

THE FIRE CULT AND ISLAM IN THE KAZAKH SYSTEM OF BELIEFS

Agila Nurgaliyeva, Zhanna Tastaeva, Alfiya Baibulsinova, and
Lazzat Serikova

West Kazakhstan State University

Abstract. In this paper, we consider various viewpoints on the extent to which the Islamic religion and pre-Islamic beliefs influenced Kazakh society. It describes the traditional religious practices of the Kazakh-nomads, including non-Moslem elements, such as the Fire Cult. Moreover, the paper assesses the impact of Zoroastrianism on this ritual. It demonstrates that the nomadic Kazakhs were less affected by alien ideologies because of their mode of life. During the whole period under consideration, Kazakh religiousness was distinguished by its vivid syncretism that involves the combination of traditional creeds and the Moslem faith. The analysis refers to the period when the Kazakh territories were the part of the Russian Empire. The authors rely on the historical concept of Arnold Toynbee, especially on his formula ‘call-and-answer’. We were also guided by the ideas of Edward Shils and Anthony Giddens about the role of traditions.

Keywords: Islamization, Russian Empire, syncretistic Muslims, geo-cultural factors, Ot-Ana, Fire Cult, evil spirits, ethnic identity

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1. Introduction

Kazakhs, as bearers of the knowledge of their own heritage, are once again entering the arena of world history, and they are worthy of the interest and attention of the world’s mainstream cultures. An understanding of the religious beliefs and practice of the Kazakh people is essential for any analysis of their socio-political, spiritual, and cultural life; it lies at the spiritual and historical roots of their ethnic self-identity and national ideology. Here, we have chosen to focus on the Fire Cult traditions to reveal syncretism of Kazakh religiousness that is currently lacking in the literature.

In our work, we rely on the ideas of Edward Shils and Anthony Giddens. According to Shils, tradition is anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present (Shils 2006:12). Anthony Giddens, discussing tradition in relationship to modernity, regards the former as something bound to ritual, where ritual guarantees the continuation of tradition (Giddens 1994:64). However, we also share Nathan Light's belief that cultural analysts must understand the motivations that lead people to preserve or change their cultures. He writes, "People transmit culture through time, but this process has to be analyzed in terms of cultural reproduction: people are actively engaged in experiencing and recreating traditional practices" (Light 2007:488). Thus, as Alexandre Papas points out, one cannot understand political and religious history as a consequence of ideas and practices adopted from abroad: historical events arise from processes deeply rooted in local society (Papas 2005:16–9).

To understand the genesis of the spiritual component of Kazakh society, Arnold Toynbee's concepts of "incentives strokes, pressure and prejudice" by the environment or external forces as a "call" and society's reaction as an "answer" are applicable (Toynbee 2000:120). Relying on these concepts, we assume that the spiritual component of Kazakh society was based on a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors that affected it during its historic journey. Cultural factors, operating mainly in the temporal dimension, combined with environmental factors, operating in that of space. Recent publications thus speak of geo-cultural factors.

In general, modern historians, despite the deeper study of documentary material, have not formed general concepts to assess the influence of Islam on Kazakh society. A historiographical analysis of the literature on Islamic issues suggests the presence of conflicting viewpoints and polemical discourses that emerge from differing values.

2. Viewpoints on the religiosity of the Kazakhs

Almost all of the nineteenth century travelers who visited the region and regions adjacent to it were unanimous in stating that the commitment of the Kazakhs to Islam was only nominal (Georgi 1799:140, Levshin 1832:53–5, Bronevsky 1830:170–71, Herman 1822:219, Sotnikov 1872:771–90, Fredericks 1869: 690–7, Gaines 1874:42). Numerous descriptions of Kazakh religious beliefs indicate the strength of paganism. Russian authors of the nineteenth century wrote that the Kazakhs were afraid of evil spirits more than the wrath of Allah. All these authors could be called 'outsiders'. For example, V. V. Radloff admits that Kazakh beliefs retained very strong pre-Islamic survivals (Radloff 1980:304–6). As Nathan Light points out, external scholars, who arrive with their own intellectual formations and knowledge, cannot speak authoritatively about insider practices, including religious ones, until they seriously participate in a society (Light 2007:479).

Most modern Western historians agree with nineteenth century Russians and evaluate the Kazakhs as marginal and syncretistic Muslims. According to Andreas Kappeler, the “patriarchal common law and animistic ideas, such as a cult of ancestors and animals, went deeper than adherence to Islam” (Kappeler 2001: 186). Despite the fact that the Tatar mullahs managed to strengthen the position of Islam in the steppe in the nineteenth century, the Kazakhs “were still very much under the influence of animism” (Kappeler 2001:189). Martha Olcott shares this view, stating that the Kazakhs’ “popular religious practices were not deeply changed by Islam until the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries” (Olcott 1995: 18). According to her, the Kazakh population and most of its leaders “had only the sketchiest knowledge of Muslim tenets and practices” (Olcott 1995:19). Olcott argues that the Kazakhs kept many elements of “earlier shamanism, animism, and ancestor worship” because of their isolation from the Muslim centers of Central Asia and Kazan (Olcott 1995:19). Another researcher, Ira Lapidus, maintains that until the Russian conquest, Islam did not make a significant impact on the Kazakh hordes (Lapidus 1988:414–23).

Although a minority, some modern Western historians have expressed a different view. In his famous “Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition”, which was published in 1994, Devin DeWesse challenges the conventional view that “Islam ‘sat lightly’ upon the Inner Asian nomad, whose ‘conversion’ was in name only and failed to have any serious impact on his daily life or consciousness.” In DeWesse’s opinion, this approach is “clearly flawed by a remarkable misunderstanding both of the nature of Islam and of the indigenous religious conceptions that preceded Islam” (DeWesse 1994:9).

Similarly, American historian Paul Werth disagrees that the Islamization of the Kazakhs was a late phenomenon, which was brought about by Catherine the Great, who aimed to ‘civilize’ the nomads with the help of Tatar mullahs. He writes, “[the] mullahs perceived this mission in their own way--as the spread of ‘religion’ (*din*) among the uncultured Central Asian population. These actions of Tatars--and especially the criticism of them by Russian scientists at the end of XIX century, appear to have generated the widespread, but rather dubious assertion that the Kazakhs at that time were not ‘true Muslims,’ although they obviously considered themselves as such” (Werth 2005:79).

Bruce Privatsky opposes viewing the Kazakhs as nominal Muslims who guarded “many pre-Islamic shamanist traditions” and who expressed an “indifference to Islamic practice and values” (Privatsky 2001:10). He believes that those who advance such notions employ biased sources, and he associates the Islamic conversion of the Kazakhs to the time of the Golden Horde: “It is a reasonable proposition that the Kazakhs are Muslims because their origins are in the Golden Horde, and the Golden Horde had already converted to Islam before the Kazaks became a distinct ethnos” (Privatsky 2001:46).

The modern Kazakh scholar N. D. Nurtazina believes that in the later Middle Ages, Islam became a “folk religion of mentality” for the Kazakhs (Nurtazina

2000:226). Many other Kazakh authors hold that in the period under review, the religious consciousness of the people had assumed a syncretic, polystructural character. For example, A. Sultangaliyeva argues that so-called folk Islam, including pre-Islamic beliefs, extended into the desert (Sultangaliyeva 1999:36). Kazakh scientists also admit the importance of geo-cultural factors, though without using the term. G. Yesim notes the naturalness of ancient forms of cognition, in which he includes the Kazakh cult of Tengri; the worship of the sun, fire, and water; and the belief in shamanism, all of which reflect this people's closeness to nature (Yesim 2006:102).

Some modern Kazakh scholars note the impact of Zoroastrianism on the Fire Cult among the Kazakhs. Thus, according to U. Zhanibekov, the belief in expurgatory firepower is related to Zoroastrianism (Zhanibekov 2007:137–8). The same opinion is shared by Sh. Davletova: “Zoroastrianism had visible spiritual closeness to the inhabitants of Kazakhstan for the plain and simple moral of ‘Avesta,’ purity of intentions, benevolent attitude towards people, peace and light, goodness, and harmony with all, which had a great significance for nomads. The ancient Zoroastrians were fire-worshippers and their folk traditions expressed the importance of the fire for livestock breeding” (Davletova 2011:198). However, L. N. Gumilev denies the link between the Central Asian fire cult and Zoroastrianism, arguing that “the similarity is purely external. ... The fact is that in Iran the fire was an object of religious worship, and among the Turkic tribes, a magical instrument, i.e., substantially a likeness between them is not observed” (Gumilev 1993:85).

An expansionist Russian state contributed to the spread of Islam among the Kazakh nomads. Thus, A. Nurgaliyeva writes, “The historical circumstances had placed Kazakh society in the condition to choose the cultural-symbolic means of its social existence. Right in that period when the Kazakh society was a part of the Russian imperial system, the context in which it drew its own image had gradually changed. The accessory to followers of ‘the Mohammedan law’ became an important (but not major, as for their many neighbors) condition for illustrating its national identity, the symbol of its ethno-cultural distinction” (Nurgaliyeva 2011: 21). Further, the majority of researchers point out that with the inclusion of Central Asia into the Russian Empire, the Islamization of the Kazakh nomads increased.

Nonetheless, it is essential to assert that Islam was more of a marker of cultural and ethnic identity than an active spiritual commitment for most Kazakhs. The splicing of ‘normative’ Islam and the local religious substrate led to the formation of what some researchers call Kazakh ‘folk’ Islam (Sultangaliyeva 1999:36). It was difficult to comply with Muslim norms under the conditions of nomadic life, and deviations from the former were evident to observers. However, the five main religious duties of a Muslim were rigorously performed. Many nineteenth century authors, such as V. V. Radloff, A. Levshin, and A. Sotnikov speak of this adherence (Radloff 1980:302, Levshin 1832:54–5, Sotnikov, 1872:773). The chief manifestations of allegiance to the faith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

were the celebration of religious ceremonies that were connected with the rites of passage, such as (male) circumcision, marriage, and burial. However, burial, funeral, and wedding ceremonies were not entirely transformed by Islamic; rather, they retained many of their original features, which were not overlaid by Islamic motifs. Their Islamic features included the participation in these rites by mullahs and the reading of prayers and chapters from the Qur'an. Some rites looked formally Islamic, but showed that they remained untouched by the imported faith (Valihanov 1985:56, Sotnikov, 1872:780, Levshin 1832:110). Moreover, the Kazakhs took part in the widespread observance of folk traditions, such as pilgrimages to the graves of holy men and the performance of associated rituals to secure divine assistance and protection. In popular understanding, such practices were considered to be in keeping with Muslim beliefs.

3. The world outlook of the Kazakh-nomads

It is justifiable to speak of the existence of a special Kazakh culture that is invariant. To understand its formation, it is crucial to study the role of geo-cultural factors. The genesis of the spiritual component of the Kazakh society is based on a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors that affected it in the course of its historical development. Cultural factors, which primarily acted as measurements of time, were combined with environmental factors, which served as coordinates of geographical space. In a number of recent publications, this combination is called the geo-cultural factor (Nurgalieva 2012:281).

The meanings of cultural space in the steppe zone were based on an ancient worldview – a metaphysics of space, planetary harmony, and the nexus of ecological and human realms of existence. Unlike the European cultural paradigm, ethnic cultures in semi-desert and steppe conditions had retained anthropocosmism as the principal feature of the philosophy and aesthetics of life. Human beings occupy the central place in anthropocentrism, but the nomad has an inwardness that emanates from his harmony with the environment. It includes a universal humanism, which embraces mice and men, nature as a whole, and the cosmos into the orbit of his spiritual culture.

The world outlook of the Kazakh-nomads met all the needs of their nomadic mode of life; it placed human beings in harmony with nature and the outer world. The Kazakh-nomads have always lived in harmony with the environment. Their traditional religious complex relied on representations of the relationship of earthly existence with universal, cosmic spheres. In the minds of the nomads, nature there was an eternal and inexplicable force that exerted positive and negative influences on the fates of individuals.

There is no doubt that people are able to change the cultural and symbolic means of their social existence in certain historical circumstances. Kazakh society made such a choice; thus, Islam began to function as a symbol of its ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. Nevertheless, Islam cannot be considered the backbone of

the Kazakh mode of life. While Kazakh traditional culture was alive, the harmonic relationship between man and nature that permeates all levels of everyday life of a nomad persisted. Consequently, no crisis of consciousness emerged that engendered a radical change in religious beliefs. Through the orthodox perceptions of Islam, the traditional Kazakh modified but did not overturn their traditional consciousness. Because the process of Islamization of the Kazakhs was not uneven but occurred gradually and was extended over a long period, no destructive changes had happened in traditional world perception of the Kazakh population, in its geo-cultural values. Inner resources of ethnical–religious traditionalism of the Kazakh culture were kept.

4. Cult of fire and the Kazakhs

The Fire Cult is the most important Kazakh cult. Cult of fire can be traced among the inhabitants of medieval cities of Kazakhstan, as evidenced by the archaeological excavations. For example, excavations at Baba-Ata, a dead village on the Karatau Ridge, demonstrate the widespread occurrence of the Fire Cult in that area (Baipakov and Podushkin 1989:88–9). Excavations of the main hall of the ancient palace complex uncovered a thick layer of ash, which indicates religious rituals associated with fire. Artefacts preserved in ruins of Kostyube and Krasnorechenskaya in Semirechiye demonstrate the existence of the Fire Cult among the townspeople and settled populations in the pre-Islamic period. In the medieval citadel of Taraz, there are flame shrines, similar to the D-shaped mud-plaster feature in Room B, known from the medieval city of Kostobe (in the Talas valley); these are often found in highly decorated rooms (Baipakov et al. 2011: 373–5). The Kazakhs, as well as other Turks, linked fire with birth, growth, and life itself. Fire was personified by a female figure, *Ot-ana* (the Mother of Fire). In Kazakh, *Ot ine* or *Ot inezi* means ‘Mother of Fire or fire mistress’.

Ot-Ana was believed to be the mother of all people. Fire was associated with clan and family shrines. It was the patron of dwellings and placed in the temple of houses. It was believed that it defended the family against all evils and brings wealth and happiness. Family prayers and sacrifices were performed to *Ot-Ana* to ensure familial health and wealth. Kazakhs asked the Mother of Fire to defend young couples. Therefore, appeals to fire for assistance and defense are a tradition of the Kazakh people, extending from ancient times to the present day.

Every family respected fire. The Kazakhs say, “There’s a glimmer of soul, where the flame wavers.” According to ancient beliefs, it was inadmissible to desecrate fire by throwing garbage and leftovers, foul-smelling substances, coals mixed with sharp objects onto it or to swing at and step over it. Valihanov reports that the Kazakh referred to someone who desecrated a fire as a “Dissolute, shameless liar, and bastard” (Valikhanov 1985:55). The Kazakhs do not pour water on fire and embers. As water meets fire embers, fire begins to sizzle and ash

rises up , and then settles as soot. *Ot-Ana* leaves hearth; flame is cooled; passion fades; a person dies.

It was believed that fire banished evil and removed sin. When people moved from wintering grounds to the *jaylau* (summer pastures), they made two big fires, and they and their cattle passed between them. The *jaylau* were thought of as clean and pure; thus, someone going to them had to be purified. Horses, however, were considered pure animals and did not require ritual cleansing. This custom of getting rid of evil is called *alas*'. During this process, people said, "Alas, Alas, Holy fire, deliver us from all distress, unhappiness." Returning in the late autumn to their winter dwellings, the Kazakh people fumigated them to banish the 'evil spirits' that had supposedly settled in summer. By saying "Alas, Alas, keep us from every evil; fire-fire, get us cleaned from everything evil," they exiled evil from a sick man's bed and the pram of a baby with smoke. They also expelled an 'evil spirit' by circling fire over a patient's head. According to Valikhanov, "The Kazakhs passed between two fires when they made a promise, swore, and to clear themselves of sins. ... At the same time, they worshipped fire and were frightened of it" (Valikhanov 1985:54). Fire had a cleaning quality. A desecrated thing was held above the flames for cleaning. A man giving a public oath also had to be cleaned by flames. Only after the cleansing process, the man could take the oath. It was necessary to be cleansed with fire before taking an oath.

Oil was usually used to ignite fire for sacrifice. As indicated above, the Kazakhs believed that fire was the patron of dwellings. For this reason, newly married women worshipped it. This custom, which was derived from the ancient Güns, has been kept by most Turkish people. A woman who has just been married bowed three times at the entrance of her new home until she reached the fireplace; this act ensured that her family would be as happy as her ancestors. The bride then poured a scoop of oil into the flame, and before praying said, "Mother of the Fire, Mother-Moon, benefactress." The mother of the groom, heating her hands over the fire, stroked the face of her daughter-in-law (Valikhanov 1985:54-5).

All these customs and traditions are rooted in antiquity and had a magical or sacred significance attached to them. It is interesting that the cult of fire coexisted with Islam. In the performance of these ceremonies, the participants uttered the name of Allah, praying for healing, and asking for happiness and well-being of the offspring.

Industrialization and urbanization have affected customs and rituals rooted in antiquity. Many of them have disappeared from the life of the townspeople. But the pre-Islamic ideology, more exactly, its separate structures, are still retained in these days in the backyard of history, such as domestic life, female ceremonies, family and witchdoctor's magic. The echoes of the Fire Cult can be felt in Kazakhstan peoples' life. Traditions associated with the Fire Cult remain in force, although they are undergoing some changes. For example, the ritual of feeding the spirits of fire with oil has been transformed into cooking ritual tortillas *shelpek*. *Shelpek* are baked from the unleavened dough in boiling fat in a cauldron. They are prepared by mixing three formulations: water, salt and flour, symbolizing the

foundation of the human body. *Shelpek* are baked for a wake, and on Thursdays and Fridays throughout the year. They are also prepared three days before the holiday of *Kurban Ait*, the second of two religious holidays celebrated by Muslim worldwide each year on the 70th day after the end of Ramadan. *Kurban Ait* literally means Festival of Sacrifice in Arabic. The ritual of cooking tortillas *shelpek*, apparently, is the transformation of the ancient rite of pouring oil on the fire. The ultimate objective in both cases is the same: to feed the protective spirits that are saturated with odors in order to obtain their arrangement.

Presently, the Kazakhs still believe in the good and bad omens. It is impossible to blow out a burning candle: the flame should be quenched by covering the wick with something. If you blow on the flame, you can blow away the wealth, extinguish happiness, and become forgetful. In gratitude and encouragement of a good omen the Kazakhs pour oil on the fire and say good wishes. There is an ancient form of divination by oil or rather in its burning in contact with fire. If oil thrown into the fire gives a vivid and bright flames, it is considered a good sign, and if the flame becomes dim, then the weather is considered to be unfavorable.

5. Conclusion

Within the Russian Empire, the Kazakh society maintained the unity of two tendencies: the internal resources of ethnic and religious traditionalism and the socio-cultural protection of the Islamic religion. Based the concepts of Toynbee, we assume that the genesis of the spiritual component of the Kazakh society was based on a set of endogenous and exogenous factors. Islam began to function as a symbol of its ethnic and cultural distinctiveness; it was a 'response' to the 'call' of the Russian Empire's cultural expansion. Nonetheless, because of their nomadic mode of life, the Kazakhs were less affected by alien ideologies and preserved local legends and traditions that comprised their religious beliefs and rituals. Thus, the Kazakhs were able to mollify the impact of Islam. Although they were Muslims, it is highly problematic to deny the existence of non-Muslim elements in their belief system, such as the Fire Cult. The persistence of this ritual can be explained by the enduring traditional institutions of Kazakh society that were expressed in ancient traditions. Non-Muslim superstitions dominated the Kazakh worldview in the period under study, a deep, persistent reality that conforms to the ideas on tradition of Edward Shils and Anthony Giddens. It is thus necessary to emphasize that the worship of nature as the universal source of life is one of the most important features of the spiritual Kazakh-nomadic culture. But the Kazakhs never entirely abandoned their pre-Islamic traditions, and their present beliefs, though officially Suffi Islam, are a mixture of Muslim and pagan traditions. This paper demonstrates that the Kazakh popular religion, which has long been in significant part itself Islamic, was not only a taproot of Islamic culture, but that pre-Islamic influences are among its most vibrant features to this day. This is especially true regarding the traditions of the Fire Cult, which are highlighted in this paper.

Various rituals and traditions associated with the Fire Cult have remained to this day. Their ongoing presence in the national memory testifies that in the course of the history of Islam in Kazakhstan, these archaic beliefs had not been forgotten. This theme requires further study.

Address:

Agila Nurgaliyeva
 Department of Universal History and Social-Political Disciplines
 West Kazakhstan State University
 Dostyk Avenue 162
 090000 Uralsk, Republic of Kazakhstan
 E-mail: agilan2009@rambler.ru
 Tel: + 870 1379 6679

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