

ISLAMIC CULTURE AND PRE-ISLAMIC BELIEFS IN CENTRAL ASIA
EDITED BY MIHAI DRAGNEA, DORINA DRAGNEA, AND
ANTONIO ALONSO MARCOS
BOOK-REVIEW

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Abstract

Islamic Culture and Pre-Islamic Beliefs in Central Asia (Lexington Books, 2024) offers a multidisciplinary examination of the religious, political, and cultural landscapes of Central Asia from antiquity to the post-Soviet era. Structured in five thematic sections, the volume interrogates the interplay between longstanding spiritual traditions and the profound transformations imposed by modern statehood and ideological regimes.

This volume represents a significant scholarly contribution to the study of Central Asian religious and cultural history. Distinguished by high editorial standards and exceptional graphic presentation across its 298 pages, the work brings together a coherent and intellectually rigorous set of studies. The editors, Mihai Dragnea, Dorina Dragnea, and Antonio Alonso Marcos have successfully curated a multidisciplinary collection that deepens understanding of Islamic traditions and pre-Islamic belief systems in the region.

The book's clarity, methodological diversity, and engagement with understudied topics make it a valuable resource for specialists and an important addition to the existing body of academic literature.

Keywords: Islamic culture; Central Asia; Balkans; religious studies; anthropology; archaeology; political history

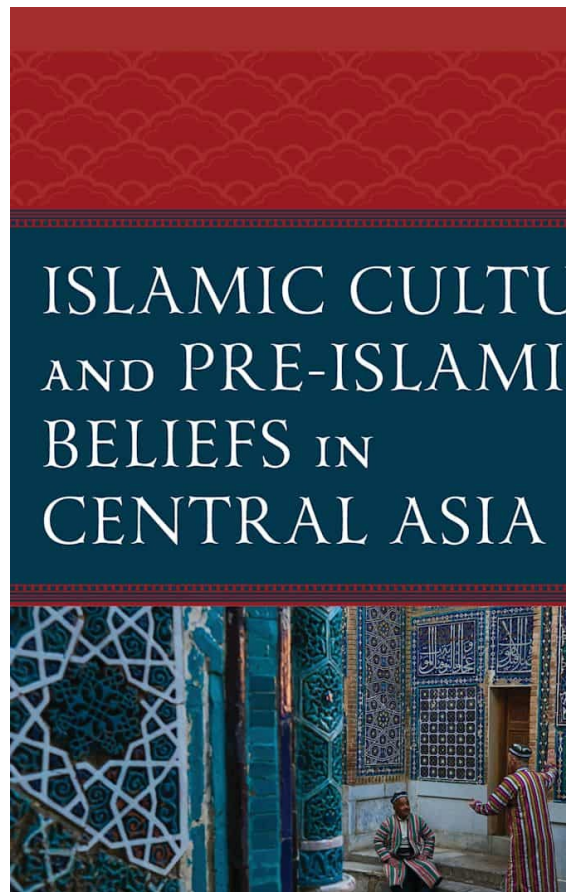
By foregrounding both historical depth and contemporary transformation, the volume *Islamic Culture and Pre-Islamic Beliefs in Central Asia* advances an interdisciplinary approach that integrates religious studies, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and political history. It invites scholars to reconsider Central Asia not merely as a recipient of external religious influences but as a locus of sustained innovation in Islamic thought and practice. In doing so, the volume contributes to diversifying global Islamic studies and encourages further international engagement with a region whose religious heritage remains understudied yet profoundly significant.

The study of Islam in Central Asia, particularly in relation to the enduring presence of pre-Islamic belief systems, offers critical insights into the region's complex religious and

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cultural formations. Pre-Islamic traditions, encompassing a spectrum of local cosmologies, ritual practices, and even residual Christian elements, continue to shape contemporary religious expression, often in ways insufficiently explored within Western scholarship. This volume addresses this lacuna by presenting new research on a region whose historical trajectories and cultural specificities have remained largely peripheral to Anglophone academic discourse, despite being well documented in Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship.

The contributions assembled examine the multilayered transmission of Islamic norms, values, and pedagogical frameworks across diverse social strata, age groups, and gendered experiences. They highlight how religious knowledge circulates within family structures, community networks, and institutional settings, thereby underscoring the embeddedness of Islam in everyday life. At the same time, the chapters draw attention to the subtle but persistent integration of pre-Islamic motifs and practices into Islamic contexts, revealing a dynamic process of cultural adaptation and continuity.



The first section analyses the Soviet Union's legal and ideological mechanisms for regulating religion, revealing how communist atheism reshaped Islamic institutions and collective identities.

The second section explores contemporary debates surrounding political Islam, assessing movements such as Hizb ut Tahrir and reconsidering the historical legacy of this approach in the light of emerging neo-Salafi currents.

The third section turns to material culture, presenting new archaeological and numismatic evidence that illuminates pre-Islamic religious architectures and early Islamic ritual practices.

The fourth section investigates sacred geography and religious mobility in Uzbekistan, focusing on pilgrimage sites in Samarkand and Bukhara during periods of political liberalization.

The final section addresses questions of language, mythology, and ethnogenesis, offering semantic and ethnographic analyses of religious concepts among the Karakalpaks and Qashqai Turks. Collectively, the contributions provide a comprehensive and innovative account of the continuities and ruptures that define Central Asia's religious heritage.

This volume aims to foster scholarly engagement with the history and cultural heritage of Central Asia within the academic context of the Balkans. Its primary objective is to foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the region's religious dynamics, an aspect that occupies a central position in the everyday life of the peoples of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, while simultaneously addressing the political, social, and historical processes that have shaped Central Asian societies. Particular emphasis is placed on the study of Islamic traditions, cultural practices, and the diverse strata of pre-Islamic belief systems that continue to inform contemporary identities.

Equally crucial is the volume's ambition to strengthen scientific and educational cooperation between public and private institutions in the Balkans and their counterparts across Central Asia. Conceived in late 2022 under the auspices of the Balkan History Association, the project has benefited from the support of several prominent institutions, including the Department of Distance Education of the Ellikqala Pedagogical Faculty, the Nukus State Pedagogical Institute named after Ajiniyaz, the Institute of Uzbek Language, Literature and Folklore in Tashkent, and the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. Two of the editors, Mihai Dragnea and Dorina Dragnea, along with contributors Venera Mustafayeva and Dareg Zabarah-Chulak, are affiliated with the Association, reflecting its central role in shaping the initiative.

The development of this volume has relied on the intellectual generosity of numerous scholars who provided expertise, research materials, and constructive recommendations during its preparation.

Their contributions have significantly enriched the project and underscored its scholarly value: Mihai Dragnea (president of the Balkan History Association and editor-in-chief of "Hiperboreea" Journal), Dorina Dragnea (Department of Intangible Heritage and Traditional Culture of the National Institute of Heritage, Bucharest, Romania), Antonio Alonso Marcos (San Pablo CEU University, Madrid), Elissa Bullion (University of Pittsburgh), Rui Kai Xue (School of Public Administration, Jilin University, China), Viachaslau Menkouski (History Department of the Belarusian State University in Minsk), Shambhavi Thite (Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India), Dareg Zabarah-Chulak (Balkan History Association), Shoiri Nurmukhamedova (Tashkent University of Architecture and Construction, Uzbekistan), Feruzjon Subkhonov (Samarkand Institute of Archaeology, Uzbekistan), Azim Malikov (Faculty of Arts of Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic), Fahri Türk (Department of Political Science of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Trakya University in Edirne, Turkey), Dolunay Yusuf Baltürk (Institute for Social Sciences, Master of Science Program for Political Science and International Relations, Trakya University, Edirne, Turkey), Gulzira Kdirbaeva (Nukus State Pedagogy University), Venera Mustafayeva (Topkapı University in Istanbul).

Islamic Culture and Pre-Islamic Beliefs in Central Asia is a highly recommended volume that offers a nuanced, interdisciplinary exploration of the region's religious heritage. Expertly edited, it provides valuable insights into Islamic traditions, pre-Islamic continuities, and cultural transformations, making it an essential resource for scholars and students alike.