

# Islam and Kazakh Society before Soviet Era

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**Abstract**—The article considers religious aspects of Kazakh society pre-Soviet times. Studying the mental, political and spiritual content of Islam, the reasons for its wide distribution among the ancestors of the Kazakhs is analyzed. Interested Russians since the accession of the Kazakh Khanate to the Russian Empire more than once pointed out that Islam is a synthesis of Islam and Shamanism. But shamanism is a generalization of the name of religion, which took place prior to Islam in the land of the Kazakh people. Here we can see the elements of Zoroastrianism, Tengrianism, etc. This shows that the ancestors of the Kazakhs - Turkic people - not renounced the ancient beliefs completely and leave some portion of these religions as an integral part of the worldview of the people, by the device. Therefore, the founder of the Turkic Sufi Yasaui still has a huge impact on the religiosity of the Kazakhs. He managed elements of the ancient religion, which formed the basis of the Kazakhs world, interpreted in the Muslim perspective. The Russian authorities tried to quell by Islamization Kazakh people. But it was Islam that has revived the national consciousness of the Kazakh people.

**Keywords**—Adaptation, Islam, Kazakh people, Shamanism, Sufism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**K**AZAKH nation which is one of the branches of Turkic people can assure that its life perception is connected with Islamic religion for more than 12 centuries. However, religion of Islam was spread unevenly on the Kazakh land from the territorial and time viewpoint due to some factors. First, Kazakh people inhabited a big territorial area, that is, geographical location. Second, Kazakh people lived nomadic life-style. Although two factors are derived through their interrelation we must consider them separately for some reasons.

Named factors above had their influence not only on the spread of the Islamic religion, but also on the place it takes in the mentality of Kazakh people, that is, the content they received. For example, even though Kazakhs recognized themselves as Muslims the first Kazakh scientist C. Valikhanov wrote "...Kyrgyz (Kazakhs were called Kyrgyz because in the Russian Empire existed Russians who lived on the boundaries with east were called Cossacks, which is likely to Kazakhs in sounding) - are Muslims, but practice shaman rituals or mix Muslim rituals up with shamanic superstition" [1, 48], they persist performing old religious rituals and Islamic rules on the same level. Also about it in 1887 governor of Akmola major general Cytovich said: "Kyrgyzs, even though call themselves Muslims do not follow Koran, shariat and other muslim teachings in their private life

and religious, civil and moral relations, but follow own national traditions" [2, 230]. Interesting fact is that Kazakhs themselves were not the main cause of Islam's rise in the region, but rather exogenous forces such as Russian colonization policy were responsible for Islam expansion as it was written by Russian scientist A. Levshin, member of the geographical society of Paris, "the number of diligent Muslims is so small that religion of Islam could fade away without supports of spiritual groups of Islam from Bukhara, Khiva, Turkestan and mullahs, which are appointed by Russian government to khans and patriarchs to correct positions of clerks [2, 314]. As a proof we may consider actions of Russian empress Catherine II such as an order to spread on a free basis Koran in 1787 and organization of Orynbor Muftiat (official name - Orenburgskii Muhammedanskii Dukhovnoe Sobranie) in 1788. For an external observer it may seem that conquering state exercises care for people under its rule, but it was covering up more important aim: on the boundaries attacks from Kazakhs on Russians did not stop. In order to suppress attacks it was recognized that it will require deepening of Islamization, because for many years bordering Turkic tribes as Tatar, Bashkir, Nogay were behaving in peaceful manner as they were Muslims were assumed. However, they did not consider that those nations were exercising sedentary life style while Kazakhs lived nomadic.

C. Valikhanov in his article which was written during 1863-1864 considered religion of Islam as the force which will expose the unity of Kazakh people to some difficulties: "concept of Muslim being has not ingrained into our flesh and blood yet. It threatens to separate public in the future" [1, 71]. The investigation of the reason why such words had been written will obviously shed the light on relations between Kazakh people and Islam in 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Consideration of those relations will require looking at three aspects.

First, Islam was introduced to Kazakh land in 714 by the leadership of Arabian General Kuteiba Ibn Muslim. According to historical facts, ancestors of Kazakh people were acquainted to Islam during military assault. B. Gafurov represented this military assault's main goal in this way: "Kuteiba was interested in that centre not only for its importance as a trading place, but for its strategic role: by conquering Isfidzhab, Kuteiba hoped to cut main roads used by Turkic troops to help their Central Asian allies" [3, 316]. Hence, Arabs invaded Turkic people's land not to conquer, but as a preventive measure of their state against external armies. That is why we can assure that invasions to Central Asia under Islam flags had more ideological form. Missioners in huge amounts flowed into area and by ideological speeches and teachings tried to recruit local population and admittance

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of Islam was held without any violence. Invasion towards Turkic population was made not for power and land, but for its people, for the changes in their perception of the world so that they could recruit locals. On certain level a period arose when it was necessary to strengthen and indicate Arab Khalifat boundaries and it is more likely that the mission of protection from the other states' attacks was given to missionaries who used words not swords to recruit. As it was mentioned above Russian empire would also try to use such action. The failure of the attempt to subdue Kazakhs in 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries using religion of Islam was explained by Russian officials that Kazakhs were illiterate in religion, and know its ceremonies superficially. County of Akmola Mikhailov wrote about: "Recently has been existing opinion that Kyrgyzs accepted only external, ceremonial side of Islam and they are indifferent to religion. Unfortunately, this opinion is absolutely wrong: those who live closely to Kyrgyz people can clearly see that they have a Muslim spirit within them. It is not expressed by blind and slave adherence to rituals of Islam, but in the perception of the world" [2, 334]. Kazakh people was familiar with Islam worldview for centuries but did not show any fanatical actions, only after colonial wars against Russian empire for own independence Kazakh started to shape Islam as a one of the tools of a struggle, that is why under the rule of Russian empire process of deep transformation into Muslim took place.

Second, religion of Islam had the ability to unite Arab tribes and as it was spread it united under its own flag other nationalities. For local officials appeared a chance to centralize ruling system based on one ideology and to unite people under their rule. Such role of Islam is very likely to belief of Turkic people in "Kok Tanir" (a Deity Above) which performed the same function of uniting people. Somehow we can claim that religion of Islam was at some degree a reincarnation of the belief of Turkic people in external powers named "Kok Tanir" and was accepted in its new form. Ruling form under the statement "God in the sky, Kagan on the earth" was very likely to those in Islamic states. Factors mentioned above explain decision of Karakhanid who came to the power in 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries to accept Islam first was aimed to strengthen their positions. Therefore, it will be right to note that in the medieval centuries religion of Islam functioned as political force to unite Turkic tribes.

Religion of Islam was always perceived as force that unites Muslim people by Turkic nations. Orynbor muftiat which was opened in Ufa included only those nations which were related to Bokei Horde (Western Kazakhstan), but Southern territories of Kazakhstan which were included to Russian empire afterwards had no affiliation to any muftiat. As a result, on one of the first national newspapers of Kazakh people "Kazakh" on its papers of 1913-1914 publications discussed the question of "Muftiat: is there any need in private muftiat or not" [5]. Those articles and publications was an attempt of the first Kazakh intelligentsia representatives as Akhmet Baitursynov, Mirzhakyp Dulatov to unite Kazakh citizens on the basis of muftiat, that is, on the spiritual basis,

to open the path of education and technical development for simple people. However, during the war against Turkey Russian officials assumed those actions derive from pan turkism ideas and tried to prevent realization of them. For example, in the secretly written letter on 17 November, 1876 by governor general of Orynbor was ordered to examine books which were brought by Muslims who have travelled to Mecca [2, 228]. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1910 there was order №9667 from Stolypin, then Minister of Internal Affairs of Russian Empire, to take under severe control those who returned from Mecca through Turkey [2, 420-421]. Under the pretense of epidemic diseases it was forbidden to visit Mecca or travelers were kept at the borders for longer period that usual [2, 351-355]. However, despite many prohibitions on travelling to Mecca, the number of travelers was increasing. Thus, religion of Islam in those periods served for Kazakh nation as a force against colonial policy of Russian Empire such as russification of the culture, language, writings and Christianization.

Third, one of the roles of Islam as a regulator of the humanist principles in relationships among societies were more applicable to moral view of the world of the Turkic people. There is no doubt that knowledge of nomadic life-style of the Prophet had influenced on sunnas and this factor also affected on decision of Turkic people to accept it as it harmonically applied to them and their life-style. The Hanafi madhhab's postulate which allows accepting local traditions if they do not go against Muslim traditions were attractive for Turkic people. Also there is one more factor which is important to consider, whilst it's spread on Kazakh land Sufism were regarded as a spiritual side of Islam, that is, Sufism were not considered as a one of the flows of Islam.

Moreover, due to geographical conditions religion of Islam were filtered by Persian people's worldview. That means religion of Islam is influenced during its spread over other nations by local believes. Even though teachings of Islam experienced no changes its some concepts were interpreted differently in every nation according to its own believes. Those interpretations were in the form of sufi may be concluded.

Spiritual world differs from material in: material things can be changed or ruined in one day or even faster, but to change spiritual world of one nation in one day or century is impossible. Exceptionality of the nation is determined through its traditions and believes. During the process of acceptance of new religion accepting nation will try to save its own traditions despite it is exposed to changes in the perception of the world and mentality, making the process of acceptance long-term process. No doubt that during the process will occur moments when there are some big differences between religions and will require change and symbiosis actions which will happen on the both sides. Thus, Islam entered into this process in the form of sufism: "it will be wrong to ignore sufism in identification of Kazakh's Islam. Teachings of sufism at some point could be recognized as a conglomerate of ancient traditions and believes of Kazakhs and served as a glue in connecting Islam to Kazakhs" [6, 197].

Sufism which continued teachings of Kozha Akhmet Yassaui a person who founded a basis for study of a mysticism of Turk and Islam allowed to interpret ayats of Koran freely. That is why in 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries citizens who strived for education tried to explain changes happening in the state basing on Islam, and understood that development of Kazakhs was based on religious believes direction. Such concepts are likely to reforms relating to religion of well known for Kazakhs Gumar Karash. For example, the charity based on the sacrifice of livestock in Islam were changed so that not to sacrifice but to give money for those who needs them. Such issues were discussed on the publications 36, 50, 53 of the newspaper "Kazakh". Also a "badal hadzh" (paying someone so that person will go to Mecca to serve Allah instead of you) which has become a trade was proven to be inconsistent to Islam on an academic level on the pages of the newspaper shows profound knowledge of Islam [2, 199].

Furthermore, for acceptance of Islam and its successful spread over Kazakh land Islam had passed all three requirements: 1) religion of Islam appeared as a new religion consistent with requirements of the new world so that it was capable for needs of Turkic people. Even though religion of Islam has come from the outside nations Turkic people were ready concluded A. Veselovsky: "Adoption assumes that those who receive are not empty, on the contrary a place which has the same mindset and fantasy forms" [7, 21]. Consequently, this means even though religion of Islam was new for Turkic people it renovated fundamentals of the world perception: new but still so familiar. Also Islam comparing to other religions indicates directly relation of "Allah - human" without any intermediaries so that no difficulties arise during rituals. It was easy for those who lived nomadic life-style. According to such objective conditions religion of Islam were accepted with no big contradictions from the side of Turkic people who lived on the lands of Kazakhstan, because conflicts emerged in the spheres such as faith, worldview and mentality found its solutions during transformational processes and did not cause so many difficulties; 2) Islam based on its tolerance could unite Turkic tribes of different religions and other Muslims, from political point of view centralized system of power were able to construct one ideology. Also concept of equality of all Muslims in Islam not only in Turkic tribes, solved conflicts between different tribes, such factor surely played a big role; 3) As it was mentioned before in Islam social relationships were strictly followed by moral principles. Ancestors of Kazakhs did not separate sufism from Islam, on the contrary considered it as a high spiritual form of being Muslim. On appearance of such opinion surely had influence teachings of Kozha Akhmet Yassaui. Kozha Akhmet Yassaui preached Islam from the point of view of sufi. Yassaui first of all demanded from his followers purity of heart and spiritual world. Spirituality of a person was a determining factor in identification of meaning of person's life. In preaches of Yassaui can be observed concepts of "Malamtiyya" of Sufism, which claims that each person is responsible to Allah for his actions, society cannot

judge someone's spiritual world and be a mentor for him. In his Hikmets Yassaui tried to interpret a famous statement of Mansur Halladzh "Ana-l-Khak" (I am the God) by the concepts of Islam not Sufism. According to this interpretation language, social status, knowledge and other attributes of this world are intangible to spiritual world. If a person truly will serve Allah, he will not need any mosque or imam, or something else; Allah will accept his true praying any time and any place in any conditions. That is why Kazakhs who admit Yassaui's preaches do not seek and build mosques to serve Allah: they only identified the direction to Mecca and read namaz on the place which suited to requirements [2,476].

Such relationship to Islam on the Kazakh land was based on these three aspects until 20<sup>th</sup> century, exactly till the October revolution.

As it was mentioned above C. Valikhanov and A. Levshin stated that Kazakh people did not rejected its traditions and faith even though they accepted Islam. Even though Islam was dominant old traditions and believes on the certain level were living together with people as a superstition and folklore. Other parts were made to explain and full those parts that Islam could not give appropriate explanation. Thus, Islam and old believes were closely interrelated in two ways. First, as it was shown by C. Valikhanov, names have been changed but the meaning stayed: "Islam could not entrench among illiterate people without mullah, but stayed in sounds and phrases which hide previous shamanic philosophies. Eventually names and words were exposed to changes but ideas. Ongon was changed to Aruak, Kok Tanir - Allah or Kudai, spirit of earth - shaitan, peri, diuan or djinn, but the ideas remained shamanic" [1, 49]. Shaman own understandings and believes interpreted in Islam terminologies. For example, baksy (shaman) by performing the shamanistic ritual could get connected to souls and djinns that belonged to metaphysical world in order to heal, predict and etc. Afterwards this would be called "making zikir".

Such process of exchanges in names can be explained: Yassaui described "zikir" from the point of view of Sufism, that it is the process of remembering Allah and pronouncing his name constantly so that a person performing it can enter "tauhid" mode of sufi. That mode enabled soul of a person to get contacted to Absolute Soul or on the level of sufi soul could be united to it. During performing zikir a person can get an access to spiritual world, baksy (shaman) of Kazakhs functioned through their own spiritual characters (djinn, peri, aruak). Due to similarity of both actions performance of shamanistic ritual by baksy were named making zikir. Also healing actions of baksy in a society were similar to those of mullah, and then people started to recognize them as mullah functions. About it A. Levshin had written in his works [3, 320].

Second way is related to sufism. Sufism as it was mentioned previously were making explanations of Islam concepts to local people through localization of any concept. In Islam there is no praying to aruak (soul of dead), it is a "shirk", an absurd which recognizes that there are others like

Allah. However, Kozha Akhmet Yassau did not exclude existence of aruaks as he believed that Prophet put him on the path of studying sufism. Kazakhs believed according to their ancient believes that ancestors whom they prayed were closer to Allah than those who lived in this world and would contribute in receiving messages and wishes to Allah faster. Even in the present days Kazakhs pray first to Allah and then to ancestors for support. This process can be regarded as an adaptation of Islam through sufism.

To conclude, Kazakhs until the October revolution even though accepted Islam were able to keep their traditions and believes that formed in the ancient times. It must be understood that statement of C. Valikhanov that religion of Islam will set apart Kazakh nation in the future meant that external powers would lead to fanatical actions because they destroy the process of adaptation which prevents from fanatical actions which is in conflict with natural flow of evolution. Religion of Islam which is does not teach fanatical actions have adapted to Kazakh mentality so that Kazakhs consider it as a faith which protects and keeps their national exceptionality.

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