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A CENTRAL ASIAN PANORAMA



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SUMMER 2008

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On Ancient Central Asian Tracks





Setting off with only the travelogue of an eighteenth-century Sufi mystic and a book on the Muslim shrines of Xinjiang, historian **Alexandre Papas** and photographer **Lisa Ross** observe the 'cult of saints' as they follow along the holy paths of the Taklamakan Desert.

Photographs and captions by **Lisa Ross**



previous spread: MAZARS

In Arabic, *mazar* literally means 'place of visitation'; in Xinjiang, a *mazar* is a holy place where Muslim saints, Sufi poets, mystical healers, martyrs and leaders have been buried. Some *mazars* are shrines located at sites where a saint may have stopped to pray or rest, or where a hero died or disappeared. Others incorporate elements of nature (such as trees or natural springs) that are believed to have mystical abilities to heal the spirit or body. The Taklamakan Desert is littered with *mazars* such as the one shown on the previous pages, to which Uighurs have made pilgrimages for over ten centuries

above: CULT OF SAINTS

The Uighur practice of visiting the tombs of saints speaks to a rich and diverse past and has been a central aspect of Islam in this region for centuries. The symbols and goods brought by pilgrims to such holy places indicate various religious influences from Buddhism, Manichaeism and Turkic-Mongol shamanism. Aspects of these different religions have been incorporated into Uighur Islam's *mazar* practice, also referred to as the 'cult of saints'. Colourful from a distance, this *mazar* is decorated with shamanic dolls, bits of clothing, mirrors and rocks all left behind from previous pilgrimages – each item representing faith and desire for healing and for clear communion with God. Pilgrims have their own ways of showing respect when they arrive at a *mazar*; the man pictured sang verses from the Qur'an and circled the site three times

Muhammad Zalili, an eighteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet, was not quite forty when he decided to leave his hometown, Yarkand, near the Taklamakan Desert (in present-day Xinjiang, western China) on a spiritual odyssey. He had spent his life acquiring an extensive knowledge of the classical Islamic sciences, and had become a renowned scholar in this field. He left his town for the ancient desert tracks to see what they could teach him, sure that visiting *mazars* (holy places) would teach him more than he could ever learn at the mosque or *madrasa* (religious school); he hoped they would lead him to a deeper understanding of his own faith.

Zalili travelled eastwards, visiting and venerating dozens of saints buried at *mazars* beneath the desert dunes. (*Mazar* translates from Arabic as 'place of visitation'; in Xinjiang and much of Central Asia, a *mazar* connotes a saint's sacred burial place.) Zalili slept alone by the graves, stayed with strangers in Sufi lodges and prayed with any and every pilgrim he met along his way. On his quest he met mystics, healers, madmen and ordinary people. He also encountered deceased saints who appeared in dreams or during trances, and others who made him sing and dance to show his piety. It was through these experiences, which forever marked and fully transformed him, that Zalili learned the true meaning of divine love and peace. When he returned to Yarkand several years later, he wrote the *Safar-nama*, a narrative of his initiatory journey in Turkic verse.

Yarkand, where Zalili's journey began, is situated between Kashgar and Khotan at the western extreme of the Taklamakan. It has long been a strategic stop on the region's historic trade routes, which lead here after passing through the Tian Shan, Kunlun and Pamir Mountains. The region as a whole, populated mainly by Uighurs, is a land of geographical extremes, with the Pamirs to the west numbering amongst the world's highest mountains, while Turfan, on the northern rim of the Taklamakan, lies only 98 ft above sea level. Although today Xinjiang is part of China, it is culturally, historically and religiously closer to the Turkic Muslim cultures of Central Asia.

On the road that leads from Yarkand southeast to Khotan, the wind blows lightly in early summer, while dust and the sounds of cities cover the silence of the nearby desert where Uighurs bury their saints and relatives. Trucks and buses driving across

XINJIANG HAS BEEN A HOMETLAND TO SUFIS AND SAINTS SINCE THE FORMAL ARRIVAL OF ISLAM IN THE 10TH CENTURY

Xinjiang's desert roads do not venture beyond the limits of the main highway connecting the desert oases; it is too hot, too sandy and a little daunting. It is, however, along these ancient tracks, away from the main road, that Zalili and many pilgrims passed and continue to travel to seek peace for their souls at the *mazars* sheltering some of the great saints of Central Asian Islam, including missionaries, martyrs and poets.

There are several kinds of *mazars* in the region: some are monumental, bearing green or blue cupolas and forming an entire religious complex complete with a mosque and *madrasa* nearby. Others, more humble, are composed of a small mausoleum and cemetery, while many are bare, anonymous tombs scattered in the desert. But all are holy places, held to be protected by God, that generate respect and veneration – expressed by the numerous ritual objects that adorn the *mazars* and are sometimes offered as sacrifices.

As elsewhere in Central Asia, Islam in Xinjiang is deeply influenced by Sufism, the mystical tradition of the faith. A common practice in Sufism is the veneration of saints, who are considered intermediaries between humans and God. These saints are highly revered as intimate friends (*wali*) of God. Because the aim of a Sufi is to attain sanctity in order to achieve intimacy with the Divine, Sufis foster the 'cult of saints' by constructing and patronising shrines and encouraging pilgrimages. Xinjiang has been a homeland to Sufis and saints since the formal arrival of Islam in the tenth century, and the *mazars* that dot its stark landscape are proof of this longstanding tradition.

Although pilgrimage to *mazars* does not figure amongst the five religious duties in Islam, it still represents a central practice in the informal traditions of Central Asian Islam, nowhere more so than in Xinjiang. As saints are viewed as intermediaries between the

TODAY ... A NUMBER OF LARGE PILGRIMAGES STILL TAKE PLACE: THROGS OF PEOPLE GATHER FOR WEEKS AT A TIME

here and hereafter, Uighur Muslims visit holy tombs for various purposes: to ask for assistance, to be cured from illness, to make ritual sacrifices, to pray, to experience mystical states and to find divine love; some even believe that a visit to seven different *mazars* is equivalent to the *Hajj*, or a visit to Mecca.

Likewise, pilgrimage to these holy shrines takes multiple forms: for certain *mazars* there are annual pilgrimages, while others attract visitors on a daily basis. Today, believers continue to venerate saints despite restrictions imposed by the authorities. During the holy months of Ramadan and Muharram, or during the birthday celebrations of certain saints, a number of large pilgrimages still take place; throngs of people gather for weeks at a time, often to pray and fast together but also to sing, dance and celebrate.

Admittedly, one meets fewer pilgrims today than during the eighteenth century. Though many *mazars* have existed for centuries, they remain fragile and ephemeral – not only because of the delicacy of their construction and materials but also because the cultural heritage and religious practice they represent is in danger of becoming lost. As Xinjiang officially became a part of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Uighur culture underwent forced assimilation into the Chinese mainstream through education, tourism and modernisation. Sufism, once prevalent in this region, is no longer practised openly. Some large *mazar* pilgrimages have been discontinued. Numerous changes in land use and modernisation may contribute to the end of pilgrimages and the 'cult of saints' in Xinjiang altogether, and the desert may eventually encroach upon the *mazars*. Despite these threats, devotees continue to pay homage to the saints of Islam at the remaining sacred *mazars*.

As Zalili ventured east, he arrived in Khotan – the next large trading post on the southern rim of the Taklamakan. He remained

there for some time, spending his days wandering from *mazar* to *mazar*, worshipping night and day. After seven years, he left, travelling further east across the Taklamakan on a journey of several days in order to reach the remote town of Niya – home to the *mazar* that Zalili called his Mecca, which signified the completion of his spiritual journey. Upon his arrival at what was to be his final destination, he passed through eleven symbolic gates, moving from the profane to the sacred. After making his final ablutions, he arrived at the *mazar's* shrine – where, according to tradition, an eighth-century *imam* from Medina had once stopped to spread Islam in this desert region. This *qadamgah* (setting-foot-place) of an early Islamic saint is as highly venerated today as it was in the past, despite its recent conversion by the local authorities into a tourist spot – with an entry fee, explanatory signs and regulation of rituals. The sacred nature of this mausoleum, however, is not so easily converted, perhaps because, as Zalili explains in the *Safar-nama*: 'The ultimate destination of any pilgrimage is the very heart of the believer.' □

Because of the political sensitivity surrounding many of the mazars described and photographed here, specific names and locations have been consciously omitted in order to protect the sites, as well as the pilgrims who frequent them.

The author and photographer wish to thank **Rahile Dawut**, a Uighur ethnographer and author of two books on the Muslim shrines of Xinjiang that they used as guides, available at bookstores in Urumqi. Without Dawut's personal guidance and collaboration, this project would not have been possible.

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ORNAMENTS

Saints are believed to be immortal and are revered with certain ornaments such as stuffed sheepskins, animal horns, wood carvings and yak tails, as well as scarves and flags – all beseeching tokens of well-being, fertility, love and spiritual guidance. Such offerings of *shidde* (wooden ornaments) and hand-sewn amulets, pictured here, commonly mark a shrine. They are tied to branches pushed into the ground by pilgrims. Each year the burial markers are renewed, rebuilt or replaced to ensure they are not lost over time



Uighur *mazars* are rich in their diversity. Although they share elements in common, each develops uniquely in relation to the landscape, history and special qualities that a particular saint is believed to possess. *Mazars* can vary from elaborately decorated structures to small mounds of dirt. This crib-like structure surrounds the tomb of a great and powerful saint. The more powerful a saint's healing powers, the more he or she is venerated. This *mazar* is decorated with flags and sheepskins as well as the body of a swan with wings outspread – a sacrifice representing great devotion. The door at the front of this *mazar* is both functional and symbolic, opened on special occasions by the *shaykh* who guards the tomb. At other times, pilgrims stand outside to offer their prayers



This simple shrine marks the burial site of a local person. It is considered highly auspicious to be buried in close proximity to a great saint or saints. When visiting a family member's burial site, relatives will also stop at the tombs of nearby saints to offer prayers for loved ones living and dead. The *yamdaq* (broom) attached to the bottom of the tall branches is there to sweep away evil spirits



The gate (pictured above) and the marker (above right) are part of the same *mazar* but serve different purposes. At this site, men and women separate; the men walk through the eleven gates marking the symbolic route to the tomb of the saint. In order to benefit from the full spiritual value of the pilgrimage, they must pass through each of these gates. It was at this *mazar* that the Sufi poet Zailili ended his pilgrimage and found his Mecca

Women, most of whom come to this shrine to pray for fertility, have left brightly coloured scarves and pieces of clothing as markers of their prayers. Many women visit *mazars* seeking guidance in resolving marriage difficulties, for example, or to ask that a child pass his or her school exams. Uighur women are active participants in *mazar* practice; it provides an important spiritual outlet for them, as attending mosques is not always an option for women. They often take an active role not only in visiting *mazars* but also in serving as caretakers



HOLY WATER

Many *mazars* incorporate elements of nature that offer healing powers, such as a water source or a very old tree. The natural stream running beneath this wooden shelter originates from a spring on a nearby mountainside. Pilgrims come from far and wide to cleanse their bodies in this water. The shelter is covered with brightly coloured fabrics, which in themselves are signs of veneration. Inside, pilgrims stand on planks as they pour water over their bodies to bathe.



HEAVENLY TREES

Pilgrims bring these *tugh-alem* – tall, thin tree trunks and long poplar branches – to the desert to mark their visits. It is common to tie flags and scraps of material to these sticks every time a new pilgrim arrives. The taller and more numerous the *tugh-alem*, the greater the saint whose tomb they mark. Ladders indicate the journey of the deceased spirit towards Heaven. The low structure visible in the distance is a *khanaqa*, a place where pilgrims carry out rituals or stay the night. It also functions as a religious classroom as well as a place for praying together over long periods of time



above and opposite: FLAGS

Sinking into the sands of the Taklamakan Desert, these handmade wooden cribs mark the burial places of saints. *Alem* (flags) play a large role in *mazar* practice. Pilgrims bring material or scarves to mark a prayer or wish, and the colours of the *alem* carry a personal significance. Uighurs believe that when the wind blows through the *alem*, bad spirits flee



following spread: CRESTING THE WAVE

At this *mazar*, the sand dunes are strewn with objects reminiscent of wooden river rafts. This burial marker seems to be cresting the dunes with its sails of coloured scarves, sewn by hand onto and around the tops of tall poplar branches sunk deep into the sand











previous spread: DESERT OASIS

Poplar trees line the lanes of villages throughout Xinjiang. It is considered auspicious to be buried close to a saint's tomb so that the dead can benefit from the *baraka* (spiritual power) of that holy person; as a result, cemeteries around certain *mazars* are often quite large. At this *mazar*, wooden burial markers are painted in bright colours and maintained by relatives. The contrasting colours at this site induce a magical sacred feeling when the setting sun casts its golden light across it.

above: ON THE FRINGE

Although not a burial marker for a saint, the number of flags decorating this *mazar* indicate that the person buried here is, in all likelihood, highly revered. Flags with fringes are popular amongst the Uighur and often have names or words from the Qur'an embroidered onto them.



SACRIFICE

Although sacrifice is no longer performed openly in *mazar* practice, the rams' horns and skulls piled up on this wall are representative of ritual sacrifice and saint veneration



YAK TAILS

Yak tails are common ornaments used at *mazars* in southeastern Xinjiang. The use of animal skins and hides evokes the oneness of creation. Pilgrims use a variety of symbolic objects to obtain the desired benediction. For instance, one cure for marital problems involves building a miniature hearth near the tomb along with the recitation of prayers. To cure physical ailments, pilgrims leave behind related objects for the saint (e.g. a pair of shoes for problems with the feet)



HORNS

Animal horns and skulls signify the holiness of this *mazar*. These sacrificial ornaments function as offerings and markers, and demonstrate a meticulous use of natural material



HOLY RELIC

Not long ago, this site was greatly venerated. According to legend, 200 sheep would be sacrificed in one night during the annual pilgrimage to this *mazar* because of the greatness of the saint buried here. But the bare branches demonstrate that it has not been possible for pilgrims to visit this site for the last eight years. Instead, a few hundred metres down the slope, a new *mazar* has been opened. It is an official Chinese tourist site complete with entrance fees and a parking lot for tour buses. At this *mazar*, which goes by the same name, ribbons emblazoned with Chinese characters are sold to tourists to tie onto an ancient tree believed to have curative powers. The official information written for tourists tells of a Chinese legend connected to the site – a history somewhat different from the site's local Uighur history

following spread: WALK THE LINE

At certain larger *mazars*, mass pilgrimage takes place on special days – saints' days or other days of celebration. The route to the *mazar* is then festive. At the edge of the desert before the pilgrimage begins, a large bazaar is set up selling food and various goods related to the pilgrimage. Entire lambs are roasted in underground pits, served by the kilo and eaten by pilgrims relaxing beneath canopies. As seen here, Uighurs are famous for *dawaz* (tightrope walking), an art form they have practised for hundreds of years. Other forms of entertainment include magicians and wrestlers, while camels are also available for hire







ON THE EDGE

Pilgrims stop to pray on top of a sand dune overlooking a burial site. There are numerous smaller burial sites located along the path of the pilgrimage, at which people stop to pay their respects before reaching the larger *mazar* of the great saint.



SHEEPSKINS

In Xinjiang, sheep are a staple commodity, used for both meat and wool. In *mazar* practice, sheep are considered holy for sacrifice; their skins are sewn together and stuffed with straw, then placed atop branches at burial sites



WOODEN CRIB

This burial marker shows the care and craftsmanship common among Uighur memorials. Verses from the Qur'an are inscribed on this wooden crib in addition to a declaration (in both Arabic and Chagatai Turkic) that the man buried here lived, supposedly, to 109 years of age. The structure represents the dome of a mosque, topped with wooden crescents



PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

Pilgrims pray at the foot of a shrine along the route of their pilgrimage. At this point, they are approximately halfway to the great tomb of one of the most venerated saints. The camel caravan in the background is actually an amusement ride travelling to and from the *mazar*



HOLY MAN

A mullah, and other religious men like him, line the pilgrimage route, praying. As pilgrims pass by, they make offerings of bread, candy and small change



END OF THE ROAD

Often, there are no roads leading to *mazars*. Families travel by foot, donkey, motor scooter or camel, pulling their carts over the sand. In spring, an annual festival draws thousands of pilgrims to this *mazar*. The route is celebratory, and provides an opportunity to meet different people than met in daily life. *Ashik* (lovers of God) and Sufi ascetics line the way, singing or praying. Umbrella stands are set up by merchants selling raisins, nuts and rosaries with 'Allah' written on each bead. The red gate pictured above displays writing in Chinese and Uighur that specifies policies to be observed while at the *mazar*. In Xinjiang, these are set by government officials and may affect some religious activity. To the right in the photograph is a parking area for donkey carts



following spread: THE FINAL DESTINATION

Pictured overleaf is the rear view of the *mazar* depicted here during the annual pilgrimage that takes place at this site every May. It is said that over 20,000 pilgrims visit over the month-long celebrations. This site is a thirty-minute walk through the desert from the smallest nearby village, which is where the large bazaar is set up. Often, pilgrims arrive at the *mazar* the evening before the big pilgrimage begins, and it is not uncommon for them to stay up all night, praying around the structure. This particular *mazar* contains a building, covered in flags, that houses the saint's tomb. In the background, are the mosque and *madrassa* – neither of which function at capacity today. Rooms set to the side of the courtyard offer a place to stay for pilgrims visiting the site throughout the year on more private occasions



