
RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION OF TRADITIONAL KAZAKH SOCIETY IN THE 16TH-19TH CENTURIES

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Abstract

The religious identification of Kazakhs is a complex and debatable topic because for a long time academic literature was dominated by the view of Kazakh nomads' indifference to Islam („superficial Islam“) and the great importance in their culture of traces of Shamanism. However, in the past decades the number of supporters of a new point of view about the Muslim identity of Kazakhs has grown. This research aimed to analyse the religious identification of the Kazakhs based on the modern methodology of defining identity when its indicators include, above all, the self-consciousness of society. The authors of this paper do not share stereotypes of Russian and Soviet historiographies, for example the understanding of Islam as a religion of sedentary-crop growing peoples and the obsolete assessment of Sufism as a pre-Islamic phenomenon. This paper argues for the point of view of the Muslim identity of Kazakhs based on studies of alternative information from ethnography and traditional oral history.

Keywords: nomadism, self-identification, Russian factor, traditional sources

1. Introduction

Genghis Khan's invasion led to the inclusion of Kazakhstan's entire territory (with the centre in the Desht-i Kipchak) in the Golden Horde. Despite the intrusion of pagan elements, soon afterwards a crucial phase of Islamisation began which was triggered by the adoption of Islam by the invaders themselves. As a result, the period between the second half of the 13th century and the 15th century is characterised by the Islamisation of the entire Great Steppe under Öz Beg Khan (1312-1342 AD). Arab authors and travellers left valuable accounts of the Muslim Golden Horde [1].

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Kazakhs themselves in their genealogical tree say that it is precisely under the great Öz Beg Khan that the people of the Steppe fully became Muslim and “since then our people haven’t changed their faith” (according to the authoritative Shezhire, a genealogy of Kazakhs recorded by enlightener Shakarim) [2]. Certain modern Western researchers consider it legitimate to focus on the historical importance of the Islamisation of the Golden Horde nomads and the central role of Islam in the system of collective identity of the Kazakhs [3].

Nevertheless, there is a wide range of different views in academic literature precisely on the topic of when Islamisation ended, i.e. the latest date Islam established itself in Kazakhstan. In particular, Russian and Western Sovietological papers widely accept the theory that Kazakhstan was fully Islamised only when it became part of Russia in the 19th century by Tatar mullahs who were Russian citizens. Generally, the topic of „Kazakhs and Islam“ and the role and place of Islam in the collective identity of the people still remain debatable because of its complexity. Theoretical and methodological approaches to this problem were impacted by Marxism, atheistic ideology, anti-Islamic syndrome, Eurocentrism and other attitudes that were dominant in Soviet historiography.

In this discourse it is also necessary to take into account the poor awareness of Russian- and English-speaking authors of the past from Kazakh sources, oral historical and epic traditions of the people, as well as the lack of understanding of the nuances of Islam itself. As a result, not only in academic literature in Russia and the West but also in Kazakhstan itself there are very strong stereotypes and clichés about „poor Islam“ (or „superficial“ or „formal“ Islam) among the Kazakh nomads up until colonisation and even until the beginning of the 20th century, and about „religious syncretism“ when the pre-Islamic Shamanistic beliefs of the Kazakhs remained under a thin coating of Islam.

However, a paradox (or contradiction) lies in, firstly, that the Kazakh people themselves in their collective identity and historical memory attached a great role and place of honour to Islam and distanced themselves from pagan Shamanism. Secondly, works by certain foreign researchers of the region in the 15th-19th centuries also suggested an alternative view about unconditional belonging of the Kazakhs to the Islamic community of peoples. Among modern authors, attention should be paid to efforts made by US anthropologist Devin A. DeWeese. He and his adherents debunked the myth that Kazakhs were „superficially Islamised“ and that their identity did not have a place for Islam and so on [4].

Questions arise: when and why did Kazakhs start being considered as „disloyal Muslims“, and was it linked to colonial prejudices and lack of awareness or were there real grounds and facts to support this assessment? Was Islam consistent with nomadism and breeding of livestock? If so, then how did Kazakhs practise Muslim rites and rituals on the nomadic periphery of the „Islamic World“?

As a result, the problem of the religious affiliation of Kazakhs acquires serious academic and practical importance. The necessary methodological

rethinking of the problem and the impartial studying of it without old ideological prejudices and myths such as „Islam is deficient in nomadic society“, „only mosque-based Islam is „proper“ Islam“ or „Sufism is not Islam but Shamanism“, „Kazakh *baqsy* (healers) are pagan Shamans“. The methodological principle of this paper is a choice of self-identification and self-consciousness of the people in question as the main criterion (indicator) of religious affiliation. At the same time, we can see the coincidence of this indicator even with the official criterion of legitimacy of Islam on the part of the Sunni Hanafi school of thought of Islamic jurisprudence.

Theoretical and methodological approaches employed by the authors largely follow a new concept of „regional Islam“ adopted in post-Soviet Islamic studies with its valuable idea of recognising the pluralism and equality of Muslim regions along with the unity of the fundamentals of global Islam [5]. For these studies of the religious affiliation of the Kazakhs we chose precisely that part (fragment) of the source basis which was constantly silenced and ignored by the majority of authors of Russian and Sovietological works on Kazakhstan. This point of view and this choice are necessary to hold a discussion and debate in favour of an alternative position on Kazakh Islam which differs from the point of view of official Soviet and partly Kazakhstan’s modern national historiography.

The analysis conducted establishes the Muslim identification of the Kazakhs of the 16th-18th centuries and the recognition of Kazakhs as Muslim nomads well before the period of colonialism. However, for the first time we formulated a new scientific hypothesis on a possible intermediary (timewise) stage of partial degradation of Muslim culture and enlightenment in the Kazakh Steppes between the second half of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century.

2. Russian factor in history of Kazakhs and development of concept of ‘superficial Islam’ - new views on Islam after Independence (in 1991)

For a better understanding of Kazakhstan’s history it is necessary to study extremely closely such a factor in its history as was its long colonial dependence on Russia between 1731 and 1991. Submission to the Christian empire followed long armed resistance to colonisation. Later when the Kazakh Steppe became a subject of ethnographic studies, so called „poor Islam“ was observed among its inhabitants – religious ignorance, especially among lower social strata. A typical example of this type of testimonial is accounts by diplomat and ethnographer A. Levshin [6].

Russian ethnography gradually developed a view of Kazakhs as a people who had always been stuck between paganism („wildness“) and Islam. In the 18th century tsarism represented by Catherine II of Russia launched a policy to spread Islam in the Steppe via Tatar mullahs to weaken the influence of Bukhara and Khiva on Kazakhs [7]. Using Islamic enlightenment, tsarism also wished “to transform Kazakhs into imperial subjects” [8]. Soon afterwards this policy was

replaced with a policy of „non-interference“ and intensification of Orthodox missionary outreach and with an open fight against Islam, later, at the beginning of the 20th century. Although “before the reign of Catherine II the status of Muslims in Russia was in many ways worse than the status of Christians in Turkey” [9]; precisely the information about the short-lived era of Russian protection of Islam is popular.

As a result, in Russian oriental studies the date of the final conversion of Kazakhstan’s population to Islam was shifted to the 19th century, even though other opinions existed. For example, between the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century V. Radlov, M. Brodovsky, R. Karutz and some other experts on the region believed that Kazakhs had long been a typical Muslim people. V. Bartold linked the crucial stage of the Islamisation of the Eurasian nomads with the period of the Golden Horde. This view was shared by orientalist N. Veselovsky [10]. Bartold maintained the unconditional Muslim image of Kazakhs even based on the simple logic of their origin from the state of „Uzbek Nomads“ [11].

Nevertheless, in the pre-Soviet period a certain pluralism existed in assessments of the religion of Kazakhs – from „Shamanistic“ identification to suggestions of „Islamic fanaticism“. Many facts testified that Islam served Kazakhs “as an ideology capable of inspiring anti-Russian sentiments” [12]. In accounts of the Kazakhs of the 19th century, A. Alektorov noted that “they are confident that people who do not revere the Prophet are in essence infidels (kafir) who could be tortured and against whom weapons could be used [...] they thought this about Christians, Buddhists, and Shias” [13, 14].

However, due to state-sponsored atheisation the only and categorical view about the indifference of Kazakhs towards Islam triumphed in historiography during the Soviet period. Western authors who often used Russian sources and, generally, had a weak grasp of people living in the Russian part of Central Asia increasingly frequently borrowed this thesis about „poor Islam“ and the late completion of Islamisation of Kazakhstan.

Russian and Western historiographies highly rated oriental scientist Chokan Valikhanov. Soviet ideology willingly used assertions made by Valikhanov about „*dvoeverie*“ („double belief“ or „dual faith“) and Tengrism among Kazakhs in a number of his essays [15]. In fact, it could be easily established that the Russian officer and spy made biased claims. Curious is his phrase: “Islam cannot help Russian or any other Christian government” [16].

At the same time, attention should be paid to serious discrepancies in Valikhanov’s description of the religion of Kazakhs. Such „inconvenient“ fragments were known only to a small circle of specialists. Thus, the enlightener complained that Kazakhs had irreversibly gone far from Shamanism and “sunk into Islam” [17], devoutly prayed, observed the Ramadan fasting and “very much respected people of learning” (in a Muslim way) [18]. Islam, in the scientist’s opinion, made “monstrous progress” in Kazakhstan; “each village has a mullah and mobile madrasa-school”; “he who doesn’t observe the 30-day-long Ramadan

fasting and five-times-a-day prayers doesn't have a voice and respect among relatives" [17].

In the years after Kazakhstan declared its independence in 1991 it became possible to openly discuss the complex, confused and ideology-driven problem of „Islam and Kazakhs“. In connection with this, researchers in Kazakhstan, of course, immediately drew attention to the feeling of identity and memory of Kazakhs reflects in epic traditions. In order to adopt new approaches, studying new trends in foreign Islamic studies proved useful. At present, approaches in Russian Islamic studies have also been transformed. Discussing previous views, specialist V. Basilov said that “many authors who published their impressions of Kazakhs themselves did know Islam well” [12, p. 17].

In present-day Kazakhstan, Professor A. Muminov criticised the myth about „superficial“ Islam through studying sacred genealogies [19]. N. Nurtazina carried out diachronic studies into the process of the development of the “Kazakh Muslim tradition” [20]. Other authors believe that Islam might have been established in Kazakhstan in the 18th century “already at the level of mass conscience and in its ritual and dogmatic institutions” [21]. A. Zhaksylykov showed the absolute domination of Islam in the conscience of Kazakhs and the fact that the religion of Tengrism, already obsolete, “fully retreated to the sphere of archetypes, substrata, superstitions and mythical poeticism of folkloric thinking” [22]. Nevertheless, despite changes in the paradigm, Russian and Sovietological approaches haven't yet fully been abandoned. For example, this is evidenced by the works of A. Nurgaliyeva, R. Mustafina [23, 24] and the scholarly five-tome History of Kazakhstan (Almaty, 2000-2010) [25, 26].

It is not quite correct to explain the reason for the emergence of the concept of „superficial Islam“ or „religious syncretism“ only by misconceptions, errors or the prejudices of Russian colonial officials. The crude falsification of history peculiar to the communist era was not yet observed in monarchic Russia in the 18th-19th centuries. Truth, as often happens, lies somewhere in the middle. It should be assumed (and this is our hypothesis) that in the history of Islam in Kazakhstan there were „high tides“ and „low tides“, in particular **regress and deIslamisation** in the colonial era. As a result, Russian eyewitnesses recorded a picture not of primary „Shamanism“ but of its partial revival from the subconscious.

This was a typical pagan reaction which happens in the life of faraway provinces of the Islamic civilisation as a result of a protracted crisis in enlightenment, isolation and the breakup of relations with Islamic centres. In the 15th-16th centuries, life in the region showed the palpable consequences of the decay of the Silk Road and peripheralisation of the whole of Central Asia. More importantly, the Islamic civilisation itself entered a deep crisis [27]. Due to constant wars, the religious and cultural achievements of previous eras might have been partially lost and moral foundations might have been shattered. However, what is fundamentally important is that Islamic identification and memory had not been lost. The state of enlightenment and morals among nomads continued to

deteriorate after the Steppe became part of the Russian Empire until Tatar clerics started missionary activities.

3. Reconstruction of Islam practised by Kazakh nomads (based on alternative local and foreign sources)

The body of oral history, genealogies and epics show a switch in the religious identification of nomads of the Kipchak Steppe in the 14th century (under Öz Beg Khan). Ötemish Hajji based his accounts on a traditional oral story of Öz Beg Khan's conversion to Islam [28]. In connection with this, interestingly enough I. Andreyev inquiring of Naiman Kazakhs in the far east of Kazakhstan about religion in 18th century, established that they had adhered to Islamic law since the times of Golden Horde Khan Jani Beg (son of Öz Beg, ruled 1342-1357) [29]. As early as the first half of 14th century, Golden Horde nomads' burial rituals clearly showed fundamental innovations testifying to the adoption of Islam by the majority of the empire's nomadic population [30]. In addition, in the post-Mongol era the construction of Muslim mausoleums started in Kazakhstan.

In Soviet literature a negative image of Öz Beg Khan was created, while the Islamisation of the Golden Horde was assessed as formal or official. However, historical sources point to the real authority of the Islamising khan. Kazakhs and Nogais still have a saying: "Din Ozbekten qalğan" – "We inherited religion from Öz Beg".

Certainly, in authoritarian nomadic societies the political elite's conversion to Islam was a remarkable event, signalling a change in collective identification. In regard to the official status of religion, it should be noted that the Kazakh Khanate emerged from the ruins of the Golden Horde in the process of its gradual disintegration. Intermediate links in the political genesis of the Kazakh state were the Nogai Horde, White Horde and other entities. Bartold observed the Islamic identification of all Turkic states in the post-Mongol period, including the Kazakh Khanate [31]. According to V. Trepavlov, the Nogai Horde "was part of the system of Muslim political entities as its sovereign and fully-fledged component" [32]. Other political predecessors of the Kazakh Khanate were the State of Uzbek Nomads and Moghulistan, whose Muslim affiliation is well-known.

In reality, the independent ethnic group of „Qazaq“ with its khanate from the very beginning positioned itself as a Muslim state (sultanate) on the international stage, while Kazakh rulers were hereditary Murids of Sufi sheikhs in Bukhara [33]. For traditional ethno-cultural consciousness it was typical to merge ethnic and religious identities, which resulted in an **old expression: ‘Musylman Qazaq balasy’ – ‘Muslim Kazakh child’**. The people had a very positive attitude to their Muslim „fate“ and even made boastful declarations of it. According to Valikhanov, "every Kazakh knows that he is a follower of Muhammad and that he is Muslim... it makes him proud in front of infidels... Right from childhood he

hears nothing but that he is Muslim” [18]. In state and legal practice taking an oath on the Koran was widely spread. “They faithfully honour an oath taken on the Koran.” [34] That Kazakhs “love using pious expressions from the Koran”, wrote V. Radlov [35].

Ibn Ruzbihan wrote about Kazakhstan that they “count themselves among Muslims” [36]. Seyfi Çelebi after communicating with Kazakhs called them “Muslims following Imam Agzam” (Hanafi school) [Seyfi Çelebi, *Tavarih (Khronika)*, http://www.vostlit.info/Text/rus17/Celebi_Sejfi/text1.phtml?id=12726, accessed May 12, 2017]. Traveller Anthony Jenkinson also defined the Kazakhs of the 16th century as a people of “the Mohammedan faith” [37], while indicating that they observe the hajj to Mecca. According to accounts of eyewitnesses of the 18th century, Kazakhs used the Arabic script and pronounced expressions of practising the faith [38].

Kazakh heroic epics, according to authoritative specialists, formed in the era of the late Golden Horde. The analysis of not only epics but all folklore genres and literature show the dominance of the Koranic picture of the world, Muslim eschatology and Sufism [22, p. 143]. The specific genre of folklore is Kazakh *qissa*, which were banned in Soviet times. These are Kazakh sagas about the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, caliphs and holy men [39]. In Kazakh genealogical trees Islamised ancestors are an obvious fact, old and laudable. Genealogical trees typically start with Allah’s creation of the „Prophet Adam“ and so on [40].

In discussing the question of religion in nomadic society it should be stressed that in Islam in order to pray there is no specific need for special temples. This function could be served even by nomads’ mobile houses. Mediaeval sources mention „mosques in tents“. The performance of five prayers a day in a nomadic village was described by Andreyev [29]. New studies show that the sub-ethnic social class of *khoja* of Arab origin, which had long been incorporated into the ethnic structure of Kazakhs, performed a leading role in maintaining and transferring spiritual information and taught reading and writing and Sufi practices [19]. *Khoja* produced authoritative spiritual leaders, for example, Musrali Khoja (died 1721), Khoja Abduljalil (died 1805) and others [20, p. 270].

In addition, over several past centuries each nomadic tribe formed its internal channel (mechanism) of preserving and reproducing religion which might not have been seen or assessed by outside observers. This was linked to the syncretism of nomadic culture. Talented tribal leaders could act as fully fledged coordinators of religious tradition and ritual intermediaries. With perfect knowledge of the Koran, written Muslim culture and the epic and musical culture of nomads, they created and spread poetic improvisations on religious topics [20, p. 315]. These *gyrau* (or *abyz*) in fact were „invisible“ mullahs and enlighteners of Kazakhs. As a result, the spiritual infantilism of Kazakh nomadic society and its alleged absolute and eternal dependence on „external“ Islam should not be exaggerated.

The bravest and most ambitious Kazakh men went to faraway cities and countries in the East in search of knowledge and to perform the hajj. In the 19th century, pilgrimages by Muslims from the Russian part of Turkestan, including the Kazakh Steppe, intensified and were performed in three ways [41]. In everyday life Kazakhs observed dietary restrictions imposed by Islam, methods of slaughtering animals and rules for ritual ablution. Their clothing also reflected the laws of local Sharia. They performed Muslim rites of marriage (*nikah*, or *neke* in Kazakh), circumcision, burials, etc. [42]. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, Richard Karutz, having familiarised himself with the lives of Kazakhs in the Mangystau Peninsula, wrote that “they ... perform prescribed prayers and execute some rules even more strictly than I have seen anywhere else” [43].

4. Conclusions

Modern approaches to the problem of the religious identification of Kazakhs requires changes to methodology and the research position, namely the holistic assessment of the self-identification of the people, criteria of the Islamic religion itself, correlation between sources of various origins and genres.

The historical and ethnographic study of the religion of the Kazakhs of the 16th-19th centuries allowed us to define two completely different stages in this history. The first is the era of the Renaissance of „Steppe“ Islam, which coincided with the Renaissance of Nomadism and politic independence of Turkic nomads between the 14th century and the beginning of the 18th century. In this historical period Kazakhs were fully-fledged members of the global and Central Asia Sunni Muslim community.

Another stage of Islam in Kazakhstan is linked to the serious crisis in nomadism and the arrival of Russian colonialism in the 18th-early 20th centuries. In nomadic societies, with their degree of dispersion, lack of permanent centres and a certain inclination of their collective mentality to anarchy (especially when they end up isolated), there always were risks of lowering the standards of Islamic behaviour, self-discipline and knowledge. However, analysing sources, especially traditional ones, it could be concluded that there was not any kind of restoration of Shamanism because the crisis did not hurt the core of identity. Later the myth of Shamanism became useful for Soviet anti-Islamic ideology. At the same time, discussion continues and many aspects of the topic of Islam in Kazakhstan’s history need further discussion and studies. For example, the topic of the politicisation of Islam among the Kazakhs of the 19th century due to a rise in protest movements against Russia has hardly been studied.

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