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Venerating the *pir*: Patron saints of Muslim ceramists in Uzbekistan

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Venerating the *pir*: Patron saints of Muslim ceramists in Uzbekistan

In some Central Asian oases towns, the patron saints of craftsmen, known as *pir*, have continued to be venerated, despite the repression of Islam and changes to the industrial structure during the Soviet Era. This paper analyses the social function and individual significance of *pir* veneration in the modern era, using ethnographic observations and interviews conducted in a ceramic town in Uzbekistan. Today, many old customs practised in pottery studios have become mere formalities, and the controlling role of the *pir* over ceramist groups is declining. However, this is not necessarily indicative of an immediate decline in the *pirs*' power. Some ceramists believe their highly skilled masters to be quasi-*pirs* and that the *pir* provides them with desirable goals, in addition to an ideal form to which to aspire.

Keywords: Islam, saint, artisan, *pir*, Uzbekistan

Introduction

‘May the *pir* and masters protect us, amen [*pir-ustalar quvvat-madad qilsin, amin!*]’

I heard this prayer frequently at various gatherings of Muslim artisans in Rishton, a small town in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. The *pir* invoked here are patron saints revered in many Muslim communities as protectors of craftsmen and workers in various fields.ⁱ By the sixteenth century, the handicraft and several service industry workers' collectives that had formed in Central Asia had begun venerating the *pirs* (Mukminova 1976, 174). Today, in many oases towns in Uzbekistan, the idea that *pirs* watch over the labour and lives of their craftsmen still exists. For example, the Prophet David is regarded as the *pir* of the iron- and metal-working professions (such as blacksmiths and tinsmiths), and also of taxi drivers and craftsmen working with ironware in Rishton. However, there are regional variations, even within Uzbekistan, regarding who is the *pir* of which practice; and occasionally one profession will have multiple *pirs*.ⁱⁱ

The veneration of patron saints has been recognised in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and other countries in the Near East, and also in Eastern Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ Previous research on the patron saints of craftsmen in these regions include studies on occupational groups in Muslim societies, descriptions of *futuwwa* (spiritual chivalry)^{iv} and *risala* sources.^v However, this prior research has been limited by its dependence on written sources, and does not analyse individual beliefs concerning the pir. Though reports of pir veneration in Afghanistan and Xinjiang have emerged in recent years, the information provided has been rudimentary at best.^{vi} Meanwhile, existing research into pirs in South Asia does not include patron saints, and generally focuses on them as Sufi masters.^{vii}

In this scholarly context, the current study seeks to extend our understanding of pirs by exploring ethnographically their significance to ceramists in contemporary Uzbekistan. The paper describes and analyses in detail how ceramists in Uzbekistan today venerate their pirs, using data acquired through intensive interviews and observations in Rishton between 2002 and 2004. I focus especially on how the controlling role of the pir over ceramist groups changed during the Soviet era, the meanings of the apprentice system, and the signification of today's pir veneration among ceramists. In the interests of length I will only briefly describe the political factors that allowed pir veneration to continue during the Soviet era, concentrating instead on ceramists' motives to maintain that custom and transmit it to the younger generation.

The research is motivated by four central questions. First, in modern Uzbekistani society, which ceramists venerate the pir, and how do they do so? Second, how are craft gatherings affecting ceramists today? Third, how do ceramists understand the relationship between masters and pirs, as evinced by praying to the pir and the

masters as one? And finally, what is the significance of venerating the pir for individual ceramists in contemporary Uzbekistan?

By addressing these questions, the paper explores how a skilful ceramic master shapes their identity and promotes respect for the pir through apprenticeship. In so doing it will also reveal the deep relationship between daily customs in today's Uzbekistan and Sufi tradition. Many existing studies about vernacular Islam in Uzbekistan have considered this relationship. Louw (2007) and Rasanayagam (2011), for instance, depicted how Muslim people engage in moral reasoning by consulting local cultural models such as Islamic and Sufi idioms, community rituals, and transcendent experiences in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Sultanova (2011) explored the way the *Otin-Oy* (religiously educated women) maintained the cultural heritage of music and dance, which had deep connections with Shamanism and Sufism, while Peshkova (2014) observed how individual *Otin-Oys* influenced their surroundings through rituals and preaching so as to bring about social change. Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004) analysed several rituals of women in Uzbekistan, recognising the influence of Shi'ite tradition, Sufism, and pre-Islamic customs. In this paper, the relationship between *murshid* (Sufi master) and *murid* (disciple) within Sufism is important, since it is reflected in the apprenticeship relationship among ceramists and has become the pivotal means for transmitting knowledge and skills. Though Sultanova (2011, 60-70) has already connected the master-apprentice link with Sufi tradition, I expand her argument by exploring how this relationship shapes ceramists' routine of praying to their pirs and masters for protection on the one hand, and how it results in the efforts of masters to raise the next generation on the other.

This paper also contributes to debates over the worship of saints by adding a unique case study. Recent studies on saint worship have revealed that many Muslim

people continue to value saints despite industrialisation, urbanisation, the spread of literacy or scientific knowledge, and the information revolution (Bruinessen and Howell (eds.) 2007). However, these approaches have barely discussed the distinctive form of saint worship that lacks defined leaders and organisational structure. The ethnography presented in this paper seeks to address this lacuna.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the fieldwork and its context. The second provides a brief history of Rishton ceramics and the associated practices of pir veneration. The third section discusses how ceramists continued to venerate their pirs against the background of Islamic repression and changes in industrial structure during the Soviet Era. The fourth section focuses on the master-apprentice relationship to reveal why the distinction between masters and pirs tends to be blurred in ceramists' prayers. The fifth section explains the individual significance of pir veneration in contemporary Uzbekistan.

Fieldwork among the ceramists in Rishton

Rishton, the focal point of this paper, is situated on the southern side of the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. In 2001, it had a population of 32,425 (ISB 2001). Its main industries are farming and ceramics. According to older inhabitants and existing records (Eshpo'latov (ed.) 1996), by the beginning of the twentieth century, most inhabitants were Muslims who spoke Tajik as their native language and who worked mainly in commerce and handicrafts. In the surrounding farming villages, most of the inhabitants working on the farms were Uzbeks who spoke Uzbek as their mother-tongue, together with some Kyrgyz in charge of livestock. Most of the residents living in the town centre today still speak Tajik, but they can also speak Uzbek fluently.

My survey of Rishton's ceramics, conducted between spring 2002 and spring 2004, was made possible in large part by the assistance I received from Anvar (not his real name), an acclaimed ceramist with a national commendation. His introductions enabled me to interview most of the main ceramists in Rishton and to observe their work of ceramic production. In addition, I met scores of people employed in the ceramics industry and was able to interview over 100 of them. Most of the interviews, with the interviewees' consent, were recorded in Uzbek using a MiniDisc recorder. A local assistant provided translation support when the interviewees switched into Tajik. Relevant literature was also found in suburban libraries in Ferghana City, the National Library in Tashkent, and bookshops in Rishton. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the ceramists throughout the text.

A brief history of Rishton ceramics

Blessed with high-quality clay, Rishton has been famous for its pottery for centuries. It was the heart of the Ferghana School of ceramics in the nineteenth century. Its ceramics were renowned for their cobalt blue and green pigments of unique motifs, such as delicate designs of flora, water jugs, and knife patterns on a white background (Zhadova 1974, 15).

The Soviet ethnographer Peshchereva has written extensively about ceramics in Rishton from the end of the nineteenth century to the start of the twentieth century. In this period, according to Peshchereva (1959: 207-208), there were several hundred ceramists in Rishton comprising distinct expert craftsmen for each of the different types of object they produced and for every stage of producing each specific object. There were three ranks within the Rishton ceramists at that time: the highest ranks were

ustakor and *usta*, for independent master ceramists. Immediately below them was the rank of *xalifa*, for fully skilled adults without their own studios, who were employed by a master. The lowest rank was the *shogird*, used to denote the apprentices learning the trade (Peshchereva 1959, 346).

During this period, Rishton ceramists formed a craftsmen's collective called a *kasaba*.^{viii} The *kasaba* had a monopoly on the ceramics profession; upon becoming a member, one had to abide by its regulations (Peshchereva 1959, 376). Members of these well-defined social groups believed that 'the people beneath one's pir are one's family', and had close relations with fellow craftsmen who venerated the same pir (Peshchereva 1959, 365). The pir of all ceramists was Amir Kulol, who died in 1371, while the pir of those ceramists who worked with the *naqsh* pattern was Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband (1318–1389) (Peshchereva 1959, 356–357).

The Rishton ceramists were aware of two chief obligations to their pir at that time. The first was the offering known as *narz* or *nazr* to the self-proclaimed descendants of Amir Kulol, who arrived in Rishton from Bukhara. The ceramists of the town gave these *pirzoda* (the descendants of the pir) seven bowls from each kiln, as well as a gift of twenty to thirty ceramic objects each year. It also became customary to purchase firewood for the kilns from the *pirzoda*'s family, which enabled the latter to make an easy living (Peshchereva 1959, 357).^{ix} The second of these duties was to hold an *anjuman* banquet to celebrate the craftsman's independence. During this period, whenever a craftsman's apprentice wished to become an independent producer, he would have to undergo a rite of passage known in Central Asian communities as the *usta rozi* (master's satisfaction); however, among Rishton's ceramists, this was known as *anjuman*. At an *anjuman* ceremony, the town's ceramists, leaders, tradesmen, and *pirzoda* would be invited for entertainment and dining. At these events, the *pirzoda*

played an important role: they tied the hands of the apprentice-turned-master with a sash, and recited a pre-determined dialogue (Peshchereva 1959, 350–352). Despite the prohibitive cost associated with holding an *anjuman*, it was required of any new master, since failing to host the banquet would result in them being derided as ‘a pir-less master’, and members of the *kasaba* would remove the pottery wheel from the studio (Peshchereva 1959, 347–348).

In 1876, the Khanate of Kokand (which controlled Rishton at the time) was annexed by the Russian Empire, which then imploded in the 1917 revolution, leading ultimately to the formation of the Soviet Union. During the 1920s, the Soviets strengthened their control over Central Asia; in 1929, they started to collectivise agriculture. This system was designed to reform society by creating collective farms that had common access to the means of production. In this vein, the Soviets also collectivised the ceramics industry in Rishton.^x By 1941, all of the town’s ceramists had become members of the communal *artel*’ and *tsekh* production and management organisations (Peshchereva 1959, 209; Rakhimov 1961, 20–24). In these workplaces, national policy dictated the entire production process, from planning products and supplying materials to overseeing production and distribution. Consequently, the former distinctions between studio-owning masters and employees disappeared. This explains why I was unable to find any ceramists who knew the word *xalifa* (fully trained studio employee) while, within these collective workshops, the two-tiered structure of *usta* (master) and *shogird* (apprentice) was maintained.

In 1974, multiple ceramics production plants were merged together, creating a state-managed ceramics factory covering ten hectares. With the introduction of electric pulleys and shaped moulds, production in the plants was mechanised, and mass production commenced with the use of the conveyor belt. However, around ten skilful

masters were permitted to use small studios [*do'kon*] established by government on the ceramics factory premises. Production quotas were imposed on these studios but provided they were fulfilled, the masters had relative freedom to work on projects and could pass on both their traditional craft and respect for the *pir* to their young apprentices (Kikuta 2009, 117). These studio-nurtured masters were indispensable for the factory, as the short-term in-service training institute could not offer such expertise in pottery (Kikuta 2009, 104). Thus, compulsory collectivisation during the Soviet era inadvertently helped to preserve the apprentice system, serving as the principal channel for transferring both traditional skills and the practice of *pir* veneration. Policies regarding Islam and nationality in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras inevitably also influenced the continuity of respect for the *pirs*. The Soviet regime attempted to alienate its Muslim citizens from Islamic tradition by forbidding the use of the Arabic alphabet and by purging many Muslim intellectuals. At the same time, the Soviet Union granted each nationality some degree of territorial autonomy and attempted to encourage national identities. The tendency to glorify customs and traditions within Soviet society offered some customs the space to exist and continue as aspects of national heritage (Khalid 2007, 114). Thus, most Muslims were not given cause to doubt the Islamic authenticity of *pirs*, and they continued to regard *pir* veneration as simultaneously the duty of Muslims and a part of their national culture.

By the 1980s, about 2,000 people worked in the factory at any one time. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the management of the ceramics factory also collapsed. The now-unemployed labourers built kilns and studios in their homes and began to make ceramics there. In Rishton, there was no other noteworthy industry since the ground in the town provided most of the raw materials, and it was easy to learn some parts of the ceramic-making process from the plethora of former ceramics factory

labourers. As a result, the production and sale of ceramics expanded rapidly. From 2002 to 2004, the period during which I conducted my survey, several thousand people were employed in Rishton's ceramics industry. One resident commented that 'in Rishton, the clay provides us a way to earn a living', which seemed an accurate description.

The successors to venerating the pir

Distinguishing common knowledge and practice

'All professions have their own pir'. Even today, this saying is well known by the people in oasis cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand, and in the towns of the Ferghana Valley. Rishton is no exception. Ask anyone over the age of thirty, and they will usually be able to recite the names of the pirs of several different professions. In terms of their own pir, they consider it to be merely common sense to pray for divine protection. Approximately once a year, they should participate in a ceremony called the *xatmi qur'on*, where a *mullah* (a male Islamic expert) recites several chapters of the Koran, and customers are thanked for their patronage. They should also suspend a bag on the studio wall containing *risala* pamphlets, and recite the prayers that they advocate.

However, most of those I interviewed, who had started working in ceramics following independence, paid only lip service to their pir. In truth, they knew only some of the processes of simple pottery production and were eager to move on to more profitable jobs. Among these, one man, in his forties, left a deep impression on me in 2003. Having worked previously as a building plasterer, health problems had led him to change professions three years earlier and he began to bake teapots for daily use. His wife proudly informed me that he was a pious Muslim and undoubtedly knew his pir

well. However, when I asked him, ‘Who is the pir of ceramists?’, it was some time before he responded. After several minutes, he finally replied, ‘[it is] Bahā’ al-Dīn (Naqshband)’. He then muttered in Tajik, ‘I forgot the name of the pir among ceramists!’ in a bashful manner. He hastily added that he always mentioned the name of his pir when praying and that he should hold the *xatmi qur’ on* ceremony once a year for his pir, though he had not yet conducted it at all.

As this encounter suggests, it is common knowledge amongst the ‘newcomer’ ceramists that one should pray to the pir for success in one’s work, but many are not particularly informed about what this worship should entail. Moreover, I was unable to find a copy of the ceramists’ *risala* in Rishton at the time of my research. Although various versions of the *risala* were retitled as *nurnoma*, republished, and resold in bazaars in 2003, the ceramists’ *risala* has yet to be reissued.^{xi} Though most of the ceramists I interviewed said that they would want to obtain a copy if it were reissued, it is obvious that working without it currently presents no obstacles for them.

Shrinking control of anjuman

At the end of the nineteenth century, the master ceramists in Rishton were required to hold the expensive *anjuman* ceremony and to receive the blessing of the *pirzoda* so as to become independent. It is clear that, at that time, the *anjuman* functioned to fix a level for masters, both in terms of numbers of goods produced and skills demonstrated. This social function of *anjuman* still exists in some industries today. According to a Rishton carpentry master in June 2003, their *anjuman* is still held as an advancement ceremony, where new masters are tested on difficult techniques. They wrap the youth in a long cloth during the examination, resembling the initiation of the Persian Khaksariyya, Turkish Bektaşiyе and Mevleviyе tariqas, described by Zarccone (2008). Barbers also

wrap new masters in a long cloth, teach them about their pir, and provide some ethical lessons during their *anjuman* in Rishton. Furthermore, I heard from tinsmiths that they held *anjuman* several times a year, at which over 500 people working in this field in the Ferghana Valley gather to exchange techniques and present their good deeds to their pir (Kikuta 2013a, 2013b).

In the immediate post-Soviet period in Rishton, ceramists no longer practiced the *anjuman* ceremony designed to maintain skill levels and to regulate the number of master ceramists. As some ceramists explained to me, because all the ceramists worked in the same factory during the Soviet regime, the masters were readily able to identify which apprentices had matured sufficiently, thereby rendering the ritual unnecessary for examination and seeking of approval. Furthermore, the male line of the *pirzoda* had died out during the Soviet era, together with the custom of inviting them to *anjumans*.^{xii}

By 2003, however, some of the young masters had slowly been reviving the *anjuman*, though its social function differed from its previous guise. Today, the *anjuman* is regarded as a worthwhile optional ceremony that can be held by sufficiently independent masters when they wish to do so. In fact, in 2003, a ceramist in his thirties held an *anjuman*, and a ceramist in his twenties wanted to hold one; both believed that ‘doing so would make their work go well’, and that it was a sort of magical ceremony essential for their success in their work. Instead of inviting all the other ceramists, invitations were issued mainly to their masters, relatives, and neighbours. Today, then, the *anjuman* for ceramists is primarily of personal significance, allowing independent ceramists to pray for success in their work.

Revision of customs among ‘pir-fearing’ ceramists

As noted above, the social functions of the *anjuman* among the Rishton ceramists have changed extensively, but this has not resulted in the complete decline of pir veneration among them. Among the skilful ceramists who learned their trade over several years in the Soviet ceramics factory studios, as well as among their families and apprentices, the pir is venerated eagerly. They are proud of being ‘true ceramists’ (*haqiqiy kulollar*). Estimates suggest that, by 2003, such ceramists numbered about 200^{xiii} and the majority were men. I met with forty of these masters, during which occasions I witnessed many of them ask the pir for help when they began their work, fired the kiln, and sometimes during the different processes involved in making ceramics. They knew various anecdotes about the pirs of ceramists, and relayed them to their apprentices. Although many of the newcomer ceramists have since left the profession, as they could earn much more in Russia than they could making cheap ceramic items,^{xiv} most of these ‘true ceramists’ have nonetheless continued their craft.

These masters call their studios *pirxona* (room of the pir), endeavour to keep them very clean in accordance with their pir’s demands, and uphold the belief that uttering evil would incite the wrath of the pir. However, many of them do not follow such old taboos as avoiding work on Tuesdays^{xv} and banning dogs and women from the studios.^{xvi} These taboos began to be neglected in the Soviet’s collective workshops, and have now become ineffectual. In the Soviet era, new genres of production that contradicted old customs have also come into being, including, for example, five-inch ceramic dolls and portraits painted onto ceramics. Hamidullo, a man in his forties who started making dolls in the 1980s, testified that elder masters at first opposed his new attempt because moulding or burning human figures was regarded as a taboo. He maintained his project, however, and now ceramic dolls are popular souvenirs in Uzbekistan and portraits on ceramics have become desirable presents.

The anti-Islam and secularisation policies of the Soviet era must have influenced this decline in traditional taboos. Interestingly, however, many people in post-Soviet Uzbekistan interpret the abandonment of taboos as a consequence of re-Islamisation in their daily lives. Re-Islamisation began during *perestroika*. Islamic practices such as fasting and reading the Koran came to be performed openly, and the amount of Islamic knowledge in the region drastically increased, such that even the general public began to reconsider whether their previously practiced customs could be considered authentically Islamic.^{xvii} Hamidullo justified to me his making of dolls as nonetheless consistent with re-Islamisation:

Muslims were afraid of making human figures, but now it's not a big deal at all. It's an art [*san'at*]. In the old days, when people worshipped [*sig'inishgan*] in that stuff, it would have been impossible. Now they are intelligent [*aql bor*], they don't believe it anymore, so it is OK (November 2003).

In short, Hamidullo considers that making dolls to be permissible among today's enlightened Muslims. In addition, Sadir, a man in his fifties who had been raised in a family where ceramics had been passed from generation to generation confirmed that the assistance of women in painting china is now essential in most studios: 'today, there's no such thing as women not being allowed to see the kiln being packed – the women themselves often do it. It's okay if they are clean [*halol poklik*] in an Islamic sense' (September 2003). He clearly prioritises proper behaviour as a Muslim over traditional taboos. Thus, ceramic masters in post-Soviet Uzbekistan seem to divide their customs between reliable Islamic practice, on the one hand, and superstitions to be discarded, on the other.

It may seem from this description that if such a revision of customs continues into the future, the pir will gradually be abandoned as mere superstition. However, if a ceramic piece breaks accidentally or fails in the kiln (accidents often occur), many masters continue to attribute this to the wrath of a pir:

Sometimes work stops going well in a studio. All the pottery products turn out to be failed. The elders say that when this happens you should slaughter a chicken and invite three or four guests over to recite the Koran. They say that the pir has closed the road ahead. (May 2003, Bunyod, a man in his fifties)

Several masters have witnessed *is chiqar* or *qurbonlik* (offerings) ceremonies to soothe the pir, even in the factory during the Soviet Era:

When I was a child, my father would carry out the *qurbonlik* once a month He would say that our pir had the right to it, and that it was meant to make all the [production of] tableware go smoothly; he would even carry it out in the factory. (September 2003, the son of Sadir, in his twenties)

The son of Sadir also revealed that he personally prayed to the pir for success in each aspect of his work, and that he occasionally carried out the *qurbonlik*, which had helped him greatly. It seems that whilst the upholding of taboos has declined and the re-Islamisation of customs in the studios has advanced, this wave has not been sufficiently strong to lead to the abandonment of the value of pir veneration. The next section explores how such respect for the pir is acquired through the role of apprenticeship and the development of one's character as a 'true ceramist.'

The apprentice system and pir veneration

Blurred distinction between masters and pirs

Those skilful masters who are proud to be ‘true ceramists’ often pray to the pir for divine protection, while simultaneously appealing to their masters: ‘may the pir and masters protect us’. Furthermore, it is common for ceramists to offer blessings to both their pirs and masters at mealtimes, saying, ‘I offer the blessings for the rights of the pir and masters’ [*pir va ustozlarning haqlariga duo qilaman*]. Such expressions led me initially to speculate as to whether the ceramists regarded their masters to be as great as the pirs and to consult some of the masters on this point. At the time of my research, Mirza, who was in his late fifties, was a ceramist who was also respected as a reliable *mullah*. Responding to my questions, he commented that there was an insurmountable difference between them: ‘Those who first created something are the pir, and those remaining, those who learned later are the masters ... the masters won’t become pir even after they die’ (September 2004). Master Nurbek, also in his fifties, who stopped drinking alcohol and started studying Islam after a pilgrimage to Mecca in 2002, made a similar point: ‘The masters don’t become pir even after they die; they are still seen as masters... the pir is one man alone. One man for each profession (September 2004). Thus, the *mullahs* and mullah-like devout Muslims regard the pir and masters to be categorically different.

However, at the time of the passing of Master Ibrohim Komilov (his real name), the most renowned ceramist in Rishton, I noticed that many of the ceramists seemed to regard this great master as a pir. Master Komilov had worked as a ceramist since before the war, and, in the 1980s, had been responsible for reintroducing natural ash glazes. He was a well-liked ceramist, who passed on traditional skills to many apprentices. Following his funeral in 2003, Anvar, one of his former apprentices, confirmed that Master Komilov would become a pir:

Originally, the word pir meant 'master'. And, of course, the masters who have passed join in line with the pir...

Haruka: Do you believe Komilov will become a pir in the future?

Anvar: Of course! He was a great man. There were quite a few masters like him in Rishton. Usta Abdullo, Mazoir, Mayoqat ... They are all seen as pirs.

Furthermore, when an apprentice of Anvar, who was ten years his junior, was asked to name the pir of ceramists, he responded immediately with, 'Master Komilov'. For them, Master Komilov had probably already come to be regarded as a pir. Such comments suggest that many of the ceramists who were taught veneration of the pir by their masters maintain the belief that the great masters take on a pir-like existence following their deaths. For example, Usta Abdullo, a ceramist who lived at the end of the nineteenth century and who trained in Kashgar, is remembered for his contributions to the construction of the palace of the Kokand Khanate. Anecdotes about him continue to be told by ceramists. One of these stories describes how he angered Khudayar Khan, the ruler of the Khanate, who had him thrown into a lit kiln. Peshchereva and a journalist Burxonov also recorded this tale: in the story, Abdullah, who is trapped in a lit kiln, either weeps and begs forgiveness from the khan, and is saved (Peshchereva 1959, 367), or manages to escape danger on the second floor of the kiln (Burxonov 1983, 17).

Whichever version of these events is correct, when I asked various masters about Usta Abdullo, some said that his escape from the kiln unscathed was a miracle. They said that Abdullo was so skilled that he had reached the level of pir, which was why he had not been burned alive.

When the Khan got angry, he threw Usta Abdullo into a lit kiln. But, when the kiln was opened the next day, he was all right. Abdullo, thus proved his power as the pir. (October 2003, Bunyod)

Clearly, some great ceramic masters are regarded as embodying a form of existence close to that of the pirs for the majority of the ‘true ceramists’, who thus pray to those deceased masters as well as to the pirs for divine protection.

The master-apprentice relationship after the murid-murshid tie

Soviet ethnographers also noticed the continuity between the pir and deceased masters in prayers and rituals among artisans. They interpreted this connection as a remnant of ancestor worship, because craftsmen inherited their trade and worshipped the ancestors who had done the same (Snesarev 1969, 122–123; Sukhareva 1960, 31). However, while ancestor worship may have had some influence on the origin of *pir* veneration centuries ago, most *pirs* are eminent figures in the Qur’an, legendary personages, or notable Sufis whom ordinary people in Central Asia find it difficult to regard as direct ancestors. Furthermore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the apprentices of Rishton’s ceramists were already being drawn from other families, and the necessary skills were no longer passed on only to one’s descendants (Peshchereva 1959, 345–346). The continuity between the pirs and the great masters should thus be regarded as reflecting the influence of the murid-murshid relationship in Sufism.

It is well known that the path of Sufism begins by accepting the authority and guidance of those who have traversed the stages, and every Sufi aspirant [*murid*] needs guidance from a director [*murshid*] (Trimingham 1971, 3). Pinto (1995) reported circumstantially how this murshid-murid relationship was practiced in the Nizamuddin Dargah, a sufi mazar in India. He concluded that this relationship is a lengthy socialisation process, through which the murid learns to show his allegiance to the murshid and to fall in love with his master, to the extent that he finally finds that his

beloved master is just a curtain that hides something else, God himself. In this account, the murshid is the representative of God for the murid. This murshid-murid path of development is called *silsila*, ‘the chain of spiritual descent’.

The master-apprentice relationship in Uzbekistan closely resembles this *silsila*. In Uzbek artisans’ tradition,^{xviii} the teenage apprentice must obey the master’s orders, performing chores and miscellaneous jobs in exchange for receiving meals and tools in the studio. If the apprentice has sufficient potential, the master gradually teaches them the core techniques, until, ultimately, the apprentice acquires a firm identity and skill as an independent artisan. Even after thus achieving their independence, the former apprentice continues to respect his master as highly as if he were equivalent to the pir. For the apprentice, the master and the pir stand on the same path of development, and through this line, the apprentice learns their way of living.

It is believed that Sufism, based on murshid-murid relationships, spread among the people of Central Asia around the twelfth century (Trimingham 1971, 53-54), long before the sixteenth century in which artisans’ collectives were believed to have been formed (Mukminova 1976, 174). It is therefore conceivable that the murshid-murid relationship in Sufism impacted both the ways in which skills were transmitted through the master-apprentice tie and the respect for masters as pirs among artisans.

Joining the path from the pir to the master

The *silsila*-like path from the pir to masters of the past presents the opportunity for today’s masters to join them in the future. If they train several good apprentices, these successors will thank and recall today’s masters in their prayers alongside the pir. In Rishton, there remains a prevalent belief that announcing gratitude to someone in one’s

prayers will bring the targeted person good fortune.^{xix} This is why Zarif, out of respect for his master, Anvar, always prayed for the latter's health when starting work:

I face the kiln and start with prayers for the health of my master along with my father and grandfathers. It is thanks to my master that I can make a living, so I always pray for his health next to the kiln. The level of my respect is that great. (June 2003, Zarif, a man in his twenties)

Another ceramist, Sarvar explained that this prayer and act of respect is one of the reasons he teaches apprentices his techniques:

The apprentices that we leave behind should remember us. Some masters teach only their sons, keeping it all a secret – the skills, preparing the colours, the process. ... But I don't behave like that. So after I'm gone, the apprentices should make the prayer to us all, and look after our families (July 2003, Sarvar, a man in his forties).

Thus, if the apprentice remembers the good deeds of the master and prays for peace, this would represent the best reward for the master. I suggest that such future acts of respect can motivate masters to nurture the next generation. Supporting their apprentices, after all, is no easy task for masters. They have to feed them during working hours, teach them manners, and reveal secret pottery techniques, which could threaten their profits in the market. However, though some important skills such as the production of natural ash glazes, are jealously guarded and passed on secretly among only two or three families, many masters do not exclude apprentices who are not their blood relations. This is because they know that, one day, the apprentice will send them spiritual merits through prayers, recalling them alongside the *pir*. The apprentice system is thus not simply a way of teaching skills but a means of forming *silsila*-like ties, which assure masters of support in their future existence and peace in the afterlife.

The individualisation of the veneration

Despite the great transformations that have occurred in Uzbek society and economy over the last two and half decades, the pirs have continued to hold a special meaning for the skilful ceramists who eagerly develop the ceramics of Rishton. For example, Yusufjon, an economically successful ceramist in his forties who produced high-end ceramics, made the following remark when asked if he thought knowledge of the pirs was necessary.

[The pirs] run in our blood. I think even the youngsters today will eventually believe in them. When we were young our masters would tell us [to venerate the pir] and we would say ‘huh?’ or something like that (laughs). But then, as our learning has continued, we really start to believe that what our masters told us was right. Maybe if we didn’t have it [veneration of the pir], we wouldn’t be the way we are today, and we wouldn’t have become the sort of masters we are. If we hadn’t taken in each word of our masters maybe we would just have been normal ceramists, the sort of ceramists who just make 25 *so‘m* teacups. (October 2003)

Yusufjon is positing that the depth of his veneration for the pir differentiates him, a skilled and successful ceramist, from a quotidian ceramist who can only make cheap products. He believes that veneration of the pir is an utterly essential part of his economic success and central to his becoming a skilled ceramist.

On another occasion, Anvar had made the following comment regarding Naqshband, the pir of ceramists, and his own personal situation:

Bahā’ al-Dīn [Naqshband] didn’t become a ceramist from a family of generations of ceramists. There were several families of ceramists for seven or eight generations in Rishton. Yet, my father is a teacher and I was the first ceramist in my family. Bahā al-Dīn was the first generation of his too. Despite that, he became

the greatest ceramist of all, the most amazing person in terms of how hard he worked, his focus, and his knowledge. (March 2003)

Anvar differs from most of the skilled ceramists in Rishton as he had no relatives among the Rishton ceramic masters and, consequently, he had to work exceptionally hard. However, his skilful hand-painting has proven popular with foreign customers, making him one of the most successful of Rishton's ceramists today. He says he is using Naqshband's experience of being born into a non-ceramist family to justify his own circumstances, building up an ideal of the perfect ceramist. His own veneration of the pir even goes beyond this: once a year, he visits the tombs of Naqshband and Amir Kulol in Bukhara, several hundred kilometres away, donating several of his own ceramics to the caretaker of the tombs.

Since Uzbekistan's independence, the makers of high-end ceramics have united the pirs under their own authorship. In contrast to the enforced production of standardised wares during the late Soviet period, it became possible, after independence, for ceramists to choose the shape and pattern of their wares. As the country was partly transformed into a market economy, ceramists had the freedom to produce goods that were either artistic or marketable, and started to call themselves *khudozhniki* (artists) or *ijodkor* (authors): there were now new titles to choose from, apart from *usta* (master) and *hunarmand* (craftsman). Domestic handicraft conventions and exhibitions frequently held in the capital provided opportunities to further stimulate their authorship. The pirs continue to play their part in these newly emerging creative arenas. Numerous makers of high-end ceramics explained to me how the pirs have continued to inspire them, and that they still pray to the pirs at the beginning of their work. The above-mentioned Yusufjon stated:

I pray to the pirs each time, asking them to help our work go well. Then, inspiration hits. Inspiration might also come during the course of my work. It feels like an assistant ... Whenever I walk in [to the studio] I think of them [pirs]. You have to believe in them. (October 2003)

Another example of the union between the pirs and authorship can be found in Zarif's story. Zarif was trained as an apprentice in the factory during the Soviet period, and is well-versed in matters relating to Naqshband, the pir of ceramists. However, when he is hand-painting his wares, he draws inspiration for creativity from a different source:

My wares follow the path of Kamoliddin Behzod. I personally believe in Allah, and pray to him. I also recite the Koran, and pray to Kamoliddin Behzod. I get my power from his spirit ... He is the most important being after Allah. (July 2003)

Kamoliddin Behzod lived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and is famous across Central Asia for his elaborate miniatures that depict humans and animals. Using Behzod as the source of his creativity, all the while venerating Naqshband as his pir, has led Zarif to opt for artwork that incorporates people as Behzod did, rather than the floral patterns seen in traditional Rishton ceramics. At the time of my research, very few ceramists drew humans and scenery on flat plates as Zarif was doing, and these products were attracting buyers' attention as a new development in Rishton ceramics.

If the makers of high-end ceramics in Rishton are to focus on their individuality as artists and authors, it seems likely that they, like Zarif, will find sources other than Naqshband to feed their imaginations, and that more worshippers will emerge. Such a development could even lead to the creation of individual pirs. In the post-Soviet ceramics market, where the author's individuality is highly prized, the pirs thus hold an important place in the hearts of some of the ceramists for their ability to inspire the individual ceramist's imagination, and to contribute to the individuality of their wares.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the ways in which Rishton ceramists venerate their *pirs* in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. I will now discuss the findings of this article for our broader understanding of *pirs*, craftsmanship, and social changes in Uzbekistan.

One of this article's most important points is the finding that the master-apprentice relationship provided the basis for *pir* veneration both during and after the Soviet Era. In this relationship, the teenage apprentice must obey the master's orders, not only in craft-related work, but also in miscellaneous jobs such as taking care of the master's livestock and making tea for guests. These services are seen as indispensable for apprentices to learn the rules of etiquette, how to deeply venerate *pirs*, and to become consummate masters in terms of both technique and humanity. Though an in-service training institute was established in the late Soviet era, the training period there lasted less than one year and was not long enough for apprentices to learn detailed skills and sufficiently deepen their knowledge. Being an apprentice of a certain master was practically the only way to become an excellent master.

Through the master-apprentice relationship, most committed craftsmen can acquire an identity as honourable ceramists, developing an understanding of the technology of pottery, and learning to see the great masters as almost equally powerful to *pirs*, leading both to become the objects of their veneration. I believe that among artisans, the *murshid-murid* relationship in Sufism has impacted the way that skills are transmitted, as well as their respect for their masters as *pirs*. For masters, aligning the skills of *pirs* with those of their past masters creates a peaceful union between this

world and the next, which is perhaps an underlying part of their motivation for working hard at their craft and cultivating the following generation.

Another finding is the individualization of *pir* veneration, or a shift in the foundation of venerating *pirs* from the collective of ceramists to the individual craftsman. The veneration of *pirs* in Rishton's ceramics industry is no longer a tool of collective control. The social function of the *anjuman*, the advancement ceremony for ceramists, had changed; whereas it was once performed to determine the number of masters able to practice and the level of skill required, the ceremony has become a mere festival through which one wishes for success in one's work. One consequence of this shift, however, is that there has been an increase in the number of independent masters who do not work together in an orderly way, leading the prices of Rishton pottery to decline.

The individualization of veneration has also had a positive effect, however. *Pirs* can accommodate themselves to social changes in Uzbekistan, and specifically to the spread of capitalism and the market economy. In the post-Soviet ceramics marketplace, where artistic individuality is sought, some ceramists now see *pirs* as their ideal, a source of success, or look to them to express individuality in their wares. *Pirs* have taken on new life amongst true craftsmen by supporting their individual self-expression, helping them to achieve technological and economic success, and providing them with goals and an ideal of who they could become.

Though it has been more than a decade since I conducted this research and some masters such as Nurbek and Yusufjon have passed away, the fact that apprenticeship is the main route for transmitting professional knowledge and skills among ceramists remains unchanged. Ceramic masters such as Anvar continue to respect *pirs* and pursue their own artistic pottery, praying for the guardianships of *pirs* and deceased masters.

While the main argument of this article remains valid in Uzbekistan's third decade of independence, some of Anvar's teenage apprentices are however departing for Russia to enter art colleges. Will instruction at modern colleges change the veneration of *pirs* among a new generation of ceramists? Such questions may provide interesting directions for future research.

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ⁱ The term ‘pir’ was originally a Persian word that meant ‘old’ or ‘elderly person’. It later began to indicate Sufi masters. Subsequently, workers’ collectives started to use the term to refer to their patron saints (Kawamoto 2002, 819).

ⁱⁱ See Babadjanov et al. (2002), Kikuta (2013b: 144–146, 312–318), and Sukhareva (1984).

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- ⁱⁱⁱ See Aščerić-Todd (2007), Baer (1964), Floor (1987), and Hamed (1990).
- ^{iv} In addition to note 3, see Eunjeong (2004), Gevorgyan(2013), Goshgarian(2013), Ohlander(2013), and Yildirim(2013).
- ^v *Risala* is a small pamphlet, which includes tales of how the pir started the craft and details of the duties and prayers that craftsmen should perform. See Andreev (1927), Gavrilov (1912), Samad ed. (1996), Sugawara (1998), and Tosheva (2002). Dağyeli (2011) refers to how artisans use them today.
- ^{vi} See Jasiewicz (1991) and Zarcone (2004).
- ^{vii} See Pemberton (2006) and Werbner (2003).
- ^{viii} Case studies have been conducted (Dzhabbarov 1959; Tursunov 1972) on *kasaba* and also on similar organisations in Khorezm and Tajikistan.
- ^{ix} Reports of *nazr* offerings to the descendants of the saints can be found across Central Asia (see Abashin 2001; Dağyeli 2012; and Sartori 2009).
- ^x See Davlatova (2011) and Skallerup (1990) for the collectivisation of the handicrafts industry.
- ^{xi} Copies of the ceramists' *risala* do exist in the State Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, but most of the people in Rishton did not know of these copies' existence.
- ^{xii} According to accounts given in December 2012 and November 2014 by Ganizhon, an esteemed ceramist in his sixties who was born into a family of successive ceramists, the sole self-proclaimed descendant of Amir Kulol had died during the revolution, leaving only daughters behind.
- ^{xiii} At the time of the research, there were 130 ceramics masters holding membership in the national craftsmen's collective; Anvar told me that 'there are between 70 and 80 truly gifted ceramists working in Rishton today', for whom I calculated there to be two or three apprentices per master.
- ^{xiv} Instead of ceramics, many of the residents have started to make their living by going to Russia to find work. See Kikuta (2016) for more information on this labour migration.
- ^{xv} Peshchereva (1959, 9) reported upon this taboo.
- ^{xvi} Some elder masters remembered this taboo when interviewed in 2003.

^{xvii} See Rasanayagam (2006) about re-Islamisation among healers.

^{xviii} See Sultanova (2011, 60-70) and Rasanayagam (2011, 19).

^{xix} See Kikuta (2011).