

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE KAZAKH STEPPE DURING THE LATE MIDDLE AGES: A BRIEF SURVEY THROUGH THE EYES OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCHERS AND TRAVELERS

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the religious beliefs and practices of the Kazakhs in the steppe during the late Middle Ages, highlighting the interplay between Islam and pre-Islamic Tengriist traditions. Drawing on archival sources, travel accounts, and ethnographic studies from the 19th and early 20th centuries, the study demonstrates that Kazakh religiosity was characterized by a syncretic form known as "folk Islam" or everyday Islam. While the Kazakhs formally adopted Islamic practices, these were often integrated with indigenous rituals, cosmological observations, and nomadic lifestyle requirements. The research explores the role of ritual purification, amulets, sacrificial practices, and celestial observations in regulating both spiritual and practical aspects of daily life. The study argues that Kazakh religious culture reflects a unique adaptation of Islam to local traditions, illustrating the broader dynamics of syncretism and resilience in nomadic societies.

**Keywords:** Kazakh Steppe, Folk Islam, Tengriism, Nomadic Culture, Syncretic Religiosity, Daily Life Practices, Central Asia.

## ОРТА ҒАСЫРДЫҢ СОҢЫНДА ҚАЗАҚ ДАЛАСЫНДАҒЫ ДІНИ СЕНИМДЕР: ЗАМАНДАС ЗЕРТТЕУШІЛЕР МЕН САЯХАТШЫЛАРДЫҢ ҚОЗҚАРАСЫ БОЙЫНША ҚЫСҚАША ШОЛУ

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**Аннотация.** Бұл мақала орта ғасырдың соңында қазақ даласындағы қазақтардың діни сенімдері мен тәжірибелерін зерттейді. Ислам мен исламға дейінгі тәніршілдік дәстүрлер арасындағы өзара байланысқа назар аударады. 19 және 20 ғасырдың басындағы архивтік деректерге, саяхатшылардың жазбаларына және этнографиялық зерттеулерге сүйене отырып, зерттеу қазақтардың діни танымында «халықтық ислам» немесе дәстүрлі ислам деп аталағын синкреттік форманың бар екенін көрсетеді. Қазақтар ресми түрде исламдық тәжірибелерді қабылдағанымен, олар жиі жергілікті дәстүрлермен, космологиялық бақылаулармен және

көшпелі өмір салтына байланысты қажеттіліктермен үйлестірілген. Зерттеу рухани және құнделікті өмір аспектілерін реттейтін тазалық рәсімдері, құрбандық дәстүрлерінің рөлін қарастырады. Мақала қазақ халқының діни мәдениеті исламды жергілікті дәстүрлерге бейімдеудің ерекше мысалын көрсетеді. Бұл көшпелі қоғамдардағы синкретизм мен төзімділіктің кеңірек динамикасын көрсетеді.

**Кілт сөздер:** Қазақ даласы, Халықтық ислам, Тәніршілдік, Көшпелі мәдениет, Синкреттік діни таным, Құнделікті өмір тәжірибелері, Орта Азия.

## РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЕ ВЕРОВАНИЯ В КАЗАХСКОЙ СТЕПИ В ПОЗДНЕЕ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЬЕ: КРАТКИЙ ОБЗОР ГЛАЗАМИ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЕЙ И ПУТЕШЕСТВЕННИКОВ

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**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматриваются религиозные верования и обычай казахов в степи в позднем Средневековье, с акцентом на взаимодействие ислама и доисламских тенгрийских традиций. На основе архивных данных, свидетельств путешественников и этнографических исследований XIX и начала XX веков исследование показывает, что для казахской религиозности характерна синкретическая форма, называемая «народным исламом» или традиционным исламом. Хотя казахи официально приняли исламские обычаи, они часто сочетали их с местными обычаями, космологическими наблюдениями и требованиями кочевого образа жизни. В исследовании рассматривается роль ритуального очищения, жертвоприношения и астрономических наблюдений в регулировании духовных и практических аспектов повседневной жизни. В статье демонстрируется уникальная адаптация ислама к местным традициям, отражающая широкую динамику синкретизма и толерантности в кочевых обществах, а также иллюстрируется казахская религиозная культура.

**Ключевые слова:** Казахская степь, Народный ислам, Тенгрианство, Кочевая культура, Синкретическая религиозность, Практики повседневной жизни, Центральная Азия.

**Introduction.** We observe a complex synthesis of beliefs and practices from the religious outlook of the Kazakh steppe in the late Middle Ages to Islam and pre-Islamism. The combination of nomadic lifestyles and the gradual spread of Islam among the Kazakhs formed a unique religious consciousness. Judging by historical sources, although the Kazakhs adopted Islam, they often understood and practiced it by integrating pre-Islamic cultural traditions, customs, and cosmological concepts.

Russian and European observers note that the Kazakh people coexisted with the principles of Sharia law and maintained Tengriist rituals. This harmonious "folk Islam" can be called a syncretic form of religiosity, or everyday Islam. From this perspective, Kazakh religious practices can be understood not only as beliefs, but also as practical adaptations to the environmental, social, and cultural conditions characteristic of the nomadic steppe. This article aims to provide a brief overview of religious beliefs among Kazakhs, focusing on the coexistence of Islamic and Tengriist elements and how these beliefs structure daily life and social practice in the steppe.

**Materials and Methods.** This study is based on a critical review of primary and secondary sources from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Archival documents, travelogues, and ethnographic reports were examined to understand the religious beliefs and customs of the Kazakhs. The main sources used were official reports of Russian administrators, ethnographic studies by Russian and European researchers, and Kazakh annals [KC MDA, n.d.; Grodekov, 1889; Valikhanov, 1984].

Additional sources include scientific analyses of Kazakh culture, folk beliefs, and Islamization processes [Kafesoglu, 1998; Toleubaev, 1972; Kul-Muhammed, 2007]. The research methodology combines historical-analytical approaches with comparative ethnography, highlighting the syncretism between Islamic teachings and indigenous Tengriist traditions. Particular attention was paid to daily religious practices, calendar systems, ritualistic purification methods, and the use of amulets and talismans. Through cross-referencing with ethnographic literature and archival documents, this study reconstructs the dynamics of religious life in the Kazakh steppe, demonstrating both the adherence to official Islam and the persistence of pre-Islamic belief systems.

**Discussion and Results. Folk Islam among the Kazakhs.** The fate of Islam in the Kazakh steppe was closely connected with the major religious centers of Turkestan and the Volga region. Islam among the Kazakhs had its own characteristics [Çicerina, 1907: 239]. These features partly contributed to the understanding of how some Kazakhs deviated from standard Islamic norms. Russian officials and researchers who observed and documented the lives of Kazakhs often noted that Kazakhs did not fully observe the rules of the Islamic religion, i.e., Sharia. In December 1877, the minister who inspected educational institutions in the Orenburg region wrote to the governor-general: "Although the Kazakhs consider themselves Muslims, in their personal, religious, civil, and moral lives they do not adhere to the Quran, Sharia, and other principles of Islam." [Kazakhstan National Archives, Fond 369, Inventory 1, File 2040, p. 48].

S. Bronevsky noted: "Although the Kazakhs have accepted the principles of Sharia, they do not understand its essence, religious figures serve akhuns, mullahs, local akims." Military officer F. Usov wrote: "Although all Kazakhs officially accept Islam, most of them are distinguished by their neutrality. Their understanding of God and religion is shaped by a variety of beliefs. Certain rituals performed at important life events, such as birth and death, have more esoteric elements than in Islam." [Usov, 1879: 284].

Ethnographer N. Zeland noted: "Kazakhs consider themselves Sunni Muslims, but they do not pay much attention to dogmatic issues (the rules of Sharia), they do not master them well. In basic worship, they pray and fast according to Muslim rules. But they do not follow them strictly." [Zeland, 1885: 31-32].

A careful study of the data relating to the period before the February Revolution of 1917 shows that one should be cautious in making statements about the religious beliefs of the Kazakhs. At that time, Islam was primarily superficial among the Kazakhs. For example, orientalist V. Radloff argued that the Kazakhs had fully embraced Islam over the centuries. This opinion was supported by ethnographer R. Karuts, who wrote: "Kazakhs have the right to be considered strict Muslims, they shave their hair, completely remove their mustaches, turn their doors towards Mecca, pray and strictly observe certain rules." [Karuts, 1810: 96].

**Traces of Tengriism among the Kazakhs.** The belief system in the pre-Islamic Turkestan steppe was Tengriism. Tengriism is a very ancient belief system that considers ancestral spirits and natural forces sacred [Kafesoglu, 1998: 300-304]. Its origins and the exact processes of its development remain uncertain. This belief system is considered a traditional faith of the Altai people, the earliest inhabitants of Turkistan, and some nomadic communities. Based on the research conducted in the second half of the 19th century among the Turkic peoples of Turkistan by scholars such as V. Bartold, A. Anokhin, V. Radlov, and A. Verbitsky, the view that Tengriism formed the basis of the ancient Turkic religion gained prominence in the academic community [Devrisheva, 2016:108]. In addition, according to Chinese sources, Tengriism in ancient Turkestan was closely connected with beliefs related to the sun and moon, earth and water, and the cult of fire and hearth [Inan, 1986: 4].

Sh. Valikhanov wrote: "The Kazakhs, combining Tengriism and Islam, formed a unique concept of "Muslimness" in accordance with their way of life. Without knowing who the prophet Muhammad was, they worshiped both Allah and the spirits of their ancestors, called "aruak." While continuing to believe in Tengriism, he also respected Islam and its religious figures. On the one hand, spirits were invoked, on the other, angels were invoked for help. Despite such contradictions, the steppe people's sacrificial rituals often paid more attention to the physical characteristics of the animals chosen for sacrifice than to Islamic instructions. Sheep with white, spotted foreheads or yellow heads, resembling a "yurt," were usually considered the most valuable sacrificial animal in the flock, and the head of another sheep was milked [Kafesoğlu, 1998: 300-304].

Kazakhs considered everything in nature special and sacred, and their beliefs led them to venerate individual trees or unique plants, sometimes even spending the night there. Passersby would not only tie cloth to a tree branch, but also make sacrifices. The salt lakes, which the people called "ken", were considered to have the power of spirits and saints, and were treated with respect. The largest of the animals sacrificed were white camels, which symbolized the importance of the event. The prayers recited during the sacrifice showed similarities to the customary prayers of the Mongols [Kul-Muhammed, 2007:108].

One of the most important elements of Tengriist worship was fire [Kapagan, 2014:808]. Fire played a significant role in Kazakh life, although not as much as among the Mongols. Like the Mongols, the Kazakhs considered fire to be a mother, purifying both the soul and the body, and called this ritual "alastau" [Devrisheva, 2016:108]. Spitting on fire, stepping on it, or jumping over it was considered extremely disrespectful. People were afraid of fire and swore, "May it not harm me." Many believed that illness was caused by the wrath of fire and used fire in healing rituals. Pieces of meat from seven parts of the animal were first thrown into the fire and then used to warm the patient's affected area. In addition, melted fat and a blue cloth were placed on the sacrificial fire[Valikhanov, 1984: 48-64].

According to Sh. Valikhanov, the Kazakhs also believed in the sun, sky, moon, rainbow, stars, and worshiped them. Believing in another life, they perceived lightning and other natural disasters as punishment for themselves. To escape from these punishments, they performed certain rituals. These rituals were observed to prevent them from being affected by misfortune, hardship, sorrow, or other evils. They believed that breaking these rules would bring great misfortune. Some of the most common customs were: if a horse strayed from the herd, they would wet a strand of hair from another horse with saliva and follow it to find it - a custom called "salivation." When clothes were given as gifts, they would keep one button and a strap for themselves. They never gave their hats to others. When selling animals, they did not sell the harness of a horse, the nose of a camel, or the collar of a dog. Spilled milk was considered a bad omen. Entering a yurt with food in the mouth was considered unlucky, while leaving with it was good. If the host observed a guest chewing something upon entering, they immediately asked for the guest's saliva. To welcome guests, the host always opened the door, but when seeing them off, they did not leave with them [Kul-Muhammed, 2007:48-64]. In conclusion, historical data show that Kazakh culture and life as a whole were closely connected with nomadic life and the Islamic religion. In their daily lives, one can observe a synthesis of Islamic beliefs and Tengriist traditions.

**Everyday beliefs of the Kazakh people.** T. Semenov noted that the Kazakhs could never completely escape the influence of natural forces and that their every step reflected this dependence. Compared to the Russian people, the Kazakhs had stronger superstitious beliefs [Kafesoğlu, 1998: 300-304]. What Europeans called "superstition" was an integral part of the Kazakh belief system. The Kazakh people, who were highly superstitious, tended to attribute almost every event in their lives to occult forces[Inan, 1986: 4].

Superstitions also had a significant impact on family life. Married couples did not tell each other their names, nor did they tell anyone the number of children or livestock they had. Certain days, such as Tuesdays and Saturdays, were considered unlucky, and people avoided traveling on these days.

Nevertheless, in case they had to travel, they performed several protective rituals. For example, before going to a certain destination, they would walk about forty steps and bury a little salt in the ground. If they had to travel on an unfavorable day, they would pick up the salt from the ground and take it with them. Kazakhs believed that failure to observe these precautions would be a punishment from God [Grodekov, 1889:100]. Protective amulets with prayers were sewn into clothing to protect against illness and misfortune when facing enemies [Kafesoglu, 1998: 300-304].

Kazakhs also observed the appearance of the moon to determine the lunar calendar. To calculate the lunar days, Kazakh astronomers continuously monitored the movement of the moon. Based on these observations, they divided the year into twelve months, and the month into thirty days. Time was measured by the phases of the moon. The months of the year were determined by the position of the sun in the sky. They called the astrological months "stars" and created a twelve-month cycle based on the constellations [Kara, 2007:355].

A twelve-year cycle, known as "mūşel" played an important role in time reckoning. Each year in the cycle was named sequentially after animals: rat, ox, leopard, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. The New Year was celebrated on March 21 as the Nevruz festival, meaning "new day". While the men traveled around the clan and went on a festive journey, the women prepared a bountiful soup made from seven ingredients. The elders were offered an ox' s head and prayers were said in their honor. The Kazakh national calendar was fundamentally based on centuries of astronomical thought and star science. Observation of natural phenomena was of considerable practical importance in everyday life. Nomadic pastoralism required both timekeeping and an understanding of seasonal cycles. Kazakhs constantly monitored the movement of the stars. Eternal nomadic life in the vast steppes taught them to determine direction, navigate by the stars, and accurately locate wells and pastures. Among the Kazakh people, specialists who dealt with meteorology and timekeeping based solely on human experience emerged. This profession was traditionally passed down from father to son, allowing these specialists to accumulate the knowledge of several generations. Throughout the year, they conducted experiments, forecasted the weather, performed seasonal tasks, determined the timing for migration between winter and summer pastures, and identified intercalary years in the Kazakh calendar. These experts placed particular emphasis on the stars. They were knowledgeable about important celestial bodies and created legends associated with them. The Kazakhs generally began mapping the starry sky from the Pole Star (Temirkazyk), which played a crucial role in their lives. During nocturnal journeys, they used this star for navigation. The constellation known as the Big Dipper, or "Jeti Karakshi," was referred to in various historical periods as "Jetigen," "Jeti Kart" (Seven Elders), and "Jeti Karakshi" (Seven Robbers), while the Little Dipper, or "Kishi Jeti Karakshi," was called "Ak Boz At" or "Kök Boz At" in different contexts. Nomadic animal husbandry and irrigated agriculture formed the basis of Kazakh culture. Interaction with neighboring peoples and the influence of Islamic culture significantly shaped Kazakh traditions. In the 15th-20th centuries, a relatively homogeneous steppe culture was preserved [Kara, 2007:355].

Another method used by Kazakhs to protect themselves from evil was the use of animal bones. To protect children from illness, the legs and feathers of a puhu bird were tied to the base of a yurt or cradle. Some tribes kept a turkey' s head in a yurt, believing it would prevent smallpox. It was customary to carry amulets and talismans to protect against the evil eye, evil spirits, and various diseases. These amulets often contained Islamic prayers and were called "talismans," a tradition that continues to this day [Kul-Muhammed, 2007:212-213].

Moreover, Kazakhs believed in the power of words, saying, "Words do not break stones, they break heads." If a healthy child died, a noble horse was lost, a hunter' s falcon flew away, or a good rifle was damaged, these events were attributed to human speech, and an amulet called an "ishek tas" was worn around the neck to protect against speech. These stones were traditionally removed from the stomach of a donkey, although traders sometimes sold green ant clay instead. Evil spirits and demons were believed to be afraid of camels and hedgehogs. Hedgehog hairs were tied to the body of a woman during childbirth and to the cradles of children. Hair from Russians and foreigners was also used as

protection against certain illnesses. Some tribes tied the femur of a sheep to a horse's saddle to feel secure [Kafesoğlu, 1998:120].

According to Sh. Valikhanov: passing by an axe or a yurt ruins a person's destiny and prevents him from becoming rich; Animals encountered at midnight should be whipped, as they were considered the embodiment of the devil. Horses and pets were never given away, as it was believed that their wealth depended on these animals. Geese were considered the king of birds and were never killed. Owls, pooh birds, woodpeckers, and blue ravens were also considered to be harbingers of misfortune if killed. It was believed that placing a goose's tail feather in a vessel filled with oil would ensure an abundance of oil [Kul-Muhammed, 2007:212-213].

Kazakhs have preserved the ritual of lighting a night fire called "alastau", which comes from the archaic word "alas" - "sacred fire" for purification. This custom was practiced when moving from wintering to summer pastures. Since ancient times, people believed that harmful "demons and devils" lived in yurts, which led to the superstition that people were more prone to sin during wintering. Summer pastures, on the contrary, were considered clean and pure. Therefore, before entering there, it was necessary to cleanse. So, at the beginning of the road to the summer pasture, two fires were lit, through which people and their herds passed. Horses, which were considered clean, did not need to be cleansed by this fire [Kara, 2007:354].

**Conclusion.** The religious culture of the Kazakh steppe in the late Middle Ages was characterized by a unique combination of Islamic and Tengriist elements. Islam, although officially accepted, was interpreted through local customs, everyday life practices, and the nomadic environment. Folk Islam emerged as a practical and syncretic form of religiosity, incorporating pre-Islamic rituals.

The Kazakhs maintained a complex calendar system, astronomical observations, and rituals that guided their spiritual and social life. Protective amulets, sacrifices, purification by fire, and veneration of natural phenomena demonstrate that religion was inseparable from the practical needs of steppe life.

Overall, the study suggests that Kazakh religious beliefs cannot be understood solely through orthodox Islamic norms. Rather, they represent a dynamic interplay between Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions that demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of nomadic societies in Central Asia. The Kazakh case illustrates how everyday religiosity mediates between official doctrine and lived experience, and offers a model for studying syncretic religious practices in other nomadic cultures.

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