, and go through a purification cleansing ritual beforehand. During menstruation women do not carry out the 'emitting the fragrance' rite. Following the purification ritual, a mother or grandmother assisted by younger female members of the family prepare the mixture of a basic dough consisting of flour, water, and salt. Apart from Uyghur tradition, other Central Asian ethnic groups leaven the dough using yeast.

According to Mihrigul who has learnt more detailed aspects of 'emitting the fragrance rite' from a well informed Uyghur neighbour in her village, the first round piece of dough out of the seven shelvek is dedicated to God and set apart on a separate plate. The second one is dedicated to the lord of water and soil/land. The third one is made in memory of a specific dead person being remembered, especially when the occasion is part of the funerary ceremonial meal. The fourth one is dedicated to the memory of other close family members, the fifth to relatives and family acquaintances, the sixth to orphans and people with no families (also called people with no owners/lords) and the seventh to the young children/babies died young who are said to be like birds. These specifications were not mentioned by other participants from Kazak and Kyrgyz ethnic backgrounds.

Next, the oil gets heated in a frying pan to the point where the aroma of the cooking oil spreads. This is an equivalent of cooking the fat

of sacrificial animals³⁸. As each piece of bread is fried in sizzling oil, the woman prays on behalf of her household, saying, 'May it touch [them]'³⁹. After the bread is fried, the doors and windows are opened to let the aroma escape. Then a pile of shelvek is brought out to the meal table.

Quran reading

'My mum used to take about an hour in reading the Quran and remembering all the names of deceased relatives, saints and prophets. As children we used to get tired sitting through this part of the evening. My mum was so devout and sincere that she would go through a long list of names! After the blessing (bata) is pronounced, we all say "aumin". Then she takes the bread and tears it, and all sitting around take it and eat,' told Gauhar from her childhood memory.

Imams, the religious leaders, tell people that Quranic reading should be led by a man in the family, usually the grandfather or father. When major funeral related remembrance meals (as беру) take place on day seven, day forty, and the one year anniversary, the male religious leader or those who are trained to recite the Quran are invited by the family according to Islamic custom. However, in everyday practices, especially for the family remembering the dead ancestors on Thursdays or Fridays, the grandmother or mother of the family, who are more active

³⁸ Bellér-Hann 2008, p.360; Privratsky 2001, p.135.

³⁹ Bellér-Hann 2008, p.365.

in observing the 'emitting the fragrance' rite, may end up not only preparing the food but also leading the family in Quranic reading and prayer. Usually it consists of naming God (bismillah), sometimes saying the shahada, and reciting a few verses from the Quran memorised from a booklet (often bought from streets near sacred sites such as shrines and mosques). The ancestors were Muslims and therefore this Quranic recital is dedicated to them in honour of their faith. Following the Quranic reading is the naming of the ancestors including family members, relatives, neighbours, close friends, local saints, and prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Daniel, Isa, and Mohammed.

Dreams

In general dreams have an important place in the life of people in Central Asia. They are not to be ignored. When ancestor spirits appear in a dream, it becomes even more significant⁴⁰. In connection to the 'emitting the fragrance' rite of honoring ancestor spirits, a dream serves as a sign of reminder or warning. It is believed that ancestor spirits come in dreams as spiritual visitors to the family home as agents of blessing. Ancestors are said to appear in dreams if they are not shown proper hospitality. People also emit the fragrance when they lose something or other uneasy pressing things happen in their dreams. Or, in reverse they find something

⁴⁰ Dubuisson 2017, p.41; Privratsky 2001, p.122.

precious or meaningful in their dreams, they emit the fragrance asking for the kind of blessings.

Often women have an important role as receiver of dreams as well as being the one who prepares the shelpek. If any other members of family see dreams, then they will tell the woman in the family to not forget to 'emit the fragrance.' Women also act as interpreters of dreams. If people cannot understand the meaning of a certain dream but feel that it is very important, then they would go and ask elders. It could be a man or a woman those who are known as wise man or wise woman in the community.

Thus, on Thursdays and Fridays or any other days of the week when a nudge from the unseen world is communicated through a dream, women are not mere cooks. In each step of preparation and facilitation of this rite, they are spiritual mediators invoking protection against bad luck and calamity, and blessing of secured future happiness and prosperity on behalf of the whole household.

Spiritual nurturer

Mothers ensure their daughters learn from their example in order that this 'emitting the fragrance' rite is passed properly to the next generation. Gauhar states: 'It (emitting the fragrance rite) is like a special spiritual assignment given to us. It has been passed on to us from our ancestors. It is a spiritual tradition. Our parents, especially mothers teach us (daughters) about it. Our grandmothers teach us that in order to be a good wife, you need to 'emit the fragrance' to bring

peace on your family.’ According to Altynai, if a young woman has little understanding and is not familiar with things related to the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite, she has no honour till she learns to do it.

In the heart of a Central Asian woman the ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite touches her spiritual longing to be close to God. Carrying the weight of life’s demands, needs and questions of the everyday, she is compelled to search the ultimate source beyond the visible world around. ‘Women are very close to the spiritual realm. My mother used to say that if I don’t keep this (emitting the fragrance), I may lose touch with God and become far away from Him,’ says Gauhar. She recalls how her mother sincerely carried out each step of the rite and taught her and her sisters. After the ‘*Aumin*’ pronounced at the end of the rite, her mother would sit for a while to pray for peace, protection and blessing over her own family, for the neighbours and others around them and for the nation. Gauhar used to sit beside her mother and joined in with the prayer. ‘Emitting the fragrance’ was not a mere duty for her to perform, it served as a sacred spiritual ritual in and through which she was seeking touches of God for herself and for all around her.

This process of involving daughters and younger women in the family demonstrates how the tradition of ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite is passed on to future generations and highlights the important role of the woman as a spiritual nurturer. Women may hardly attend mosques and have little knowledge of the sacred text, their piety is lived out and vividly captured in the middle of ones’ everyday household and then passed on to the women of the next generation.

Missiological reflection

An important question to consider is how the spiritual role of Central Asian BMB women relates to issues of contextualization for Central Asian churches? There has been little discussion or attention given to the issue of Muslim ancestor practices among the churches in Central Asia, and even more scarce is consideration of women's spiritual roles related to these matters.

One of the BMB participants says, 'I used to do this (emitting the fragrance) so that the dead spirits may be pleased. But now I do this in the name of *Isa*. My younger sister who is not yet a committed believer, does it every Friday. In my case, I may only do it once a month. If my sister sees disturbing dreams about me, she will ring me and say that we need to emit the fragrance and read the Quran. But now I do it in *Isa's* name and they (family members) just say "*Aumin*". With a slightly sheepish smile on her face she continues, 'In the early days of my faith walk, some said frying the bread should be completely thrown away. And we were forbidden to do so by some foreign workers. But we felt so lost in which way we may pray and ask help.' This points out one of the distinctive felt needs of Central Asian BMB women. The woman carries a more active role in preparing and cooking the bread which contributes to building the whole family's spirituality, their devotion and moral integrity in the community. Simply treating the role of a woman as cook according to traditional cultural gender divisions would dismiss the significance of the spiritual roles examined in this present study.

Unlike other Muslim majority countries, the growth of visible Protestant churches with converts in Central Asia with converts from a Muslim background has been remarkable during the past three decades, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding Muslim ancestor practices, various responses and treatments have been

expressed by different church groups influenced by cross-cultural workers from the West and East, and Russian background churches in the region. People were usually told to reject anything to do with ancestor practices. This is true with the teaching of the most Russian background churches that says ancestor spirits are demons, and the Muslim funeral meals are the Corinthian table of demons⁴¹. In contrast, other church groups have carefully investigated and sought more balanced biblical approaches to these matters. One example is a letter written to Central Asian churches entitled ‘An appeal to the Messianic assemblies concerning God and the ancestor spirits’⁴² in which the study of 1 Corinthians 10:25-11:1 regarding food sacrificed to idols and 2 Kings 5:1-19 with Elisha’s dealing on Naaman and Syrian temple practices are included⁴³.

The captivating moments of the present study were conversations with three BMB participants towards re-imagining their kitchen and dining table at home with their new faith in *Isa* the Messiah in light of the scripture. A summary of the reflections of these conversations are put together below as a letter written in a similar manner to the preceding letter mentioned above, which was addressed to Central Asian churches. What is shared in the letter below should not be read as definitive suggestions by any means. Yet some elements, if not all, could be beneficial in the ongoing contextualisation and self-theologising conversations of the churches

⁴¹ Sauma 2002, p.341.

⁴² The letter was drafted in English first by several expatriates including Rabban Sauma, all trained in American seminaries, with field experience and competence in a Turkic language. Then it was translated, checked and reviewed by BMB pastors and church planters (Sauma, 2002, pp. 329, 330).

⁴³ Sauma 2002, pp. 323-345.

as well as among cross-cultural workers in their support and service for the good news in the Central Asia region.

Precious brothers and sisters in Isa Messiah,

Grace and peace to you, the church of God in Central Asia, from the One God our Father and Lord Isa Messiah.

As fellow servants in the ministry of the Most High, we rejoice and give praises to Him for His redeeming work fruitfully evident amongst the people of God in Central Asia. Truly it is the work of His Holy Spirit that many brothers and sisters from Muslim backgrounds have been added into the family of God in our region, following the steps of people of faith in enduring the hardship and persecution.

This is our prayer for each one of you, dear brothers and sisters. May God's church in Central Asia be firmly rooted in the truth of His Word so that each one of the members of His body may grow in confidence and fully experience the gift of His abundant life according to the freedom of the good news.

Concerning the problem of the ancestor spirits that are worshiped in many Muslim homes in our region, there has been a preceding letter⁴⁴ addressed to you in support of dealing with the difficulties faced by our

⁴⁴ Sauma 2002, pp. 323-345.

brothers and sisters. In this letter, building upon the constructive teachings and guidelines laid out in the previous letter in light the Scripture, we would like to highlight some aspects of the same issue specifically from the perspective of our sisters in Isa the Messiah and their faith growth in mind.

What will you say to the member of your fellowship when she comes to you and says, ‘Pastor (or brother / sister), I am pressured by my unbelieving family members to fry the bread because my husband saw his grandfather in his dream.’ What will you teach and how will you guide your sisters who have to prepare the food for the funeral and memorial meals of which shelvek is always an integral part? How will you help your sisters to be good witnesses in their homes? It is foolish to think that the problem will be solved by forbidding everything about the Muslim ancestor practices, when God has not dealt with His people in such manner.

First of all, let us be reminded that honouring the dead in remembrance is in accordance with God’s Word, i.e. God’s commandment to honor our fathers and mothers (Exodus 20:12), and Ruth, Naomi and Boaz honoured the dead by fulfilling the law of God (Ruth 3, 4). However, God’s Word forbids worshiping the dead by devoting offerings or sacrifices to ancestor spirits, as our people do when they ‘emit the fragrance,’ believing that these spirits could advocate before God, intervene on their behalf and help them. When we turn to the way of Isa with repentance, we have God’s own Holy Spirit as our comforter and

counselor according to Isa's promise (John 14:26; 15:26). And God appointed Isa as the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5, John 14:6).

Therefore, we should not seek help nor guidance from ancestor spirits, getting into the habit of seeking after all kinds of spirits. If any of you see your mother or father in your dream, you should not be afraid that you have seen a demon, as these dreams are often a natural thing with no significant meaning attached⁴⁵. God's angel may sometimes appear in our dreams and visions, for example, to Joseph (Genesis 37) and to Joseph the husband of Mary (Matthew 1:21-22, 2:13, 19). In fact, some of you have encountered Isa with His presence as a bright light in your dreams that served as guidance to your search for the truth. However, you should be wise and careful that you may not be deceived by Satan in the figure of your ancestor spirits in your dreams, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1). If someone in your family, relatives, neighbourhood or from your church come and tell you about their dreams, be ready to listen carefully, trusting His Holy Spirit's guidance and offer to pray and intercede for the person and respective family in the name of Isa the Messiah.

God does not forbid us to show respect in our relationship to others from different religious faiths but wants us to act honourably with

⁴⁵ Sauma 2002, pp. 333.

wisdom and pure intention. One clear example from the Old Testament is found in 2 Kings chapter 5. In the story, Naaman a Syrian general came to Elisha the great prophet of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. By washing seven times in the river nearby according to Elisha's instruction, Naaman was completely healed by the power of the God. Then he immediately repented from his pagan idolatry and promised to worship only the God of Israel. However, Naaman pleaded with the prophet for understanding of his difficulties to be faced back in his homeland and said, '...your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord. But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also – when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this.' Then the prophet Elisha gave his blessing to Naaman and said, "Go in peace" (2 Kings 5:17b-19).

Naaman demonstrated his pure heart intention and sincere determination to worship only the Lord but also to act honourably in his own context especially in relation to the religion of his own people. Because of this the prophet permitted Naaman the freedom and gave a blessing to serve God among his own people of Syria and show respect to their religious traditions and practices that were unacceptable to God (i.e. Exodus 20:2)!

In light of this Scripture, the previous letter addressed to us states that Muslim memorial meals and eating the food at such occasions are

permitted with a pure heart and intention of followers of Isa to serve the One true God and worship Him alone while showing respect to others. We may help our Muslim relatives when they give the funeral and memorial meals, like Naaman did for his king. And when the blessing is spoken at the end of the meal after the Quran is read, you may also receive the blessing by stroking your face, just as Naaman bowed before Rimmon. Also, out of respect to the fellow believers, we should refrain from eating when another brother or sister considers eating the meal dedicated to ancestor spirits as sin (1 Corinthians 10; Romans 14:15-16). Likewise, believers should not condemn anyone who takes the meal with a pure conscience and no objections from other believers present⁴⁶.

However, what should a believing sister in Isa do in her own kitchen at home before other Muslim family members in relation to ‘emitting the fragrance’ rite? When a woman’s heart intention is pure before the One true God, seeking His protection and blessing for her own self and her household, she may fry the bread as an act of worship to the One true God in whom she has put her sole trust and hope, saying: ‘May this fragrance touch the One true God, to the praise of His Holy name’. Whilst preparing and cooking the bread, she may bring all petitions, longings and thanksgivings about herself, her families, and her community and people in the name of Isa the Messiah. In this way, she acts honourably in her

⁴⁶ Sauma 2002, pp. 334-338.

home before her unbelieving family members and community around her but stays pure before the One true God, as Naaman did.

What if a believing sister was also to facilitate the family meal with Muslim as well as the believing members of family present? She may start with 'bismillah' (in the name of God in Arabic) and 'allahu akbar' (which translates 'God is the greater than all' in Arabic) and carefully pronounce the blessing at the end to dedicate the whole meal to the One true God, 'May the bread and food eaten touch the Spirit of the One true God, to the praise of the unity of the Most High from whom everything comes from, the life of our ancestors before us and our own.' And all may say 'Aumin,' receiving the blessing by stroking one's face. Her spiritual leadership is exercised in her home in worship to the One true God but shows respect to the ancestors and other members of the family. In this way, she keeps her family's honour, gains respect and maintains peaceful relationships with her non-believing family members.

When a neighbour's child brings a piece of shelpek, it may be received with blessing 'May it touch the One true God, to the praise of Him. May God be with you!' One could even ask the neighbour what caused them to emit the fragrance, and offer special prayer for them in Isa's name, making the occasion to bless and plead on behalf of the neighbours' family, thus acting as spiritual intercessor before the One true God in her own neighbourhood.

O beloved brothers and sisters, therefore, let us approach God's throne of grace with full confidence through Isa the Messiah who

intercedes on our behalf and stands before God, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Let us thank God for His grace, infinite wisdom and patience throughout history, guiding and teaching His people from all cultures and backgrounds to come to the light and to the very source of living water, Isa Messiah our Lord. May the fragrance of the perfect sacrifice offered by our Lord Isa the Messiah fill every household in Central Asia and beyond, as daughters of the Most High, our sisters in Isa the Messiah, worship the One true God in Spirit and truth, touching heaven and interceding in His Holy name!

Amin