

## Chapter 2

# Making Sense of Central Asia Sources of Epistemic Uncertainty



Aziz Elmuradov 

**Abstract** Central Asia is in flux, and so are the perspectives and angles of intellectual inquiry, as are the modes of and approaches to the scientific investigation of the region. This paper sets out to discuss the role of academic positionality essential to this flux—caught between modernity and tradition—and reflects on one of its striking effects, epistemic ambiguity. In light of knowledge-related turns in the social sciences, notably, the epistemological twists and turns entailed in postmodernist, postcolonial, decolonial, and feminist critique, the study of academic positionality and its implications in the Central Asian context is a worthwhile pursuit.

**Keywords** Central Asia · Epistemic uncertainty · Tradition · Local epistemologies · Decolonial critique · Geopolitics of knowledge

## Introduction

In bringing to the fore the topic of academic positionality in Central Asia, the editors of this volume have undertaken a worthwhile, exciting, and timely endeavor. There are a great many reasons in view of which inquiring into academic positionality in Central Asia may be deemed worthwhile and timely—the ontological and epistemological twists and turns of our times, the enduring relevance in research of wider identity issues, and the slow but growing scholarly recognition of individual, personal, and gendered subjectivities faced by local and foreign intellectuals, not to mention the complex moral dilemmas and ethical issues, linguistic barriers, and methodological challenges that researchers face. Academic positionality entails “ethical, personal and methodological dimensions” and is the “intersectionality of various categories of differences” that inform research (Dall’Agnola, 2023, 12). In this contribution, I will share my impression of wandering through some of this rocky terrain, struggling to map out my way across instances of epistemic uncertainty, ambiguity, and anxiety.

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My account, although predicated on subjective judgement and observation, draws on critical literature and unfolds in a narrative style along two broad lines. First, I hold that “tradition,” as slippery and confusing as this notion often is, underlies the conditions of knowledge production in Central Asia. Second, that “modernity,” an equally confusing and slippery notion, invariably looms large in the background while informing and, in fact, permeating and penetrating our quest for intellectual inquiry on Central Asia in significant ways. In this account, I relate to “tradition” and “modernity” in the sense of postcolonial and decolonial critique, as a background matrix of contesting social reality—conditions of epistemic emergence—against the backdrop of which meaning-making takes place. In linking “tradition” and “modernity” in such loose terms, what I aim to do is not to engage in in-depth definitional or theoretical elaboration of these concepts, but to try to carve out a suitable niche for the reconstruction of an underlying emergent condition that I think pertains, for the lack of a better term, to a sense of epistemic anxiety on behalf of a scholar navigating their positionality in/on Central Asia.

## Sources of Epistemic Uncertainty

It seems that underlying the topic of academic positionality is a peculiar unresolved dilemma: it is an empowering merit and at the same time, a potential pitfall. On the one hand, scholars of areas, studies, and sociologists of knowledge are perfectly aware that academic positionality implies some sort of social positionality, that it entails some sort of normative basis, for example, incorporation of local, native, and unfamiliar voices, and their broader representation in order for social sciences to be truly social. The prevailing conventional wisdom seems to have its roots in the idea, and rightly so, that it is through the acknowledgment and appreciation of subjectivities, the silenced or the excluded or the oppressed, that knowledge is acquired and validated. On the other hand, scholars of areas studies and sociologists of knowledge are also aware that they depend on preconceived ideas, interpretative frameworks, sophisticated vantage points, analytical tools, and methodologies in order to “explore” their subject matters and contexts. The process of “exploring” the new is then often informed by presumptions and preconceptions, persistent understandings, and established practices that aim to see meaning within clear-cut paradigms and intelligible frameworks. After all, no one would deny that scholars are also human beings and that, as such, they are ultimately embedded in normative values of this or that cultural milieu, social circle, academic community or society, and their conceptual constructs are, in fact, often intelligible within the established intellectual frameworks in which they are used. It is also true that it is often the case that there are significant discrepancies between textbook advice and the reality of the field (Dall’Agnola, 2023). Conditioned by such circumstances, how can we hope to operate in novel terrain with a sense, more or less, of intellectual integrity and certainty? How can we lay claim to valid knowledge, let alone “truth,” when we seem

to occupy an ambiguous position of being within knowledge, yet simultaneously outside of it?

Multiple streams of critical thought are mindful of the crucial role of epistemic frameworks in asserting, legitimising, and reinforcing structurally privileged modes of knowledge. In particular, postcolonial and decolonial thought and feminist scholarship are acutely aware of the epistemic problems along such dimensions as culture, gender, religion, class, social status, age, and ability, and in terms of whether a researcher is an “insider” or an “outsider,” “foreign” or “local” (Dall’Agnola, 2023). Moreover, that “epistemologies of ignorance” follows from our “situatedness as knowers,” or “specific aspects of group identities,” or that “oppressive systems produce ignorance” is also well known (Alcoff, 2007, 40; Haraway, 1988, 581). Ultimately, such considerations are insinuated with an implicit concern over power, and its use and abuse; and therefore, they are intimately linked with an idea of imminent conflict and violence. What is also implicit in these considerations is a concern over knowledge as power. What kind of epistemic consequences follow from examining the wider implications of knowledge as power? An intellectual is then all too often faced with a self-posed question of the degree to which they are, in fact, knowledgeable, or even worse, whether or they are engaged in “epistemic violence?” Once aware, we understand that epistemic violence may be deeply embedded in our knowledge as well as in the ways through which we strive toward knowledge.

What I strive to pin down here, with apparent difficulty, is a sense of ambivalence, perhaps the futility of scholarly detachment, of non-knowing, of being caught up between various intellectual matrices of knowledge. To demarcate more precisely, it is perhaps useful to describe the phenomenon I am addressing here as an epistemic dilemma, or sociostructurally conditioned epistemic ambivalence. What we know is often shaped by our “social location,” or “locus of enunciation” (Grosfoguel, 2007, 213). We always speak from a particular location in the power structures and the problem of social location goes in tandem with academic location. As a social scientist, one is expected to provide, on the one hand, the best possible account of their subject matter (which is usually a complicated embedded social phenomena) as well as, on the other hand, to present a critique and at times even provide proposals, albeit often implicitly and with a certain normative stance, as to how to modify and improve social constellations in reasonable ways. In doing so, one seeks to push forward an informed, impartial, and reasonable position. From this ostensibly impartial position stem optics (of disembodied knowledge) through which local and provincial knowledge is routinely dismissed due to privileging hegemonic epistemic practices. This circumstance arouses a sense of epistemic anxiety over “the geopolitical and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2007, 213) and poses crucial questions such as “can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak, 1988).

## Making Sense of Central Asia

Central Asian research has been in flux in recent years and a fair amount of attention has focused on epistemic awareness and diversity. With “more diverse voices joining Central Asian studies, [...] the field is maturing into a more self-aware community” (Marat, 2021, 479). Scholars with critical, feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial leanings have come to increasingly constitute a significant part of this community. By interrogating conventional theoretical underpinnings and raising new epistemological questions, new voices plead for a broader reconceptualization of the field. The critiques have been voiced in terms of problems relating to “knowledge production,” “postcolonial deconstruction” (Sultanalieva, 2019), the “ambivalent role of feminist research” (Mamadshoeva, 2019), and “the need to decolonize international relations” in Central Asia (Dadabaev, 2022). Furthermore, it has been noted that a feminist perspective has long been missing in studies of Central Asia (Arystanbek, 2019; Mamadshoeva, 2019). While the scope of the research field has significantly diversified, the main intellectual and ideological positions are still located in the North. By contrast, the subjects to be studied are located in the South. In other words, Central Asian Studies has not epistemologically transcended Eurocentrism; “sense making” and “social sciencing” remain informed by frameworks obscured by “modernizing reason.” This state of affairs also concerns, perhaps first and foremost, the study of the role of tradition and traditionality.

Tradition, conceptualized as modernity’s otherness, is more than just a discourse of difference and producing meaning (Elmuradov, 2021). Indeed, while a fair amount of attention has been focused on tradition and its meanings in the Central Asian context (Beyer & Finke, 2019), little attention has been paid to exploring its epistemic implications. It is clear that the concept of tradition does not entail an obvious, fixed, or clear-cut meaning. On the contrary, since tradition hinges on the realm of the social, its manifestations are more fluid and dynamic than is commonly assumed. Tradition entails active elements of social creation and invention. “Tradition is not an object of fixed history but a part of a process of identity formation,” and we should regard tradition as “an interpretative concept, not a descriptive one” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, 314). Tradition is then inseparable from the present and “to do something because it is traditional is to reinterpret it, to change it” (Anttonen, 2016, 35). Such explanations are predicated on the idea of tradition as a subject of study and phenomenon of interest. However, what I find most interesting is the epistemic consequences arising from the lived experience of tradition, the manifestations of tradition that are held up as expressions of local knowledge in their own right—experience-based knowledge. While there is ample amount of research on tradition as a subject of inquiry, there is strikingly little research on tradition as an expression of local knowledge. With a few exceptions, most studies focus on interpreting social agents and relations rather than interpreting the world with them and from their perspectives. However, to avoid a possible misunderstanding, it should be made clear that I do not intend to offer a neutral account or an objective representation of what I call the lived experience of tradition as local expressions of knowledge, or experience-based knowledge.

Defining experience-based knowledge is not a value-free endeavor that follows a universal logic, and the question of which “experiences” and what “expressions of knowledge” constitute tradition is always and inevitably the result of a selective perspective.

In Central Asia, experience-based local epistemologies may comprise communal beliefs, cosmologies, rituals, practices, and worldviews, mainly emanating from the high degree of religiosity, the significant role of Islam, the relatively high degree of traditionality in general, and an affinity towards mysterious phenomena. Awareness of local epistemologies may present a crucial opportunity to gain a vivid glimpse of special circumstances and settings. Experience-based local epistemologies put forward “an argument for situated and embodied knowledge and argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, 583). As observed by Haraway, “we are bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (Haraway, 1988, 585). One of the fundamental tasks in Central Asian Studies today is this: to look for ways of offering better accounts of traditions and customs as local epistemologies.

## **Grappling with Obstacles**

On the other hand, however, there may lie an imminent danger of romanticizing local epistemologies. To see from a local position is neither easy nor unproblematic. We cannot present local epistemologies as if they were a site of pristine and flawless knowledge. Far from being apolitical, tradition as a local epistemology is equally implicated in concerns over the question of power, its use, and abuse. Appeals to tradition sometimes do serve to disguise deeper societal problems. For example, in the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, there is a growing trend toward beliefs, practices, and worldviews that emanate from an affinity for religiosity and a proclivity towards recitals of good and evil through telling of religious and quasi-religious narratives and tales, etc. The rise in religiosity is a case in point: conservative moods and sentiments circulate widely, predominantly among the male population. The conservative segments of society employ, in particular, discursive repertoires and strategies to articulate the sociocultural boundaries of the traditional in which they resort to “politics of knowledge”: contemplations on the “great past” and moral and ethical values, often propped up by patriotic rhetoric and moralizing religious critique. Even on social media platforms, conservative moods, and trends have gained increasing prominence.

In Uzbekistan, for example, the nascent public domain is just beginning to evolve and is not amply cultivated for discourse through meaningful, consensus-oriented communication. It is true that the coexistence of traditional and modern socialization models and value systems is common to Uzbek society in which a number of social, political, cultural, and religious features intermingle against the background

of traditional, Soviet, and modern elements. However, the traditionalist turn is on an upward trend in which appeal to the “age-old traditions” and “true faith” has become a vibrant part of the public imagination and a ready-made point of reference for actors who aspire to redefine the social order in their own interests. In spite of the fact that tradition is an inherently ambivalent phenomenon, it is presented as something that should ensure the continuity of communal practices and impart an idea of stability. Traditional societies have been regarded as being characterized by powerful collective memories that are sanctioned by ritual, with social guardians ensuring the continuity of communal practices (Giddens, 1994, 63–65). Patterns of traditional “stability” and “continuity” are predominantly masculine and, as such, masculine sociabilities are implicated in local power games. A vivid example is the growing affinity for religious and quasi-religious narratives, which are embedded in their own matrix of power.

While reputable scholarly research in the past has meant abstaining from making value judgments, both at home and in the field, today, intellectuals are well aware that detachment is ultimately impossible since knowledge is conceived to exist in direct relationship with power. The knowing subject is caught up within epistemic entanglements of modernity and tradition. This curious circumstance of ambivalence carries profound implications: the inquiring subject is situated, simultaneously, within the multiplicity of perspectives across power-differentiated communities: particular epistemic discourses, ways of experiencing, knowing, speaking, making sense, and representing. In the words of Rosi Braidotti, following Deleuze and Guattari, the inquiring subject is, at the same, time an affective transversal subject (Braidotti, 2019). While modernity has traditionally meant the questioning of authority, the established ways, power and domination, the traditional locus of enunciation has postulated, across many of the Central Asian renderings, the Law of the Father. “You are not to get on the roof of the house where your father is,” an Uzbek saying goes. Our “concepts are not part of free-floating philosophical discourse, but socially, historically and locally rooted, and must be explained in terms of these realities” (Hobsbawm, 1990, 9). Notions such as “knowledge,” “law,” “just society,” and “gender” are not just self-evident universal signifiers one can look up in the dictionary, they are locally produced understandings that are rooted in their own matrix of power. Particularly for “outsider” researchers, but also for “insiders,” as well as for female researchers, it is immensely difficult to navigate across the site. Circumstances may turn out to be advantageous as often as unfavorable for “outsider” researchers. Traditional accounts of knowledge claim that knowledge emerges from an experiential basis that is subjective and that those who lack subjectivities may not always be able to share that knowledge to its fullest extent. The outsiders may not have sufficient foundation from which to evaluate local knowledge. In short, since reality is socially mediated, it is put forward that only those who belong to a particular setting can know about it and relate to it.

## Conclusion

Navigating across Central Asian intellectual terrain engenders a set of epistemic uncertainties induced by a demand for “disembodied scientific objectivity” and “embodied and located knowledge.” We have to insist on better accounts and offer critical and reflexive insights into symbolic entanglements of modernity and tradition. As I discussed elsewhere (Elmuradov, 2021), no other analogy could perhaps be more useful in elucidating symbolic entanglements in the discourse of modernity and tradition than reference to the metaphorical figure of Lady Justice—the ultimate allegorical representation of the modern philosophy of law and of equality before the law, the individual, and the idea of the subject. Taken together, the objects she commands represent the conceptual ideal of modernity. The blindfold, scales, and sword epitomize the self-evidence of the supreme authority of truth, with justice applied impartially and objectively. As alluring as her imagery is—femininity, outstanding credentials, and a proven track record of success—the question we must ask is how she might gain a genuinely central position in the discourse in a society that is rooted in multiple, sometimes uneasy, and certainly not always self-evident notions of truth, and one that, to an uncommon degree, is governed by a sense of masculinity. Ironically, despite being physically present as a common sight on the facades of courthouses and legal institutions, it seems justified to enquire to what extent this imagery is, in fact, present in mental frames. Critical reflection on such entanglements pertains to how we make sense of a host of questions in Central Asian studies and how we redefine academic positionality as a medium in reconciling the resulting discrepancies.

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