



**THE EMOTIONAL WORLD OF ISLAM:  
A Review of SVETLANA PESHKOVA,  
WOMEN, ISLAM AND IDENTITY:  
PUBLIC LIFE IN PRIVATE SPACES IN UZBEKISTAN.  
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, 352 pp.**

**Anna Cieślowska**

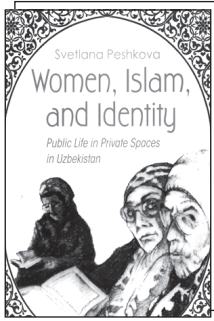
Jagiellonian University  
24 Gołębia Str., Krakow, Poland  
acieslewska@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This review discusses *Women, Islam, and Identity, Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* by Svetlana Peshkova, who analyses the status and role of female informal religious practitioners called *bibi otin / otin-oy / otinča*, in Uzbekistan. These spiritual female leaders deal with a variety of issues related to spiritual life, teaching children, and women religion, as well as performing rituals and prayers for the female part of the community in some parts of Central Asia. Peshkova analyses the sphere of influence of female religious leaders in the context of religion and everyday life. The material reflects the political, social, and economic issues of Uzbekistan by exploring the personal narratives of three female personages. The book is based on a field research conducted by the author in 2001, 2002–3, and 2011 in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley.

**Key words:** female religious leaders, Islam, a religious policy, Uzbekistan.

**To cite:** Cieślowska A., 'The Emotional World of Islam: A Review of Svetlana Peshkova, *Women, Islam and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, 352 pp.', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2016, no. 12, pp. 278–281.

**URL:** <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng012/cieslewska.pdf>



**Svetlana Peshkova.** *Women, Islam, and Identity, Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, 352 pp.

This review discusses *Women, Islam, and Identity, Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* by Svetlana Peshkova, who analyses the status and role of female informal religious practitioners called *bibi otin / otin-oy / otinça*, in Uzbekistan. These spiritual female leaders deal with a variety of issues related to spiritual life, teaching children, and women religion, as well as performing rituals and prayers for the female part of the community in some parts of Central Asia. Peshkova analyses the sphere of influence of female religious leaders in the context of religion and everyday life. The material reflects the political, social, and economic issues of Uzbekistan by exploring the personal narratives of three female personages. The book is based on a field research conducted by the author in 2001, 2002–2003, and 2011 in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley.

Keywords: female religious leaders, Islam, a religious policy, Uzbekistan.

### The Emotional World of Islam

The role of women and their position in Islamic society may be one of the few topics in current research on Islam that has been intensely discussed. One of the questions examined within this topic is the function of female religious leaders in different parts of the Muslim world, including Central Asia. In the Central Asian tradition women who engage in religious educational and ritual activities professionally are called *bibi otin, otin-oy, otinça*, etc. Mention should be made of authors such as Habiba Fathi, Razyia Sultanova, Deniz Kandiyoti and Nadira Azimova, Rakhmat Rakhimov and Olga Gorshunova, who have addressed this question in their work. The book under review, Svetlana Peshkova's *Women, Islam, and Identity, Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan*, represents another outstanding contribution to the field. Peshkova's study is based on fieldwork carried out by the author in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley in 2001, 2002–2003 and 2011. In it she examines questions connected with the role, status and function of Muslim women leaders in Uzbek society. The book is the result of many years of research. The materials it presents are mostly concerned with the spheres of influence of women religious leaders in the context both of religion and of the life of society.

**Anna Cieślowska**

Jagiellonian University,  
24 Gołębia str., Krakow,  
Poland  
acieslawska@gmail.com

The book is an important contribution to the study of the role of female Muslim religious leaders because of the unique character of the research and also its original approach to its topic. The author combines the experience of fieldwork with knowledge of the relevant scholarly literature, theological and religious questions. It is noticeable first of all that Peshkova has managed to avoid a mistake that is often made in relation to Islam, namely the representation of that religion as an isolated, self-sufficient system, functioning in isolation from the object of research, which is Islamic society.

In this book Islam is represented in the context of the practices of everyday life, which are inseparable from a person's activity, fate, attitudes to other members of society and to himself. This approach to the question being studied allows the persons and actions presented in the book to be seen in a concrete social reality. In this way they become closer to the reader.

The material collected is presented using the examples of three women living in the same social milieu in a town in the Fergana Valley. At the same time, the history of these people reflects the dynamic processes of change taking place in post-Soviet Central Asia and Uzbekistan generally. Each woman's spiritual journey has been undertaken in a different way as she strove to convey her knowledge, religious practice and moral values to her family and community. The structure of the book, which is partly based on real events from their personal life, is worth particular attention. Thanks to this structure the work represents a very interesting and absorbing story, while not losing its scholarly character.

The book consists of six chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, a list of works cited, a glossary and a bibliographical index. Each chapter is divided into two parts, which are freely structured and intersect with each other. The first part of a chapter is essentially orientated towards an analysis of the research material. The ethnography is sometimes supplemented by the motif of the author's personal life. The second part, printed in italics, is a sort of private diary of her journeys to Uzbekistan, describing the events that take place there and also the author's life, emotions, personal experiences and observations. The author thus becomes part of the reality that she describes. This style of writing means that the research anthropologist is less distanced from the object of her research, and in contrast to 'classical' scholarly publications is at the centre of the process. Despite its 'informal' nature, the second part has a great practical significance. It describes the conditions of research into Islam in Uzbekistan and the attitude of the powers that be towards foreign researchers and their activities. Thus the 'informal' part is a description of the circumstances in which the scholar conducted her fieldwork.

In the introduction the author briefly examines her methodology and the topic of research, and also gives general information about the structure of the book. The first chapter introduces the reader to the subject of the book by recounting the story of the life and work of one of its main figures, Tursun-oy, a teacher of Islam and at the same time a moral and religious authority amongst women. The author describes her personal relationship with Tursun-oy, who is her friend and teacher at the same time, and who introduced her to the nuances of local Islam.

The second chapter looks back over the time when the research was conducted in relation to the various political and social events of the period which affected the lives of the people presented in the book. This part of the work shows very clearly how political events determine what happens to people, what they do, how they behave, and what opportunities they have.

The next chapter tells the stories of Nainakhon and Zhakhon, two women who, together with Tursun-oy, are the key figures of the book. Their story is the story of the journey of religious development that each of them chose for herself in order to remain a spiritual authority in her community. These histories are at the same time the background for a discussion of questions of women's rights in Central Asia and their evolution from the pre-revolutionary period, through Soviet times to the present day, in the context of Uzbek culture and tradition.

The fourth chapter is in my opinion worthy of special attention; it deals with ethnographic material on current female religious practices and traditions in Uzbekistan. This chapter is devoted to the religious stories (masala) during rituals and women's events. Each story consists of unique material, on the basis of which it may be seen how religious leaders form their authority by passing on knowledge. The stories, which have a moral and educative significance, affect the students' view of the world. The collected material is very interesting and is intended to show how the process of studying religious questions, and also religious and spiritual practice, can affect the evolution of a person's religious consciousness and how this is reflected in their relationships in their personal and social life.

The fifth and sixth chapters continue the life stories of the book's main characters in the context of changing political realities and the relationship between religion and the state in Uzbekistan. Peshkova enumerates such instruments as religious lessons, various rituals, and women's meetings and events, which make up the sphere of influence of female religious leaders. At the same time they reflect the ideology, practice and requirements of the state towards Islam and religious leaders. The religious policy of the Uzbek state is taking new measures regarding the *otinça*, who are nowadays under its

supervision. It should be stressed that the *otinča* always acted informally, and their inclusion in the framework of official state Islam may have a negative effect on their activity. This means a practically total control over religious institutions in Uzbekistan, leaving a very narrow field for autonomy or independent action. Similar attempts by the state regarding the *otinča* may also be observed in Tajikistan.

The conclusion sums up Peshkova's research, which was suddenly cut short by the Uzbek authorities, who are suspicious of the activities of foreign scholars. In this context the conclusion is not simply an illustration of one researcher's progress. This section of the monograph makes one think about the future of research into Islam not only in Uzbekistan, but in the whole Central Asian region.

The author may be reproached by some for idealising the characters and cultural realities described in the book. However, considering her emotional involvement, this sort of emotional and subjective approach is understandable. The process of anthropological research is always an individual journey which changes the researcher and forms her outlook on life and individual approach to various problems. It is hard to remain neutral when one enters into relationships with people, but at the same time this should not interfere with the interpretation of the phenomena observed. The author of this book analyses the reality that she has observed very individually, and concentrates on specific problems. For this reason the reader may feel dissatisfied with the discussion of certain questions, such as the transformation of Islam in Uzbekistan. Perhaps this problem should have been presented in a wider context in connection with the doctrinal questions affecting the current changes in the tradition of the Hanafi madhhab in Central Asia.

Overall, however, the book is unique of its kind, and its appearance has made a great contribution to research on the religious practice of women and on female religious leaders in Central Asia. The relatively long period of time (2002–2011) that Peshkova's study addresses has allowed it to show changes in the lives of the particular persons who appear in the book in the context of changes in Uzbekistan and the entire world. Svetlana Peshkova's work is an important voice in the discussion on female religious leaders in Central Asia.

*Anna Cieślowska*

*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*