

**The social dimensions of understanding illness and healing: Islamic societies from Africa to Central Asia. Report of a workshop at the Orientwissenschaftliches Zentrum, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Halle/S. Germany, 31th march – 1st april 2006**  
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**Workshop Abstracts (in alphabetical order)**

**HABIBA FATHI** (Uzbekistan: French Institute for Central Asian Studies, Tashkent)  
*Traditional Curative Practices Among Practicing Muslims in Central Asia*

The aim of this paper is to analyse diverse curative practices among practising Muslims of contemporary Central Asia that are linked with traditional medicine. It is based on fieldwork carried out in different parts of the five newly independent States of the region between 1997 and 1999. It will present a range of practices and traditional know-how used by different religious female figures of the sacred as expressed in discourses on the medical, the corporal, the psychological and the spiritual, — especially by Muslim religious women (otin-oyi or bibi-khalife) and various healers including female « shamans » of the Muslim faith. This will show how various domains of beliefs, which appear to be opposites, such as pharmacology, clairvoyance, divination, magic, sufism, witchcraft and endorcism — which is particularly dominant in Central Asian chamanism —, can be in fact considered as interlinked. Consequently, this study will highlight the interaction between Islam and other systems of ancient beliefs which had prevailed before the Islamization of the region and which are still alive.

**PAWEL JESSA** (Polen: Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan, Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology)  
*Ak Jol – Spiritual Healers. New Dimensions of Spiritual Healing in Kazakhstan*

The paper focuses on the problem of the religious dimensions of illness comprehension and healing in contemporary Kazakhstan on the example of the Muslim religious movement *Ak jol* (“the White Road”). The author visited the followers of this cult during his field research in Kazakhstan in 2004. The main purpose of the paper is to describe and interpret the ceremonial practices (diagnosing and healing a disease) in the context of the socio-religious functioning of the group.

*Ak jol* is a relatively new religious movement that emerged about 1997. On the ideological level it appeals to the “spiritual purification” of Kazakhstani society which should be considered as a religious awakening through the implementation of healing practices, pilgrimages to shrines and obtaining blessings from the ancestors and Muslim saints.

The social dimensions of the group’s influence is a significant aspect of the problem. Whereas shamans and *emshi* activities are usually limited to the local community level where their role

is reduced to recognising and eliminating a disease, *Ak jol* establishes a kind of hierarchized corporation whose members assume specific roles (shamans, emshis, clairvoyants, those with a gift of blessing). The group exerts its integrating influence through the systematic organisation of religious events. The *shirak* ceremony (which includes healing and individuals receiving blessings from ancestral spirits) takes place twice a week and pilgrimages to the holy places are organized frequently. Taking advantage of the above mentioned activities the cult gains new followers and consolidates bonds between these and the old adherents. Regular members of movement identify themselves as “*the ak jolists*” – a designation which emphasises the supra-ethnic character of the group.

The charismatic leaders of the movement emphasises its Muslim character, but *Ak jol* is also open to adherents of other religions (Christians in the first place) and to non-Kazakhs. The ritual and ceremonial practice – including healing - reflects Muslim and non-Muslim traditions and synthesising processes. In this context, the additional aspect is the creation of “new traditions” by cult leaders through the Muslim education (indoctrination) of the neophytes. The followers of the cult come from different social strata. Frequently even Muslims themselves do not have sufficient knowledge about Islam. Inside the movement they obtain “a course in Muslim education” based on the leaders’ own interpretation of Islam with reference to local tradition and to “instructions” received from the ancestors.

The main research problems discussed are as follows:

- The religious context of diseases (the concepts of health, disease and healing),
- “Magico-religious” healing practices (from diagnosis to curing),
- Healers and others (shamans, emshi, media) – figures and their functions,
- *Ak jol's* social range – its functions and influence on the religious life of the Kazakhstan’s inhabitants,
- Tradition revitalised or invented? *Ak jol* – the new face of Islam in Kazakhstan.

**KRISZTINA KEHL** (Germany: Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/S.)

***Controlling the Spirits – Women Healing Specialists in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan***

In Uzbekistan, like in many other parts of the world, illness is often attributed to the impact of bad spirits, magic and the evil eye. In order to get rid of the effects of this kind of supernatural intervention, people turn to traditional healing specialists whose methods range from Koran reading to exorcism. The institution of religious healing, which, due to Soviet modernization policy lost much of its former significance, has experienced a considerable revival after Uzbekistan became independent in 1991. Against the background of post-Soviet transformation processes, this presentation deals with various forms of religious healing in the western Uzbek province Khorezm. The healers’ narratives and the way their clients perceive their powers demonstrate that the persuasiveness of religious healing largely draws on the authority of traditions which survived – though in a weakened and clandestine form – in spite of persecution and suppression by the communist regime. However, it will be argued, that the current upsurge of healing is not a straight-forward revitalization of pre-Soviet traditions. Rather, healing in present-day Khorezm evidently involves re-constructions of traditions that are capable of incorporating new methods and modern meanings.

**ANETTE KRÄMER** (Germany: Humboldt Universität Berlin, Institut für Asien- und Afrika-wissenschaften, Zentralasien-Seminar)

***Pluralism of Medical Systems and Health-Seeking Behaviour in Central Asia: a New Field of Research***

Research on illness and healing in Central Asia has become increasingly popular in recent years. However, research has been focusing on specific aspects of health and health care, and has so far concentrated on specific research fields and methods. Numerous quantitative studies by Public Health experts concerning various urgent health problems have been concentrating on biomedicine and somehow neglected complementary medicine. The latter, however, has been addressed by several scholars in the field of cultural and social anthropology as well as in Islamic Studies. These works often depart from an interest in religious issues and have a certain tendency to focus on alternative health-care professionals - healers - more than on clients. Given this situation, the presentation shall give a short overview of the complex pluralism of medical systems in present-day Central Asia. Summarizing research trends, it proposes a client-centered perspective as a meaningful approach to describe health-seeking behaviour reflecting facets of this pluralism.

**PAULA MICHAELS** (USA: University of Iowa, Department of History)

***Kazakh Ethnomedicine and Soviet Biomedicine under Stalin***

This paper will explore the ways in which the Soviet state used biomedicine as a sociopolitical tool in Kazakhstan during the Stalin era (1928-53). Particular attention will be paid to women and the nomadic population as targets for this campaign. Oral testimony will be examined in juxtaposition with archival and published sources.

**SYLVIA ÖNDER** (USA: Georgetown University, Washington D.C., Division of Eastern Mediterranean Languages)

***Nazar in Context: Contemporary Turkish Manifestations of a Traditional Islamic Concept***

Because *nazar* (often translated as “the evil eye”) is mentioned in the Koran, it offers rich possibilities for comparisons across regions and cultures of the Islamic world. Comparisons cannot be useful, however, without a detailed description of specific instances of *nazar* occurrence and treatment. This paper will outline some of the basic features of the health care system in a rural setting on the Black Sea Coast of Turkey, including both traditional and clinical resources. Specific details about local conceptions of health and illness, the body in its social context, the problem of *nazar*, and treatments for it will be provided. The effects of culture change, migration (including migration to Europe), and biomedical models will be addressed.

**MATHIJS PELKMANS** (Germany: Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/S.)  
***Establishing credibility: Secular legacies and new spiritual realities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan***

Do spiritual healers have healing power? There are good reasons to avoid this question as its answers tend to result in either secular reductionism (false consciousness) or in psychological functionalism (therapeutic function). Unfortunately, circumventing the question by presupposing local beliefs in spiritual powers ignores that such beliefs are not necessarily stable and internalized convictions. In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, it was not me but my informants who asked whether spiritual healers have healing power. While on the one hand these healers were called on to treat illnesses, foresee the future, cast or remove spells, and to interpret dreams, they were also portrayed as charlatans and imposters. These divergent attitudes demand renewed attention for the social construction of beliefs. Rather than assuming that spiritual forces are a reality for indigenous groups, this paper analyzes the discourses and actions of spiritual healers, their clientele, and other actors, to show how the credibility of spiritual healers and clairvoyants is socially defined. As such, it sheds light on the new roles (and uses) of spirituality in a postsocialist context and illuminates the enduring (but changing) legacies of Soviet secularism.

**DANUTA PENKALA-GAWECKA** (Polen: Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan, Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology)  
***Complementary Medicine in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Doctors and Healers***

Complementary medicine has enjoyed growing popularity and plays an important role in the pluralistic health care of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Complementary medicine itself is pluralistic - it comprises such diverse methods and techniques as Kazakh folk medicine, including spiritual healing; medicines of various ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan; treatments derived from the “great medical tradition” of the East, and therapies that have been brought recently from the West. It is practised, on the one hand, by physicians who adopt complementary methods, and, on the other hand, by various kinds of healers. The focus of this paper, based on the author’s research conducted in Almaty between 1995 and 2000, is on those two groups of complementary practitioners. Their legitimisation and the sources of their prestige are discussed, as well as their mutual relations, borrowings, collaboration and conflicts, in the context of state policy towards complementary medicine and its practitioners, which affects their position and activities.

**SARA RANDALL** (UK: University College London, Anthropology)  
***Women’s Health as a Justification for Contraceptive Use: Wolof in Senegal***

A qualitative interview study undertaken in Senegal in 1999 with Wolof men and women from three sites (a village, a small town and the capital, Dakar) demonstrates a preoccupation with women’s health. In many cases women’s health is represented as the justification either for actual contraceptive use or at least, for considering eventual use of contraception even when desired family size remains very high. In general there is a gradation from the rural to

the urban areas in terms of the acceptability of family limitation, but threats to women's health are an acceptable motive for use even in the most traditional of couples.

Both men and women consider women's health to be of paramount importance, to the extent that men are apparently willing to override their deep-seated opposition to fertility control if their wife's health is in danger. The paper explores both men and women's perception of the links between fertility control and women's health and discusses the role of Islam in constructing the verbalisation of acceptable attitudes to fertility control. The paper then discusses the importance that this legitimate forum for contraceptive use may have in providing women with opportunities for initiating contraceptive use against their husband's expressed desires.

ANNE REGOURD (France: Sorbonne, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes)

***“Unclean Blood” (al-dam al-fâsid): The Practice of Wet Cupping and the Representation of Blood in the Highlands of Yemen***

The cupping instrument is simultaneously part of Arab medicine as well as the Prophet's medicine. If you try to answer the question “What does one do with the blood after the procedure?” the links to Arabian medicine as well as magical practices and cosmological accounts become apparent. In all cases an “individual” concept of blood (linked with the *nafs* and the person) is emphasized. As wet cupping includes shedding blood, it has to be practised by a professional – it is not part of the medicine cabinet -, and by a male person belonging to a social stratum considered inferior from the point of view of those members of Yemeni society who inhabit the plateau. The patients who go to see the practitioners generally belong to the local tribes (and are therefore neither descendants of the Prophet nor *qudat*). As for female patients, coming from the surrounding mountains, this therapeutical procedure often bears urban characteristics.

EKATERINA RODIONOVA (Russia: Saint Petersburg State University, Faculty of Oriental and African Studies, Middle East History Dept.)

***Traditional Ways to Take Care of Mother and Child in Iran***

In the paper the following questions will be addressed:

1) Motherhood and childhood as social phenomena in Iran in general.

Diverse approaches to the issue.

2) Common and special features in a practice of taking care of mother and child in Iran; its correlation with such practices in other countries of the wider geographical region.

3) Magical-religious and rational aspects of traditional ways of taking care of mother and child in Iran: conception, birth-giving, up-bringing, healing etc.

4) Diversity and change of traditional practices of taking care of mother and child in Iran in different historical periods; its contemporary and historical dimensions and interaction with state medical and social systems.

5) Changes in the traditional conceptions of the role of mother and child' role during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty: the ambivalence of modernization.

6) Changes in the conceptions of the role of mother and child role after the Islamic Revolution. “Pure Islam” and folk beliefs and customs.

7) The dynamics of the idea of fertility in contemporary Iran and some perspectives of further changing the traditional ways of taking care of mother and child

**GERDA SENGERS** (The Netherlands: free-lance consultant, Amsterdam)

***Are Zar-Ceremonies Indeed Unislamic and is Koran Healing Fully in Accordance with the Islamic Faith? An Anthropological View***

My work has concentrated mainly on women in the poor neighbourhoods of Cairo. Their daily life is in many ways a recurrent challenge, especially when they fall ill. Not only do economic factors then play a key role but there is also a lack of understanding for their psychological problems. Often the blame for their misfortunes is placed on malicious spirits from the invisible world (possession), or the Evil Eye. If that is the case they seek the help of traditional healers. These healers are on hand in abundance and often live in the same lower income districts as they do and use an idiomatic language closer to them than that of scientifically trained doctors.

Rising pressure of fundamentalism makes many women feel guilty when they attend zar-ceremonies (a healing trance dance). They are accused of being bad Muslims when they do so, because the ceremonies are considered unislamic. On the other hand, a new class of healers promote Koran-healing (a form of exorcism). Here women are told that illness is their own fault because they were lax in their faith. However, in spite of criticism and pressure, women continue to attend zar-ceremonies. Some attend sessions of Koran healing too.

**MARJA TIILIKAINEN** (Finland: University of Helsinki, Academy of Finland)

***Witches, Spirits and Human Worlds: Ethnographic Notes from Northern Somalia***

Islamic medicine entered the Horn of Africa during the expansion of Islam. In Somalia the Prophet's medicine gained particular popularity, which assumed that spirits, witchcraft and evil eye were the causes of illnesses. Pre-Islamic healing practices such as the saar (zar) cult, have been used alongside with Islamic practices and bio-medicine, and, hence, laid the foundation for medical pluralism.

Relatively little has been written on the evil eye and witchcraft in Somalia. According to I. M. Lewis (1998) and Virginia Luling (2002) the evil eye and witchcraft, sixir [sihir], have not been central features in Somali culture. According to my recent fieldwork the situation has changed. In the past, possession by jinn was quite a rare event, but nowadays it has almost become an 'epidemic'. The number of sixir cases has also increased. On the contrary, saar rituals are rarely organized when compared with previous practice. Another interesting dimension may be found among Somalis from the diaspora who travel to Somalia and consult traditional healers in cases which seem to fall outside the domain of western bio-medicine, meaning mainly cases of witchcraft, spirit possession and evil eye.

The aim of this paper is to highlight today's Somali cultural understandings on witchcraft, spirits, and related healing techniques. The change in healing traditions is understood to be taking place within the context of the post-war social, political and religious situation in Somalia (Somaliland), and, moreover, globalization and transnational life-worlds. The paper is part of my on-going post-doctoral research, where I focus on illness and healing experiences among Somali families in the diaspora, in particular Finland. The paper is based on ethnographic data which was gathered during a five-week field work in Somaliland, mainly Hargeysa area, in the summer 2005.