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A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MODERN QAZAQS'
HISTORICAL CLAIM THAT ISLAM IS
THE ANCESTRAL FAITH

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A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MODERN QAZAQS'
HISTORICAL CLAIM THAT ISLAM IS
THE ANCESTRAL FAITH

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For the glory of God

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PREFACE

As an evangelical Christian, I often hear that I am either a traitor to or lost from my fellow Qazaqs. Very few of them will address our theological disagreements. They are Muslims, and I am a Christian. One might expect that we are battling over issues such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the reliability of the Bible, and the historicity of Jesus Christ, but rarely are these issues the topics of my conversations with Qazaqs. Instead, I have to deal with the notion that no religion is morally permissible for a Qazaq other than Islam. Therefore, from my childhood to my late teens, I have felt ashamed and scared because of my faith. At times, I agreed with the sentiment that being a Qazaq necessitates the Islamic faith and that I must be wrong in my Christian belief.

To defend my Christian identity, I was first interested in Christian apologetics. Then, I turned my attention to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue. Unfortunately, none of these disciplines offered me any significant aid to overcome the struggles I had. Nevertheless, the most excellent teacher of all time is history itself. With a deep and genuine curiosity, I started studying the religious history of Qazaqs, and I discovered that the widely believed narrative about the Qazaqs' Islamic past is not as convincing as it sounds.

It would not be possible for me to conduct this research without the aid of my family, friends, academic advisors, and the community of believers across the world. The first person to thank and give the highest praise is my wife, Nina, who has been enormously supportive and loving over the years of my studies. I am grateful to God that he sent me Nina for my life journey, and we reached this milestone together. I also thank my parents, back in Qazaqstan, who have been sending us their love from the other side of the globe and rejoicing every time when we had a breakthrough, such as finishing the

coursework stage, passing comprehensive exams, and submitting the defense draft of the dissertation.

I am grateful to the people who helped on the project's academic side and were directly involved in the writing process of this dissertation. The first thanks go to John M. Klaassen, my supervisor, whose feedback, recommendations, questions, and critical observations at every stage of this work were of the utmost value. I also thank George H. Martin for helping sharpen my research skills and introducing me to world religions. A great number of people other than the committee members helped me think in a more nuanced and detailed way justly. However, one person deserves the deepest appreciation and special thanks—Ayman S. Ibrahim. In conversations with students, I always boast that I took every single class taught by Ibrahim. He sparked my interest in Islamic Studies and was a role model as a scholar and devout Christian.

Lastly, it would not be possible for me to afford to study at Southern Seminary without the generous financial assistance provided by Scholar Leaders International and Langham Partnership. Also, financial donations from New Covenant Bible Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, Kansas, and CCCP Ministries in Tampa, Florida, were crucial. I thank God for my friends, the Snodgrass families and Hills from Iowa, whose personal gifts, words of wisdom, and constant prayers were outstanding support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Five freshly independent states joined the Muslim world after the collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. These countries are Qazaqstan,¹ Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, located in Central Asia.² The re-Islamization of these post-Soviet countries is accompanied by deep concerns for rediscovering and reinstating cultural and ethnic identities. Muslims unanimously argue that Islam predated Russian colonization and Soviet rule in all of these countries and that 1991 marked the year that Islam was restored to its historical status—the national faith.³

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) itself was a new formation. As the new power replacing the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union consisted of multiple nations, diverse cultures, and radically different languages previously colonized by the empire. Nearly seventy years of Soviet rule heavily distorted Central Asians' self-identification in two critical ways. On the one hand, Marxist-Leninist atheism abolished local religious traditions with its anti-clerical,

¹ I have chosen the spelling “Qazaqstan” and “Qazaq” instead of “Kazakhstan” and “Kazakh” because the second “Q” accurately corresponds to the letter “K” in the Qazaq language. The traditional “kh” in the spelling of the country’s name is taken from the Russian spelling “Казахстан” and “Казах,” but in Qazaq it is “Қазақстан” and “Қазақ.”

² In fact, as Yaacov Ro’i rightly notes, Azerbaijan is the sixth independent country that joined the Muslim world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but geographically it is in the Caucasus region. Also, Muslims make up the majority populations in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, but all of these states are subjects of the Russian Federation. Therefore, I did not include Azerbaijan in my list because it is outside of geographic Central Asia, and I also excluded the states within the Russian Federation since they are not independent. Yaacov Ro’i, *Islam in the CIS a Threat to Stability? Central Asian and Caucasian Prospects (Project), and Russia and Eurasia Programme* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), xii.

³ Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 118. Khalid’s overarching argument is that Islam in Central Asia cannot be understood properly without taking into consideration the years under Soviet rule (2). Although I agree with Khalid, my goal is not to study the history of Islam under Soviet rule.

irreligious propaganda. Mosques and madrasas were shut down, and Muslim clerics found themselves under persecution.⁴ Additionally, the Soviets adopted the Russian language for interethnic communication, further dampening the distinct ethnic expressions of these peoples.⁵

Bereft of freedom to practice traditional religious faith and kept from communicating in mother tongues, former Soviet Central Asian nations felt the suppression of their national identities intensely. Therefore, after finally gaining political independence in 1991, Central Asians promptly embraced the narrative that Islam is the sole historical faith and in need of revitalization. Since then, re-Islamization has been one of the most potent consolidating ideologies in Central Asian states. In the present day, Islam has grown into more than a mere expression of personal spirituality since it now supplies an ethnic, national, and cultural identity in the minds of Central Asian people. It is widely broadcasted and believed that the Islamic faith is a prerequisite to belonging to an indigenous Central Asian ethnicity.⁶

If a Qazaq, Kirghiz, Uzbek, or any other indigenous Central Asian converts to a faith other than Islam, then that person is considered a traitor by his or her tribesmen.

⁴ James Thrower mentions the dramatic decrease of Mosques: from 26,912 in 1912 to 1312 in 1941. By 1976, the number of mosques in Central Asia had been reduced to 300. James Thrower, *The Religious History of Central Asia from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Studies in Asian Thought 27 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press), 196-200. Azade-Ayse Rorlich rightly notes that the Marxist-Leninist ideology did not leave room for any ideological pluralism. The Soviet rulers wanted to eliminate religion from social life. Azade-Ayse Rorlich, "Islam and Atheism: Dynamic Tension in Soviet Central Asia," in *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*, ed. William Fierman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 186.

⁵ Bernard Comrie, *The Languages of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22, 31. Comrie points out that Russians were the majority in the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was a natural choice that Russian would be the language of interethnic communication. However, the process of Russification or Sovietization affected almost every aspect of life from education to economics to politics. See Brian Silver's article, where he provides a lengthy list of literature on the Russification of the nations in the Soviet Union: Brian Silver, "Social Mobilization and the Russification of Soviet Nationalities," *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 1 (1974): 45-46.

⁶ As an introductory note, it is worth quoting A. Christian van Gorder, who writes, "Much of the resurgence of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia, in fact, is as much about the reassertion of cultural identity as it is about the revival of Islam." A. Christian van Gorder, *Muslim-Christian Relations in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2008), 89. In chapter 2, I will interact with Qazaq authors insisting that Islam in Qazaqstan can be understood only through the lenses of national and ethnic identity.

Thus, Central Asians' view of ethnicity coincides with the primordialist approach.⁷ Although one's religious faith and ethnic identity are tightly interwoven, the two identities are still distinguishable.

Thesis

As a critical assessment of the modern Qazaqs' equation of ethnic identity and Islamic faith, I argue, from the historical perspective, that the ancestors of the Qazaq people professed different religions, and Islam was one of many faiths. Even then, historically, Yassawi Sufism was more popular than Hanafi Maturidism, which is today an officially accepted and state-supported version of Islam in Qazaqstan. For Christianity to thrive in Qazaqstan, the socio-religious stronghold that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim must be deconstructed.

Through four chapters, I will demonstrate that from the period of the first and second Turkic Khaganates (AD 531-744), whom Qazaqs consider their earliest ancestors, to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Islam, particularly, Hanafi Maturidism had little significance for the Qazaq people's self-identification as a nation. And the practice of Islam was not scripture-based as it is proposed today but focused on Yassawi Sufi mysticism. In other words, Hanafi Maturidism gained popularity only after 1991.

Term Definition

Although each section of this dissertation explains critical terms pertinent to its content, the term "ethnic identity" merits a definition at this introduction stage. Countless books and articles have discussed the concepts of "ethnic identity" and "ethnicity." The abundance of research literature helps to explain the issues of ethnic identity and ethnicity but fails to establish a universally satisfactory definition. My goal is not to solve

⁷ Please see the section "Term Definition" below, where I provide a definition for the term *ethnic identity* and discuss leading theories.

the definition problem with ethnicity and ethnic identity that experts in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, ethnography, and social studies struggle to resolve. Instead, I will be using two perspectives that accurately describe the cultural practices in Qazaqstan.

First, in this work, I will use ethnicity and ethnic identity interchangeably. Second, Naysan Adlparvar and Mariz Tadros summarize the leading positions and single out four theories in studying ethnic identity: primordialism, instrumentalism, materialism, and constructionism.⁸ Primordialism and constructivism are more relevant to the discussion of Qazaqs' ethnic identity than instrumentalism and materialism.⁹

According to Adlparvar and Tadros, primordialism suggests that ethnic identity is innate and permanent. A person's ethnicity is identified by his or her biological parents, wider blood relative connections, culture, and geographical boundaries.¹⁰ The constructionist approach, as its name hints, maintains that ethnicity is socially constructed by the elites and ordinary people of the group. Ordinary people create and recreate ethnicity through daily routines, choosing the behaviors and actions appropriate to their culture. However, culture according to constructionist theory is not permanent, as primordialism would suggest, because culture is affected by politics, economics, and social forces.¹¹

⁸ Naysan Adlparvar and Mariz Tadros, "The Evolution of Ethnicity Theory: Intersectionality, Geopolitics and Development," *Institute of Development Studies* 47, no. 2 (2016), <https://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/index.php/idsbo/article/view/2722/html>.

⁹ According Adlparvar and Tadros, instrumentalism theory suggests that "the maintenance of ethnic boundaries occurs through interaction of 'us' and 'them' across a group boundary. Moreover, the cultural features that are drawn upon in this interaction are not fixed; they are situationally defined." And regarding materialism, the authors write that supporters of this theory "view ethnicity as an epiphenomenon, or a result, of class relations. These crude Marxist theories also suggest that violence between ethnically aligned groups is the result of economic inequalities and elite exploitation." Adlparvar and Tadros, "Evolution of Ethnicity Theory."

¹⁰ Adlparvar and Tadros, "Evolution of Ethnicity Theory."

¹¹ Adlparvar and Tadros, "Evolution of Ethnicity Theory."

Qazaqs generally see ethnicity through the primordialist lens, but the modern state-sponsored endeavor to revive authentic ethnic identity fits the constructionist approach. The importance of biological heritage is often heavily emphasized among Qazaqs. For instance, Qazaq boys must be able to name their grandfathers to at least the seventh generation. It is also important for Qazaqs to know the history (legends and myths) of their tribe and ancient ancestors.¹² Therefore, in this research, the definition of ethnic identity and ethnicity coincide with the perspectives of primordialism, and constructionism discussed above.

The Significance of This Research and the Current State of Scholarship

This work is a contribution to the studies of Islamic societies outside of the Arab world. The discussions and findings of this research contribute to the scholarship in several ways. A critical assessment of modern Qazaqs' historical claims about Islam is the primary contribution of this research.¹³ In this regard, two works are worth mentioning. The first is Bruce Privratsky's ethnographic research that he conducted in the southern Qazaqstan.¹⁴ Privratsky acknowledges that Islam among Qazaqs is heavily distorted by the local culture, but he insists that Islam is more preferred faith than other beliefs. However, the book evidences two main flaws: (1) Privratsky dismisses the theological borders of Islam, which allows him to interpret the syncretistic expression of

¹² Edward Schatz discusses the post-Soviet policies and practices that Qazaqs have undertaken to reinstate their ethnic identity through the revitalization of the historical narratives. Edward Schatz, "The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Qazaqstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 3 (2000): 489-506.

¹³ In this section, I am focusing on literature that specifically discusses the religious life of Qazaqs. But I acknowledge and include in the bibliography literature that discusses Central Asia, the Silk Road, and the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (2001; repr., New York: Routledge, 2014).

the religion as traditional. (2) His research is geographically limited even within Qazaqstan; he focuses on the city of Turkestan and its vicinity.¹⁵

The second work is Simon Michael Braune's annotated bibliography "Islam as Practiced by the Kazaks: A Bibliography for Scholars" published in 2005, where he briefly summarizes the works that discuss Islam in Qazaqstan.¹⁶ Braune's list includes works published in Qazaq, Russian, and English, making his bibliography both comprehensive and versatile. Braune argues that Qazaqs were fully Islamicized until the twentieth century. In this research, I will focus on the works that were published in Qazaq and Russian in the years after Braune's publication.

Most of the literature on the religious history of Central Asia discuss it as part of Islam's history. Among few exceptions would be Jean-Paul Roux's monumental work *Les Religions des Turcs et des Mongols* on the pre-Islamic religions of Turks and Mongols published in 1984.¹⁷ Julian Baldick's *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* could be viewed as an update of Roux's book. Baldick puts less emphasis on the role of Tengri (a celestial god) than Roux.¹⁸ Tengrism¹⁹ and shamanism were local religions of Central Asia before the arrival of Islam, and this region also hosted imported religions such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity (Church of the East). A notable supplementary work on the history of pre-Islamic religions, including

¹⁵ Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, 10.

¹⁶ Simon Michael Braune, "Islam as Practiced by the Kazaks: A Bibliography for Scholars," *MELA Notes* 78 (2005): 1-17.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris: Payot, 1984).

¹⁸ Julian Baldick, *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ In chapter 2, I will define Tengrism and provide a detailed discussion of this religion's significance for Qazaqs. For now, it is enough to say that Tengrism was a pre-Islamic religion that ancient Turkic and Mongol tribes adhered to and that some modern Qazaqs regard it as a monotheistic religion.

Tengrism, in Central Asia is Janos Harmatta's *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia*, published in 1979.²⁰

The chapters on Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism (chaps. 4 and 5, respectively) will cover the topics often overlooked in anglophone academic circles and literature. Devin DeWeese, from Indiana University, is one of the very few whose research interest embraces Yassawi Sufism. Even then, his articles on Yassawi Sufism often interact with Central Asian scholarship prior to 2000. A complete book in English on Yassawi Sufism is *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition: Ahmad Yassawi and the Diwan-I Hikmat*, by Ismail Tas, Tahir Uluc, and Kemar Argon, published in 2016.²¹ But the authors of this book uncritically accept and reiterate the arguments of Mehmed Fuad Köprülü that he posed in his book *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, published at the beginning of the twentieth century.²² Thus, except for DeWeese's works, there are no works that have been produced on Yassawi Sufism.

The English translation of Ulrich Rudolph's *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand* is one of the rare books that discusses how Hanafi Maturidism contributed to Sunni Islam's theology.²³ The most recent book providing an in-depth examination of Maturidism's history, theology, development, and legacy is Ayedh S. Aldosari's *Hanafi Maturidism: Trajectories of a Theological Legacy, with a Study and Critical Edition of al-Khabbazi's Kitab al-Hadi*.²⁴

²⁰ Janos Harmatta, ed., *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest: Adademiai Kiado, 1979).

²¹ Ismail Tas, Tahir Uluc, and Kemar Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition: Ahmad Yassawi and the Diwan-I Hikmat* (Konya: Palet Yayinlari Aralık, 2016).

²² Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, ed. and trans. Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²³ Ulrich Rudolf, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

²⁴ Ayedh S. Aldosari, *Hanafi Maturidism: Trajectories of a Theological Legacy, with a Study and Critical Edition of al-Khabbazi's Kitab al-Hadi* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020).

Methodology: Historical-Critical Assessment

I have chosen a historical-critical assessment method because historical claims are the primary approach that modern Qazaqs utilize in promoting Islam as a national faith, specifically, that Qazaqs must follow Islam since their ancestors were Muslims. In this research, I will break down the Qazaq people's claims into three categories and examine each of them in the light of available primary sources, archaeological findings, and scholarship.

Therefore, the research consists of four chapters of historical examination and one chapter on missiological implications based on the findings of the previous chapters. In conducting this research, I will extensively engage books and articles written in Qazaq and Russian. Occasionally, the books and articles written in German, French, Arabic, and Turkish will be referred to as well.²⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all the translations from those languages are mine. Also, at the beginning of chapter 2, I will provide a definition of the term "Qazaq" and clarify its usage in works published at different times.

Chapter Summaries

In this section, I provide summaries for chapters 2-7 of this research. The history of Islam among Qazaq people can be divided into three periods: before, during, and after Russian colonization and Soviet rule, whereas the history of non-Islamic religions can be outlined as before and after Islam's arrival. In chapter 1, I will summarize modern Qazaqs' historical claims regarding Islam and pre-Islamic religions.

The vast majority of Qazaqs believe that Islam did not introduce essential changes to the indigenous tribes' faith. Pre-Islamic Central Asians worshipped Tengri, a celestial god, who is like the god of monotheistic Islam. The chief advisor of the head of the Muslim Department of Qazaqstan says that Islam is flexible and sensitive to cultural

²⁵ The works in foreign languages other than Qazaq and Russian will be used rarely. I will be providing the translation of the title for the works written in Cyrillic script, but I will not translate the bibliographical details such as the name of a city or a publisher; those details will be provided in original languages.

features. Therefore, ancient ancestors of the Qazaqs converted to Islam willingly with no resistance.²⁶ But there are some who insist that Islam brought crucial changes to the morality, culture, and ethics of the ancient Turks and Mongols. These nations saw Islam as the source of deliverance, and Islam saved them from completely disappearing from the stage of world history.²⁷ However, the proponents of both arguments agree that Qazaqs must be Muslim today because it is the ancestral faith.²⁸

The internal logic of this historical claim inevitably raises multiple questions and leads to contemplating what religion predated Islam itself and whether Central Asians should rediscover *that* faith and restore it for the sake of historical justice. Why should ancestors leaving their indigenous faith(s) in favor of Islam be considered a proper religious shift? What are the nuances proving, disproving, or questioning the validity of that religious switch? The more pressing issue to consider is the version of Islam practiced during pre-Russian colonization versus post-Soviet rule. Is it the same version of Islam before and after, or has it changed?

Many Qazaqs believe that Islam has remained unchanged to this day since its first arrival in the region. Qazaq academia, mass media, and politicians unanimously broadcast this narrative to the general public, and the latter gladly embraces it. My primary focus will be academic works published in Qazaq and Russian after 1991, and I will briefly highlight public statements posed by influential figures outside of academia. Before exploring modern Qazaqs' historical claims, I will describe the current state of

²⁶ Шейх-уль Ислам Мухаммад-Хусайн ибн Усман Алсабеков, *Ислам: Религиозные идеи и современность* (Алматы: Көкжиек, 2008), 104. [Sheikh-ul Islam Mukhammad-Khusa'in ibn Usman Alsabekov, *Islam: Religious Ideas and Modernity* (Almaty: Kokzhiiek, 2008), 104.]

²⁷ Назира Д. Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана* (Алматы: Фараб, 2000), 50, 285. [Nazira D. Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Farab, 2000), 50, 285.] Nevertheless, it must be noted that Nurtazina is in minority when she argues that Islam saved the declining medieval Mongol and Turkic tribes from disappearance.

²⁸ Алма Султангалиева, *Возвращение Ислама в Казахстан* (Алматы: Фонд Алтынбека Сарсенбайулы, 2012), 80. [Alma Sultangalieva, *The Return of Islam to Qazaqstan* (Almaty: Fund of Altynbek Sarsenbayuli, 2012), 80.] It should be noted that Sultangalieva's note is descriptive. She simply states the fact that many Qazaqs argue that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim.

Islam in Qazaqstan and introduce the history of QMDB.²⁹ The officially accepted and promoted version of Islam in Qazaqstan is Hanafi Maturidism, which belongs to Sunnism.³⁰

Chapter 2 consists of two parts: (1) the definition of the term “Qazaq,” and (2) modern Qazaqs’ arguments on the pre-Islamic religions, which include Tengrism, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, Christianity, and the spread of Islam. For sources, in addition to Alma Sultangalieva, Nazira Nurtazina, and Sheikh-ul Islam Mukhammad-Khusaïn ibn Usman Alsabekov, I will engage the works of QMDB members and Qazaq historians, politicians, and public figures.

In chapter 3, I will examine the religious context of Central Asia before the arrival of Islam and demonstrate that ancient Central Asians adhered to other faiths alongside Tengrism. Tengrism itself hardly fits the framework of a monotheistic religion. Although the primary focus of this chapter will be on Tengrism, it will also examine the pre-Islamic practices of local animistic beliefs, shamanism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The purpose of this chapter will be to demonstrate that pre-Islamic Central Asia was significantly different before the arrival of Islam. Islam brought radical changes to the cultural and religious life of the indigenous people.

Once the pre-Islamic Central Asian religious context is identified, I will turn my focus to Hanafi Maturidism in chapter 4. Maturidism is a branch of Islam that belongs to the Hanafi school of thought and claims to interpret the Qur’an and Islamic doctrines scholastically. For instance, Maturidism distinguish God’s essence and attributes without

²⁹ QMDB in Qazaq stands for Қазақстан Мұсылмандар Діни Басқармасы, which means Qazaqstan Muslims Religious Management. It is an official state-recognized Islamic entity in Qazaqstan. This entity defines the mainstream Islamic discourse in Qazaqstan. The official website of QMDB is <https://www.muftiyat.kz/kk/>, and QMDB is their official logo.

³⁰ I will discuss in detail the history and teaching of Maturidism and its importance for Qazaq society in chapter 4. For now, it is enough to point out that Qazaq proponents of Islam’s history in Central Asia tend to omit the differences between the modern and early versions of Islam in the region. Thus, in chapter 2, I will focus on the general arguments about Islam without specifying its prominent branches in Qazaqstan. But in chapters 4 and 5, I will come back to Islam and discuss its two main branches: Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism.

falling into anthropomorphism as the Mutazilites and Ash'aris did. Thus, on the surface, Maturidism reminds us of the discipline of systematic/dogmatic Christian theology.³¹

The founder of this branch, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, was born in Samarqand, modern-day Uzbekistan, in 853. He lived during the reign of the 'Abbasids (locating him in the broader Islamic historical context). Maturidism is the officially accepted and promoted version of Islam in Qazaqstan today.³² A closer look at the history of Maturidism will reveal that its popularity was minuscule among the Qazaqs before 1991.

To understand Maturidism in Qazaqstan, one needs to acknowledge that the Islamization of Qazaqs lasted centuries. The earliest Muslims arrived in the region around the eighth century. However, Qazaq tribes embraced Islam more or less seriously only by the sixteenth century. Even then, it was not anything comparable to the modern practice. Moreover, during the most intense proselytization in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Islam remained a highly syncretistic, non-scriptural religion among the Qazaqs.³³

³¹ However, Josef van Ess warns that anthropomorphism in Islam is not the same as it is in Christianity. He writes, "We must, however, bear in mind that anthropomorphism in Islam is always derivative in character, in that it is not a genuine attempt at comprehending God by means of human categories but always a theological problem generated by a text, either a hadith or the Quranic revelation itself." Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra*, vol. 4, *A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom, Theology and Society Series 116/4 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 417. It should be noted that not all of the Mu'tazalites fell into anthropomorphism. Therefore, it might be surprising to read statements like that of A. K. M. Ayyub Ali, who writes that al-Maturidilike Mu'tazalites fought against anthropomorphism: "It has been noticed that al-Maturidi, like the Mu'tazalites, strongly opposed the anthropomorphic idea of God and interpreted metaphorically those passages of the Qur'an which appear to create such an impression. But on the question of seeing God in paradise by the believers, he is wholly in agreement with the orthodox, and firmly holds that the passages of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet on this subject must be taken in their literal sense." A. K. M. Ayyub Ali, "Maturidism," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, bk. 3, *A Compendium of Articles on the History of Muslim Philosophy: Early Centuries*, Al-Islam.org, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-1-book-3>. For the difference between the Mu'tazalites and Ash'aris regarding anthropomorphism, see Yahya Raad Haidar, "The Debates between Ash'arism and Maturidism in Ottoman Religious Scholarship: A Historical and Bibliographical Study" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2016), 88.

³² Rudolf, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 125.

³³ Алма Султангалиева, "Эволюция Ислама в Казахстане," Центральная Азия и Кавказ, accessed May 6, 2021, https://ca-c.org.ru/journal/1999/cac-05-1999/st_06_sultangal.shtml. [Alma Sultangalieva, "Evolution of Islam in Kazakhstan," Central Asia and Caucasus.]

Chapter 4 consists of four sections. The first section provides introductory notes on Hanafi Madhhab since Maturidism belongs to this Madhhab. The second section examines Maturidism, which will include the biography of its founder Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, his writings, and his teachings. The third section will outline the perspectives of Qazaqs on Maturidism. The fourth section will study the spread of Maturidism, which disproves the argument about its historical presence among Qazaqs.

In chapter 5, I will argue, historically, that Sufism was far more popular than Maturidism among the Qazaqs. Speaking of Sufism, one must note that it is widely known as mysticism in Islam that emerged from early Muslims' quests for spiritual experience when they saw that Islam was becoming more mundane or worldly. With its strong emphasis on inner life and mysticism, Sufism shares a few features with Buddhism and Hinduism, perplexing many regarding its origin. In this chapter, I will focus on Central Asian Sufism tightly connected to the name Qoja Ahmed Yassawi, who was born in Sayram, a city in the southern part of modern Qazaqstan, in 1093. Qoja Ahmed Yassawi introduced religious poetry in the region and established a Sufi fraternal order that remained active centuries after his death. In the fourteenth century, Tamerlane built the Qoja Ahmed Yassawi Mausoleum in Turkestan, which locals still regard as the second Mecca.³⁴

Sufism in Central Asia, however, more closely resembles syncretism than mysticism. Two factors caused Islamic syncretism in Central Asia. First, any religion entering a new region inevitably comes into contact with the local religious practices/beliefs, and both faiths mutually influence each other. When Islam entered Central Asia, the indigenous population appropriated it to shamanistic practices and different local animistic beliefs. Second, Nomads inhabiting northern parts of Central

³⁴ Andrew Petersen, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 310. See also Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1876), 72.

Asia could not give up accustomed behaviors contradicting Islamic proscriptions. One example is Islamic restriction of the consumption of fermented horse milk, which contains alcohol. Drinking fermented horse milk did not have any religious significance, but Nomads were not ready to cease consuming it in the name of a new religion. Thus, Islamic syncretism in Central Asia was a mixture of religious and non-religious practices. Therefore, one can conclude that modern Qazaqs' claims about the Islamic past are exaggerations. Chapter 5 consists of four sections: an examination of (1) the emergence of Sufism, (2) Qoja Ahmed Yassawi, (3) the spread of Yassawi Sufism, and (4) *Diwani Hikmet*, a poem attributed to Qoja Ahmed Yassawi.

I will discuss the missiological implications of this research in chapter 6. Christian evangelization requires a deep understanding of three basic components: the message, the messenger, and the recipient of the message. The message is, of course, the good news of Jesus Christ—forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God for all who believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead to save them from eternal punishment. The abundance of literature on biblical exegesis and theological studies demonstrates that the need for an accurate understanding of the gospel message has been fulfilled.

However, many nations, including Qazaqs, remain unreached, which indicates the shortage of messengers and insufficient interaction with the recipients of the message. Therefore, through this research, I will seek to present what Qazaqs believe about religious faith and why they choose Islam and reject Christianity. The outcomes of this research will help the Qazaq church and missionary community to have a deeper understanding of the Qazaq mindset.

For Qazaqs, being Muslim means more than religious faith. Qazaq men and women believe that the Islamic faith is inseparably attached to their ethnic or national identity. Consequently, for them, accepting Christianity means ceasing to be Qazaq. When Qazaqs think of Christianity, they associate it with the Russian Orthodox Church,

which is viewed as the religion of a former colonizer. Therefore, missionaries or local Christians in Qazaqstan need to understand the historical and cultural background of Qazaqs. This chapter consists of two sections: the first will describe the church in Qazaqstan, and the second will outline the needs of and opportunities for Christian missions in Qazaqstan.

In the final chapter, I will list the key findings of this research, one of which is that the primary force driving Qazaq people to Islam is a quest for ethnic identity rather than a theological argument. Based on this finding, I recommend areas for further study and practical applications from a missiological perspective. Since Christian missions are done by missionaries and Qazaq believers, both parties must take into account the belief broadcasted to the masses that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim. Therefore, foreign Christians must demonstrate that Christianity is for all the nations, and Qazaqs must manifest that their Christian faith does not distort their Qazaqness.

CHAPTER 2

MODERN QAZAQS' HISTORICAL CLAIMS REGARDING ISLAM

In this chapter, I summarize the historical claims of modern Qazaqs and demonstrate that most of them see Islam as an answer to the contemporary quest for national identity. From the perspective of international affairs, Qazaqstan has been an independent sovereign state since 1991. However, at the sub-conscious level, Qazaqs are still in the process of understanding what it means to be an independent, self-sufficient nation. Convinced that they need a meta-narrative to explain their current state and future path as a distinct ethnicity, they are delving into the history to find roots there. Different voices among Qazaq thinkers put forward various interpretations of the past and point the directions for the future. And Islam appears as the unifying ideology in most propositions.

Proponents of Islam argue Islam was persistent in the nation's history, whereas the political state was unstable. For instance, the Qazaq tribes were parts of the Mongol Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. Yet, Qazaqs never perceived themselves as Mongols, and definitely not as Russians. Of course, historical arguments should entertain the questions of when and how Islam spread among the Qazaq people. If the Qazaq national identity must be tied to Islam, it necessitates a narrative on the history of Islam and its impacts on the nation.

The grand narrative on the history of Islam today states that Islam did not introduce essential changes to the ancient indigenous tribes' beliefs. Nevertheless, modern Qazaqs acknowledge that pre-Islamic Central Asians, including Qazaqs, worshipped Tengri, a celestial god, who as they argue, was like the god of monotheistic

Islam. For instance, the chief advisor to the head of the Muslim Department of Qazaqstan says that Islam is flexible and sensitive to cultural features. Therefore, ancient ancestors of the Qazaqs converted to Islam willingly with no resistance.¹ But a few others like, Nazira Nurtazina, insist that Islam brought crucial changes to the morality, culture, and ethics of the ancient Turks and Mongols. These nations saw Islam as the source of deliverance, and Islam saved them from completely disappearing from the stage of world history.² However, the proponents of both arguments agree that Qazaqs must be Muslim today because it is the ancestral faith.³

The internal logic of this historical claim inevitably raises multiple questions and leads to contemplating what religion predated Islam itself and whether Qazaqs should rediscover *that* faith and restore it for the sake of historical justice. Why should ancestors leaving their indigenous faith(s) in favor of Islam be considered a proper religious shift? What are the nuances proving, disproving, or questioning the validity of that religious change? Another issue to consider is the version of Islam practiced during pre-Russian colonization versus the Islam practiced after Soviet rule. Is it the same version of Islam before and after, or has it changed? Many Qazaqs believe that Islam has remained unchanged to this day since its first arrival in the region. The officially accepted and promoted version of Islam in Qazaqstan is Hanafi Maturidism, which is a branch of Sunnism.⁴

¹ Шейх-уль Ислам Мухаммад-Хусайн ибн Усман Алсабеков, *Ислам: Религиозные идеи и современность* (Алматы: Көкжиек, 2008), 104. [Sheikh-ul Islam Mukhammad-Khusain ibn Usman Alsabekov, *Islam: Religious Ideas and Modernity* (Almaty: Kokzhiek, 2008), 104.]

² Назира Д. Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана* (Алматы: Фараб, 2000), 50, 285. [Nazira D. Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Qazaqstan* (Almaty: Farab, 2000), 50, 285.]

³ Алма Султангалиева, *Возвращение Ислама в Казахстан* (Алматы: Фонд Алтынбека Сарсенбайұлы, 2012), 80. [Alma Sultangalieva, *The Return of Islam to Qazaqstan* (Almaty: Fund of Altynbek Sarsenbayuli, 2012), 80.]

⁴ I will discuss in detail the history and teaching of Maturidism and its importance for Qazaq society in chapter 4. For now, it is enough to point out that Qazaq proponents of Islam's history in Central Asia tend to omit the differences between the modern and early versions of Islam in the region. Thus, in this chapter, I will focus on the general arguments about Islam without specifying its prominent branches in

Another issue to discuss is the role of religions other than Islam and Tengrism in the lives of ancient Qazaq tribes. Archaeological findings, historical records, and some of the traditional customs testify to the presence of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and animistic beliefs among the Qazaqs of the distant past.⁵ The Qazaqs, who promote Islam as the central ideology to consolidate around, insist that those religions had an insignificant impact on the Qazaq tribes.

Before summarizing what modern Qazaqs argue about pre-Islamic ancestral beliefs and the spread of Islam, I discuss the meaning of the term Qazaq. By explaining the term Qazaq, I seek to establish what it means to be a Qazaq. The meaning of the term Qazaq “free” does not seem to easily reconcile with the meaning of Islam “submission.”

This chapter serves as the starting point for my subsequent chapters, where I assess the historical claims posed by Qazaq Muslims. Thus, in this chapter, I first define the term “Qazaq.” Then, I proceed to discuss the arguments posed by modern promoters of Islam on pre-Islamic religions as well as their arguments on Islam and why they view it as the best nation-building ideology. To accomplish this task, I focus primarily on academic works published in Qazaqstan after 1991.

The Definition of Qazaq

Various scholars from different fields have used several ethnonyms to identify “Qazaq”: “Kazakh,” “Kazak,” “Kirgiz,” and “Qazaq.” For instance, Bruce Privratsky and others use *Kazak*, whereas in our days, *Kazakh* is widespread across popular and academic publications. The authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century books employed the terms *Kirgiz* and *Kirgiz-Kazak* to refer to the same people. Since I will be quoting and referring to literature from a vast span of periods, the term needs a

Qazaqstan. However, in chapters 4 and 5, I will come back to Islam and discuss its two main branches in Qazaqstan: Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism.

⁵ In chapter 3, I will examine each of these religions, and based on archaeological findings and historical records, I will argue that they were present among the early Qazaq tribes alongside Islam.

definition to avoid potential confusion. I argue for the use of the transliteration of the term *Qazaq* from Qazaq as the most accurate English rendering of the nation's proper name. The term *Qazaq* needs analysis in two historical aspects: first, its linguistic development; second, its political usage, which demonstrates when *Qazaq* became an ethnonym.

Historical-Linguistic

The modern term *Qazaq* (Қазақ) can be broken down into two parts by its syllables: *Qaz* (Қаз; “Goose”), and *Aq* (Ақ; “White”). As a native Qazaq speaker, I find this approach a bit awkward in the handling of the word, though I acknowledge the grammatical possibility of this breakdown. Another possible breakdown would be to translate *Qaz* (Қаз) as an imperative form of the verb standing for “dig,” then *Aq* (Ақ) would become object receiving the command to dig. But both these treatments are obscure rather than conveying the original meaning of the word. Therefore, it is worth exploring the history of the term and previously proposed etymological definitions.

Unclear variant readings of Qazaq replacing or doubling vowels and consonants are traced back as early as the second century BC. Scholars have not come to a consensus regarding the etymology of the term. For instance, Russian writer Yarovoy says, “The very word ‘Cossack’ (or Kazak) causes contradictory disputes among researchers, who believe the origin of this term has not been decisively clarified yet.”⁶ Omeljan Pritsak expresses the same thought by quoting Gerhard Doerfer, “No reliable etymology exists for this word.”⁷

⁶ А. В. Яровой, *Воинская Культура Казачества: Символическое Пространство и Ритуал* (Москва: Direct Media, 2014), 121. [A. V. Yarovoy, *The Militant Culture of Cossacks: A Symbolic Space and Ritual* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2014), 121.] “Уже само слово «казак» вызывает противоречивые споры исследователей, которые считают, что вплоть до настоящего времени окончательно не выяснено происхождения этого слово.”

⁷ Omeljan Pritsak, “The Turkic Etymology of the Word *Qazaq* ‘Cossack,’” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 28, nos. 1-4 (2006): 238. See also Gerhard Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung älterer neupersischer Geschichtsquellen, vor allem der*

The verified earliest occurrence of the term Qazaq in written documents is dated around the eighth century. Even then, it is only the first syllable of the word. The Orkhon inscriptions of the eighth century in Old Turkic language included the verb *Qaz*. Omeljjan Pritsak refers to Annemarie Gabain, who argued that *Qaz* means to “conquer” or “gather.”⁸ Between these two possible translations, I am inclined to think that *Qaz* could mean “conquer” instead of “gather” because Orkhon inscriptions had another word *birik*, which meant “gather.”⁹ And modern Qazaq language has derivative words from Old Turkic *birik*, which today sounds like “birigu” [bipiry], which means to “gather” or “put together.”

Thus, scholars have reached a consensus that the term “Qazaq” originates from an Old Turkic root with unclear meaning. However, several centuries after the Orkhon inscriptions the term “Qazaq” acquired a different meaning than “to gather” or “to conquer.” At least three documents from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries support the hypothesis that “Qazaq” was used as an adjective denoting “free” or “independent” rather than as a verb. First, Pritsak refers to an Arabic-Polovcian glossary of the thirteenth century, where the word *Qazaq* was translated as *al-mujarrad*, which stands for “free.”¹⁰ Second, *Codex Cumanicus* a thirteenth-century glossary that Catholic missionaries used to communicate with the Cuman (a Turkic people). In this document the term “Qazaq”

Mongolen- und Timuridenzeit. Bd. I: mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1967), 462-68. “Eine sichere Etymologie für das Wort [*qazaq*] existiert nicht.”

⁸ Pritsak, “The Turkic Etymology of the Word Qazaq ‘Cossack,’” 238. See also Annemarie Gabain, “Kasakentum, eine Soziologisch Philologische Studie,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 11, no. 1/3 (1960): 161-67. For the translation of the inscriptions, see E. Denison Ross and Vilhelm Thomsen, “The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen’s Final Danish Rendering,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 5, no. 4 (1930): 861-76.

⁹ Talat Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, Uralic and Altaic Series 69 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 315.

¹⁰ Pritsak, “The Turkic Etymology of the Word *Qazaq* ‘Cossack,’” 238. Pritsak refers to Hans Wehr’s Arabic-English glossary, but the translation of *mujarrad* from Arabic to English as “free” seems to be not the first choice of the translator. “Free” appears only after “denuded,” “bare,” “naked,” and “freed.” Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 3rd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976), 120.

was used to convey “free.”¹¹ Lastly, Pritsak points out that Babur the Great (1483-1530) used the term *Qazaq* in the meaning “freebooter.”¹² It is worth mentioning that in Babur’s writings “*Qazaq*” as “free” conveyed a negative meaning, which was “political vagabond” as Stephen Dale writes.¹³

Lawrence Krader echoes Pritsak’s and Dale’s understandings but adds a little nuance. Krader says *Qazaq* means “separated” or “wanderer.” He also mentions that the word “*Qazaq*” occurs in *The Secret History of Mongols* as a “large cart.”¹⁴ But I do not see any connection between the “large cart” and ethnonym “*Qazaq*.” Instead, I give preference to Krader’s translation of *Qazaq* as “separated” because historically it makes more sense. For instance, Volker Rybatzki wrote regarding the “large cart” in *The Secret History of Mongols*, “It is not possible, in my opinion, to connect *qasaq* ‘cart’ with the ethnic name Kazakh at this point of history, as a distinct ethnic group known as Kazakh arose only in the mid-fifteenth century when parts of the White Horde broke away from the Khan of the Özbeks.”¹⁵ The fact of breaking away from the Özbeks allow us to accept that the modern ethnonym must be understood as separated or free.

Thus, the earliest confirmed occurrence of the word *Qazaq* appears in Orkhon inscriptions. Then the word appears in various medieval documents in Mongolia, Egypt, and India. The historical development of the word is not clear; the available evidence suggests that the term must be of Turkic origin meaning “free.” Since 1465, the term became the national name of the unified tribes, who are today known in the world as

¹¹ Pritsak, “The Turkic Etymology of the Word *Qazaq* ‘Cossack,’” 238.

¹² Pritsak, “The Turkic Etymology of the Word *Qazaq* ‘Cossack,’” 239.

¹³ Stephen Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Bābur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 98-99.

¹⁴ Lawrence Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia*, 2nd ed., Uralic and Altaic Series 26 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 64.

¹⁵ Volker Rybatzki, review of *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, by Igor de Rachewiltz, *Central Asiatic Journal* 52, no. 1 (2008): 137.

Qazaqs (or Kazakhs). Therefore, if modern Qazaqs want to revive their true historical national identity, they need to reinforce the term's original meaning, free or independent, instead of absorbing the religion that demands a slave-like submission—Islam. The following section aims to clarify how this word became an ethnonym of the Qazaqs.

Historical-Political

Qazaqs emerged as a separate nation after the disintegration of the Mongol Empire and before the Russian colonization of Central Asia. When Genghis Khan died in 1227, Jochi the oldest son of the Great Khan became the next ruler. However, Jochi died soon after his father's death, and his sons succeeded in the vast empire. Constant conflicts and wars between Jochi's descendants eventually resulted in the complete disintegration of the Great Mongol Empire. By the fifteenth century, the remnant of the Great Empire was the Uzbek Khanate with its supreme leader Abul Khair Khan, who strived to revive Genghis Khan's empire. But two princes, whose genealogy also traced back to Genghis Khan, Janibek and Kerey, refused to submit to Abul Khair Khan. In 1465, these two led several tribes to establish own sovereign Khanate. In the words of Giampaolo R. Capisani, "This clan of so-called 'dissidents' was referred to as 'Kazaks.'"¹⁶ Thus, from the second half of the fifteenth century the word Kazak or (Qazaq) became an ethnonym of the modern Qazaqs.

The Qazaq Khanate consisted of three hordes: great, middle, and small. Martha Brill Olcott rightly points out that these three hordes (in Qazaq *zhuz* [жүз]), were loosely unified. When neighboring Kalmyk Mongol tribes started migrating westward, along the way they launched raids and military expeditions on the Qazaq pasturelands. Due to a lack of unity among the Qazaq hordes, individual hordes were not strong enough to resist the Kalmyk raids. As an escape from the Kalmyks, Qazaqs were forced to seek protection

¹⁶ Giampaolo R. Capisani, *The Handbook of Central Asia: A Comprehensive Survey of the New Republics* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 27.

in allegiance to the Russian Empire. But Russians viewed the Qazaq-Kalmyk conflict as an opportunity to colonize the vast swathes of Central Asia. By the nineteenth century, all three Qazaq hordes were colonized by the Russian Empire.¹⁷

The Russian Empire's colonial expeditions conducted for military and ethnographic purposes discovered potential confusion between Qazaqs, Cossacks, and Kirghiz. For instance, Vladimir Barthold referred to the Qazaqs with the term *Kirghiz* (Киргиз); he referred to proper Kirghiz as *Kara-Kirghiz* (Кара-Киргиз), and to the Cossacks as *Kazak* (Казак).¹⁸ The tradition of calling Qazaqs *Kirghiz* had started before Barthold. For instance, Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, describing Alexey Levshin's Russian ethnography (1797-1879), write, "Throughout this excerpt, Levshin refers to the Qazaqs as Kirgiz, or Kirgiz-Kazak, in the fashion customary among Russians at that time."¹⁹ Either out of imperial arrogance or lack of research competence, Russian ethnographers never were able to identify the difference between Qazaqs and Kirghiz correctly.

Saulesh Esenova, a professor of anthropology at the University of Calgary, quotes from Nelson E. Fell and writes,

The word Kazak means "a rider," and the Russians had already adopted this word for their own groups or organization (which amounts almost to a caste, so close it is) which we know under the name of "Cossack," so when they absorbed the Kirghiz Kazakhs into their body politics, in order to avoid the confusion of terms, they abandoned the use of the word Kazak, when referring to the native race, and use,

¹⁷ Martha B. Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 12. Each *zhuz* consisted of numerous tribes: great *zhuz* (11), middle *zhuz* (6), and small *zhuz* (25). Anthropologists and scientists are still battling with the questions of when and how the *zhuzs* were formed. Tolganay Umbetalijeva, "Feeling of Membership of the Tribe in Present-Day Kazakhstan," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 3, no. 1 (March 2008): 90.

¹⁸ Владимир В. Бартольд, *История Культурной Жизни Туркестана* (Ленинград: Издательство Академии Наук СССР, 1927), 146. [Vladimir V. Bartold, *The History of Cultural life of Turkestan* (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1927), 146.]

¹⁹ Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 293. The authors also mention that Levshin's work was translated into French, but they do not provide a bibliography. Therefore, I have decided to fill this gap and provide bibliographic data on Levshin's original work in Russian and its translation into French. Алексей Левшин, *Описание киргиз-казачьих или киргиз-кайсацких орд и степней* (Петербург, 1832) [Alexey Levshin, *Description of the Kirghiz-Kazak or Kirghiz-Kaisak Hordes and Steppes* (Petersburg, 1832)]; Alexey Levshin, *Description Des Hordes Et Des Steppes Des Kirghiz-Kazaks Ou Kirghiz-Kaïssaks*, trans. Ferry de Pigny (Paris: Imprimé Par Autorisation Du Roi a L'Imprimerie Royale, 1840).

simply, the word “Kirghiz.” The natives have retained the word and never speak of themselves otherwise than as “Kazaks” [“Qazaqs”].²⁰

Although Fell acknowledged that indigenous people’s self-identification would not be the term *Kirghiz*, he kept using the wrong term. Esenova does not include it, but the above-cited quote from Fell’s work continues as follows: “but, in the following stories, the Russian style is adopted, and they are referred to exclusively as ‘Kirghiz.’”²¹ Therefore, when people like Barthold and Levshin employed the term Kirghiz regarding Qazaqs, they distorted the nation’s self-designation and perpetuated this distortion among international scholars.

The October revolution of 1917, and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 introduced significant political changes to the life of the Qazaq people. Therefore, it is worth mentioning them in chronological order.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire, Qazaqs attempted to gain independence in the form of the autonomous state of Alash, which lasted for three years, 1917-1920.²² In these years, indigenous people had to choose between White and Red armies. When it was clear that the anti-Bolsheviks would not support Alash, Qazaqs had to establish a new autonomous republic—Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic—in August of 1920.²³ The choice of the word *Kirghiz* by the Qazaqs in 1920 demonstrates how colonial suppression can distort colonized people’s self-identification.

Nevertheless, the spirit of Qazaqs for freedom eventually broke through, and by 1925, the Soviets finally recognized the difference between the Qazaq and Kirghiz

²⁰ Saulesh Esenova, “Soviet Nationality, Identity, and Ethnicity in Central Asia: Historic Narratives and Kazakh Ethnic Identity,” *Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002): 15. Fell was wrong when he said that the term “Kazak” means “a rider”; as I demonstrated in previous section, the term means “free” or “independent.”

²¹ Nelson E. Fell, *Russian and Nomad: Tales of the Kirghiz Steppes* (London: Duckworth, 1916), xiii.

²² One of the sources in English to consult is Geoffrey Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1964), 101.

²³ Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia*, 103.

people, and the republic's name was changed to Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.²⁴ A significant change to the status of the Qazaq state came in 1936 when the prefix "autonomous" was removed from the republic's name. And now it was called Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.²⁵

In the same year 1936, while Qazaqstan still was an autonomous republic, the Central Executive Committee of the Kazakh ASSR and Council of People's Commissars of the Kazakh ASSR issued an order regulating the Russian spelling of ethnonym Kazakh. The document stated that the final consonant "Қ" of "Қазақ" in the Russian language must be rendered as "X," converting "Қазақ" into "Казах."²⁶ From 1936 to now, most English literature follows this Russian version "Казах," which transliterates as "Kazakh." However, the direct and proper transliteration from Qazaq to English must be "Qazaq."

The outlines below details Qazaqstan's history from its time under Soviet rule to its independence:

1917-1920	Alash Orda
1920-1925	Kirghiz Autonomous
1925-1936	Kazakh Autonomous
1936-1991	Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic
1991-	Independent Republic of Qazaqstan (Kazakhstan)

²⁴ Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 200; Facts and Details, "Soviet Period in Kazakhstan," accessed January 17, 2022, https://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Kazakhstan/sub8_4a/entry-4632.html.

²⁵ Oliver Roy, *New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 61.

²⁶ Центральный Исполнительный Комитет КазАССР, Совет Народных Комиссаров КазАССР Постановление от 5 февраля 1936 года О русском произношении и письменном обозначении слова «казак». [Central Executive Committee of KazASSR, Council of People's Commissionaires of KazASSR Decision Dated February 5, 1936, on the Russian Pronunciation and Written Designation of the Word "Kazak."]

As this outline and brief historical excursus reveals, Russian colonizers for two centuries wanted to distort Qazaqs' identity by changing their names. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the past thirty years, the question of national self-identification has become a sensitive topic for Qazaqs. In other words, having thrown off Russia's colonial grip, Qazaqs today grapple with the existential question of what it means to be a Qazaq. From a historical and grammatical perspectives, as demonstrated above, Qazaq means "a free man." A free Qazaq should not be enslaved ever again. Unfortunately, modern Qazaqs are filling their existential emptiness with a religion that requires them to be slaves— Islam. Qazaqs could find true freedom in Jesus Christ; as the apostle Paul writes, "For freedom, Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1; see also Rom 8:16; Eph 6:6; Col 3:24; 1 Pet 2:16).²⁷

Modern Qazaqs on Pre-Islamic Religions

Proponents of Islam who advertise it as the ancestral faith inevitably wrestle with the question of what religion Qazaqs followed before Islam. Most Qazaqs acknowledge Tengrism as an ancestral faith predating Islam. On a popular level, Qazaqs also know that Zoroastrianism, shamanism, Buddhism, and Christianity had a presence in their history. Moreover, some features of those non-Islamic religions are still present in Qazaq land and culture. Because of this fact, the question of identity becomes more complicated than merely what religion predated Islam. Is Islam the only religion that can strengthen Qazaq ethnic and national identity, or do other religions serve this purpose better? The sections below outline prominent arguments about pre-Islamic religions in Qazaq history. In these sections, I minimize my voice to present what modern Qazaqs believe about the major religions.

²⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

Tengrism

In daily life, Qazaq Muslims employ the terms “Tengri” (Тәңірі) and “Allah” interchangeably. The most salient manifestation of this interchangeable use is observed in the opening lines of a popular song titled “The existence of Allah is True” (Алланың бары ақиқат). The official translation of the Islamic statement of faith Shahadah to Qazaq is identical to the song’s opening lines, “Алладан басқа жоқ тәңірі, Мұхаммед Оның елшісі” (There is no *Tengri* but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger).²⁸ Interestingly, the official translation of Shahadah has the term “Tengri,” instead of “Quday” (Құдай) a common word used in Qazaq for God. Quday (خدای *k̄hud-āy*) is originally a Persian word standing for self-existent God.²⁹ Thus, Qazaq Muslims’ statement of faith contains the name of the pre-Islamic religion’s god—Tengri.

Without a detailed discussion about how folklore and society impact one another, we know that a popular song, to a degree, reflects the collective frame of mind. Every culture has its own beloved singers and songs. When the aforementioned song is performed by Meirambek Bespaev, one of the most cheered singers in Qazaqstan, it erases the distinction between Allah and Tengri in an emotional and cultural subconscious.

It must be acknowledged that Qazaq evangelicals too use the term “Tengri.” The term occurs in the Qazaq Bible, Christian literature, and worship songs. Does this mean that “Tengri” is a mere synonym for “god” in Qazaq, used by both Muslims and Christians?³⁰ The answer to this question depends on the context. It could be “yes” because many Qazaqs use “Tengri,” “Quday,” and “Allah” interchangeably. However,

²⁸ ҚМДБ, “Исламның Шарттары,” last updated May 24, 2017, <https://islam.muftyat.kz/kk/islamnyyn-sharttary/islamnyyn-sharttary/>. [QMDB, “The Tenets of Islam.”]

²⁹ Francis J. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to be Met with in Persian Literature* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1892), 449, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?page=449.

³⁰ I acknowledge the controversies concerning whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. However, it is not my objective in this research to address that debate.

“Quday” and “Allah” are closer in meaning to each other than to “Tengri.” In this regard, it is worth mentioning three approaches to handling the term “Tengri.”

First, from the perspective of Qazaq historians, the god of Tengrism, Tengri, is not identical to Allah but very similar. The promoters of this view insist that ancient tribes inhabiting the modern territories of Qazaqstan adhered to monotheistic Tengrism. Therefore, when Islam arrived in the region, the indigenous population realized that their faith needed a slight emendation. For instance, N. J. Baytenova, Sh. S. Rysbekova, and A. D. Qurmangalieva, the editors of the textbook *Religions in Qazaqstan: A Study Guide*, write, “The Turkic understanding of Tengri and Allah means the same creator. Many features of the old religion had to adapt to the canons of Islam. And Islam, to solidify its precepts took into account indigenous people’s beliefs.”³¹ Therefore, the authors argue that today it is impossible to distinguish all the details of these two religions.³²

In a similar manner, to support the closeness of Islam and Tengrism, professors of the Qazaq-Turkish University in the city of Turkestan published an article discussing the historical-religious context in which emerged Maturidism, which is the official version of Islam in Qazaqstan. The authors point out the diversity of religious life in Central Asia when Maturidism emerged. They list Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions that Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853-944), the founder of Maturidism debated. Their statement regarding Tengrism stands out as they write, “At this time, the Samanids, seeking sovereignty from the Abbasids, were in the vicinity of the Buyahids, promote [sic] ideas of the Shia Imams, Zaydi, and the state, to adhere to

³¹ Н. Ж. Байтенова, Ш. С. Рысбекова, А. Д. Құрманғалиева, *Қазақстандағы Діндер: Оқу құралы* (Алматы: Қазақ университеті, 2011), 18. [N. J. Baytenova, Sh. S. Rysbekova, and A. D. Qurmangalieva, *Religions in Qazaqstan: A Study Guide* (Almaty: Kazakh University, 2011), 18.] “Түркілердің түсінігіндегі Тәңір мен Аллах бір жаратушыны білдіреді. Ескі діннің көптеген көріністері ислам канондарына бейімделуге мәжбүр болды. Ал Ислам діні өзінің негізгі канондарын нығайтып, бекіту үшін тұрғылықты халықтың наным-сенімдерімен санасты.”

³² Байтенова, Рысбекова, Құрманғалиева, *Қазақстандағы Діндер*, 18. [Baytenova, Rysbekova, and Qurmangalieva, *Religions in Qazaqstan*, 18.]

Shi'ism, and the Ghaznavids, supporters of Sunni and Turkic tribes, stick to Tengrism.”³³ In other words, Maturidism emerged in a religiously diverse and politically complex context. On the one hand, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi had theological disagreements with the followers of Tengrism. But on the other hand, those Turkic tribes professing Tengrism were in support of Sunni Muslims on the political issues, to which belonged al-Maturidi. Thus, some Qazaq Muslims acknowledge Tengrism as an ancestral faith but prefer it to Islam.

Other Qazaq Muslim clerics and scholars perceive Tengrism with less enthusiasm than the authors mentioned above. For instance, Toreali Qidir and Amantay Toyshibayuli challenge the validity of Tengrism as an ancestral faith. Qidir points out Tengrism's inability to compete with other religions like Christianity, Manichaeism, and Buddhism. He asks why, if Turks were solid adherents of Tengrism, did they need translations of other religions' sacred scriptures in their own languages.³⁴ In a similar manner, Toyshibayuli rebukes proponents of Tengrism for their desire to make Tengrism a national faith. He dismisses Tengrism since it does not have proper religious attributes such as sacred scripture, prophet, and God. In his opinion, pro-Tengrism narratives sprang from the Russian Empire's colonial rule. He refers to a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox missionary, who said that historically Qazaqs believed in Tengri rather than following Islam.³⁵

³³ Kymbat Karatyshkanova et al., “Background Teachings of Maturidi Formation and Its Impact on the Spiritual Knowledge of the Kazakhs,” *Current Science* 112, no. 8 (2017): 1941.

³⁴ Төрәлі Қыдыр, “Исламафобия—Тәңіршілдік Желеуі ме?,” Қожалар, last updated September 8, 2020, <https://kozhalar.kz/20200916-islamofobiya-tangirshildik-zheleui-me>. [Toreali Qidir, “Islamophobia—A Wind of Tengrism?,” Kozhalar.] In chapter 3, I will provide detailed information on the Buddhist texts produced by the Turkic tribes.

³⁵ Амантай Тойшыбайұлы, “Тәңіршілдік—Қазақ Халқының Төл Діні Емес,” ҚМДБ, last updated May 9, 2020, <https://www.muftyat.kz/kk/articles/islam-and-society/2020-05-09/31344-tnirshildik-kazak-khalkynyn-tol-dini-emes/>. [Amantay Toyshibayuli, “Tengrism—Not an Indigenous Faith of the Qazaq Nation.” QMDB.]

The third group holds the complete dissimilarity of Allah and Tengri. They see Tengrism as the true ancestral faith, whereas Islam is a foreign religion that intruded on Qazaq culture in the past. A representative of this position is Aron Atabek. (Atabek was imprisoned for his political opposition to the ruling power. He is not given wide recognition in mass media, but his ideas are popular among Qazaq opposition groups.)³⁶ Atabek endorses the concept of Tengrism as the national ideology for the Qazaqs. His starting point resembles religious pluralism rather than exclusivism (only Allah) or inclusivism (Allah and Tengri). Atabek argues that there is one true supreme God, but His immanence is expressed through different religions and gods. To say there is no God, but Allah, Jesus, or Buddha³⁷ is nothing but arrogance diminishing God's greatness. God is sovereign and free to express Himself through various religious systems. Every religion is assigned to a particular nation. Each religion has its own prophet, sacred scripture, and rituals. For instance, Moses and Jesus were sent to Jews, Krishna and Buddha to Hindus, and the prophet Muhammad to Arabs. He holds that the gods of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and other religions are inferior to the true supreme universal God. In his opinion, all the religious systems either monotheism, polytheism, or paganism, serve the same goal—to reveal the true God.³⁸

According to Atabek, Tengrism is the original religion assigned to Qazaqs. Unlike some Qazaq Muslims, who try to present Tengri as a monotheistic god, Atabek does not shy away from agreeing that Tengrism is a pagan religion. Tengri is a pagan god. Interestingly, Atabek does not have a problem acknowledging Tengrism as

³⁶ Арон Атабек [Aron Atabek] is his pseudonym. This is the website where his proponents post his works and political statements: <https://aronatabek.com/tengrianstvo-osnova-nacionalnogo-samosoznaniya-kazakhov.html>.

³⁷ I acknowledge that technically, Buddha is not a god. However, here I am describing Atabek's opinion, and he lists Buddha's name alongside Allah and Jesus.

³⁸ Арон Атабек, “Тенгрианство — Основа Национального Самосознания Казахов,” last updated September 1, 2005, <https://aronatabek.com/tengrianstvo-osnova-nacionalnogo-samosoznaniya-kazakhov.html>. [Aron Atabek, “Tengrism as the Basis of the National identity of the Qazaqs.”]

paganism. Regarding the issue of Tengrism as a national ideology, Atabek refers to the belief that each nation is assigned specific religion and God. In his opinion, there is an exchange of energy between God and nation. Atabek insists when a person prays and worships the god of his own religion, this god responds with blessings to the whole nation. For instance, when an Arab prays to Allah, Allah blesses all the Arabs, likewise, Yahweh blesses all the Jews in response to one Jewish man's prayers. But when a man prays to a foreign god, the energy exchange is imbalanced. In other words, when a Qazaq prays to Allah instead of Tengri, Allah rewards Arabs in response to Qazaq's prayer. Since prayer is a release of energy, it must be replenished by a god. But praying to a foreign god weakens the nation because gods bless only their own nations. Therefore, if Qazaqs want to be a prosperous nation, they must embrace Tengrism as a national religion.³⁹

Sagadi Bulekbaev, a Qazaq philosopher who researches national ideology, poses a similar argument to Atabek's position. Bulekbaev's argument coincides with Atabek's view that Islam should not be the national ideology. In his article, "About the Role of Ideology," Bulekbaev points out that Marxism was the ideology of the USSR. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxism became the subject of condemnation in Qazaq society. Bulekbaev describes this change as follows, "But what has come to replace it was not a step forward on the path of intellectual and moral progress of the population, but a degradation unprecedented in the history of humankind."⁴⁰ Later, still discussing the lack of national ideology in Qazaqstan, he notes that Islam today means more than a religion or expression of spirituality. Bulekbaev writes, "In this situation,

³⁹ Атабек, "Тенгрианство — Основа Национального Самосознания Казахов." [Atabek, "Tengrism as the Basis of the National identity of the Qazaqs."]

⁴⁰ Сагади Булекбаев, "О Роли Идеологии," Qazaq Gazetteri, last updated November 25, 2013, <https://mysl.kazgazeta.kz/news/1589>. [Sagadi Bulekbaev, "About the Role of Ideology," Qazaq Gazetteri.] "Но то, что пришло на смену ему, есть не шаг вперед на пути интеллектуального и нравственного прогресса населения, а беспрецедентная в истории человечества деградация."

religion, that is, Islam actually becomes not merely the main religion in the country but the primary compensator for ideology. It has a massive support of the authorities.”⁴¹

Then, Bulekbaev suggests three-fold proposition necessary for the proper national ideology. Whereas his first proposition sounds too generic as he talks about sacrificial heart, rejection of individualism and consumerism, his second and third propositions are pertinent to the discussion of this research. The second fold of his proposition states that Qazaq society will benefit from a secular ideology. The third fold is that Qazaqs must strengthen the sense of patriotism and national spirit. For this, Qazaqs have to rediscover their national identity in ancient history, from the time of old Turkic civilizations. And Bulekbaev remarks that we have everything to accomplish it; he means abundant archaeological and historical evidence. He believes Eurocentric historiography and historical studies suppress the Qazaq identity. Therefore, Qazaqs should move the focus from Eurocentric history to the Turkic-centric paradigm.⁴²

In conformity with his words, Bulekbaev published the book *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*. In the book, he argues that Qazaqs are an inseparable part of the modern Turkic world and descendants of ancient Turkic powers.⁴³ Among many historical facts about ancient Turks, Bulekbaev discusses the role of Tengrism as the Turkic civilization’s heritage. He acknowledges the role of Islam and stresses that the two religions Islam and Tengrism had the most profound impacts on the Central Asian Turkic nations.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Бүлекбаев, “О Роли Идеологии.” [Bulekbaev, “About the Role of Ideology.”] “В этой ситуации религия, точнее – ислам, фактически становится не просто главной религией в стране, а главным компенсатором идеологии. Поскольку она имеет мощную поддержку со стороны власти.”

⁴² Бүлекбаев, “О Роли Идеологии.” [Bulekbaev, “About the Role of Ideology.”]

⁴³ Сагади Бүлекбаев, Тюркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию (Алматы: Bavis Systems, 2016), 2. [Sagadi Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization* (Almaty: Bavis Systems, 2016), 2.]

⁴⁴ Бүлекбаев, Тюркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию, 133. [Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*, 133.]

Bulekbaev recognizes the presence of other religions among the Turks. His quote (perhaps from Raphael Bezertinov) lists Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and Confucianism as the religions that coexisted alongside Tengrism. However, Bulekbaev by commenting on this list remarks that he would also add Christianity to it (list). He writes that the Naimans, one of the Qazaq tribes, professed Christianity.⁴⁵ This remark indicates that he does not know that Nestorianism was one of the branches of Eastern Christian traditions or he believes that Christianity and Nestorianism are two separate religions.

Returning to the discussion of Tengrism's significance for the ancient Turks, it is worth mentioning five points that Bulekbaev makes. First, Tengri is the creator, the highest being, and he is transcendent. But Tengri's transcendence does not preclude his immanence in the human mind and spirit. Bulekbaev believes Tengri, Allah, and Quday, all these terms refer to the same being—God. Second, Tengrism teaches the immortality of the human soul and cultivates the worshipping of ancestors' spirits. When a man prays to the spirits of the dead ancestors they can intercede and help. Moreover, the ancestral spirits nurture the souls of living people. Therefore, it was common among the ancient Turks to commemorate their ancestors. The third point is the admiration of parents and forefathers and taking care of children. Every boy was required to know the familial stories, victories, and failures of his ancestors. Boys had to know by name of their great grandfathers at least to the seventh generation. On the one hand, it secured the bond between the generations. On the other hand, it was the soil to foster a responsible, well-behaved, and honorable man. Men knew that their deeds and words would be memorized and transmitted to the next generation. Fourth, Tengrism demanded respect for society

⁴⁵ Бүлекбаев, Түркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию, 133. [Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*, 133.]

and collective decisions. Fifth, ancestral customs and national traditions never should be broken.⁴⁶

Although Bulekbaev admits the difference between Islam and Tengrism, he endorses the idea of similarity between these two religions. For instance, he writes, “Perception of Tengri in its essential characteristics, in general, did not contradict the perception of Allah.”⁴⁷ In other words, Bulekbaev believes, Islam and Tengrism had more in common than uncommon. Nevertheless, he points out that the Turkic expression of Islam differs from the Arabic expression of the religion. Arabs would worship prophets, whereas Muslim Turks still venerate the ancestral spirit.⁴⁸

In support of Bulekbaev’s argument that Turkic Islam manifests many features of Tengrism, one may refer to the similar rites of both religions. For instance, in their textbook in world religions, Shamshiya Risbekova, Qarligash Borbasova, and Ainur Qurmanalieva, professors of Qazaq National University, bring up ritual sacrifice in Tengrism. Ancient Turkic followers of Tengrism, thought that there are various spiritual beings wandering in this world. Those beings potentially could harm or bless people. Therefore, to defend themselves, Turkic people brought sacrificial offerings to Tengri. The same sacrifices were also offered to defend from someone’s jealous desires and words.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Бүлекбаев, *Түркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию*, 135-37. [Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*, 135-37.]

⁴⁷ Бүлекбаев, *Түркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию*, 135. [Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*, 135.] “Восприятие Тенгри по своим сущностным характеристикам в целом не противоречило восприятию Аллаха.”

⁴⁸ Бүлекбаев, *Түркский Вклад в Мировую Культуру и Цивилизацию*, 138. [Bulekbaev, *Turkic Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization*, 138.]

⁴⁹ Шәмшия С. Рысбекова, Қарлығаш М. Борбасова, and Айнұр Д. Құрманалиева, *Діндер Тарихы: Оқу-әдістемелік Құралы* (Алматы: ҚазНУ, 2012), 19. [Shamshiya S. Risbekova, Qarligash V. Borbasova, and Ainur D. Qurmanalieva, *The History of Religions: A Textbook* (Almaty: KazNU, 2012), 19.] This is a textbook designed for the undergraduate students studying in religious studies programs in Qazaqstan.

Three more cases when the Turkic people offered sacrifice to Tengri. First, I already mentioned that Tengri is the supreme god of Tengrism. And early Turks adhering to Tengrism believed that Tengri either blesses or curses. Therefore, they brought a sacrificial offering to gain Tengri's blessing. For instance, it could be before a military campaign, hunting, travel, harvest, and other situations. Second, in rough circumstances, people would seek Tengri's help. It could be a famine, drought, sickness, or any other unfortunate accident. In these instances, the color of the sacrificial animal must be black. Third, on the days of joy, celebration, and success Turks would offer sacrifice to Tengri. The color of the sacrificial animal must be white in all cases except the one mentioned above. In the worldview of ancient Turks white and blue represented the colors of heaven, where Tengri dwells.⁵⁰

For the followers of Tengrism, sacrifice was a nexus of three worlds: subterranean, earthly, and heavenly. Therefore, the Turks divided the sacrifice into three parts. First, all the leg and body bones of the sacrifice were thoroughly cleaned and buried in an outskirt, where no human foot would step. It was the portion of the underground world. Second, Turks would cook the meat of the animal and serve it to people, which was the portion given to the earthly world. Third, the head of the sacrifice would be hung on a tree. It represented the portion dedicated to the heavenly world.⁵¹ Risbekova and other co-authors of the textbook did not make an explicit statement that Tengrism and Islam are similar religions.

However, Alau Sh. Adilbayev, a QMDB deputy, makes an explicit parallel between Tengrism and Islam. In *The Harmony of the Qazaq traditions and Islamic Shari'a*, he refers to traditional Qazaq prayer and Islam. Adilbayev tells a story about the

⁵⁰ Рысбекова, Борбасова, and Қурманалиева, *Діндер Тарихы*, 19. [Risbekova, Borbasova, and Qurmanalieva, *The History of Religions*, 19.]

⁵¹ Рысбекова, Борбасова, and Қурманалиева, *Діндер Тарихы*, 19. [Risbekova, Borbasova, and Qurmanalieva, *The History of Religions*, 19.]

prophet Muhammad praying to Allah for rain. In the sixth year of Hijra, there was a drought in Medina. And the prophet Muhammad gathered the citizens outside of Medina for prayer. During this collective prayer, Allah responded immediately, and the rain started pouring.⁵² Then Adilbayev adds that Qazaq elders prayed in a similar manner. He refers to a Qazaq prayer asking Tengri for rain.⁵³ Adilbayev's main point is that indigenous Qazaq cultural practice is similar to the culture of Medinan Muslims during the time of the prophet Muhammad. Therefore, as the title of Adilbayev's book suggests, Islamic rituals naturally fit into the Qazaq culture. Thus, Muslim clerics and theologians promote the blended identification of Tengri and Allah.

Nevertheless, some Qazaq intellectuals do not welcome the Arabic expression of Islam in Qazaqstan. They suspect that the modern Islamization of the Qazaqs is nothing but undercover Arabization. The most debated issues are the Hijab and the use of Arabic terminology by Qazaq Muslims. The issue of the Hijab leads to the role of women and their dignity in society. For instance, a deputy of the Qazaq parliament, Kamal Burkhanov, in 2011 questioned why a Qazaq woman must wear Hijab. In his opinion, wearing Hijab goes against Qazaq culture. In other words, the traditional culture of the Qazaqs is different from Islam. He insisted that Qazaq women in the past did not wear Hijab because it would have been highly uncomfortable in their nomadic lifestyle. Burkhanov was disappointed by the fact that Qazaq women more and more tend to wear medieval Arabic apparel believing that it is religious clothing. Women in Qazaq society share the same respect that men do, unlike in Islamic or Arabic culture. He said, "In Qazaq society, a woman is a mother, a keeper of the hearth, a revered and respected

⁵² Алау Ш. Әділбаев, *Қазақ Салт-Дәстүр, Әдет-Ғұрыптарының Ислам Шариғатымен Үйлесімі*, 2 том (Астана: Рухани құндылықтарды қолдау қоры, 2018), 63. [Alau Sh. Adilbayev, *The Harmony of the Qazaq Traditions and Islamic Shari'a*, vol. 2 (Astana: Rukhani Qundiliqtardi Qoldau Qori, 2018), 63.]

⁵³ Әділбаев, *Қазақ Салт-Дәстүр, Әдет-Ғұрыптарының Ислам Шариғатымен Үйлесімі*, 63-64. [Adilbayev, *The Harmony of the Qazaq Traditions and Islamic Shari'a*, 63-64.]

person who has never been in an oppressed position.”⁵⁴ Of course, Burkhanov was not against Islam in general. At the end of his speech, he stressed out that Qazaqs share the Islamic faith with other Muslim nations, including Arabs. But he maintains that Islam should not alter the Qazaq ethnic identity.

Similarly, Balghabek Mirzayev, a well-known Muslim theologian and religious studies scholar, laments Qazaq Muslims’ use of Arabic terminology instead of Qazaq words. In his interview given to the website Turkistan, he refers to two terms, *Allah* and *Iftar*. He says both words have Qazaq equivalents. In his opinion, instead of saying “Allah” (Аллаһ) with the final “h,” Qazaqs should write and say “Alla” (Алла) without “h” at the end. (It would have been interesting to hear if he would suggest using Tengri instead of Allah.) Regarding *Iftar*, Mirzayev mentions that there is a Qazaq expression, “ауызашар” (*auizashar*). He argues that Qazaqs should use the Qazaq word “ауызашар” instead of Arabic *Iftar*.⁵⁵ The literal translation of “ауызашар” (*auizashar*) to English is “mouth-opener,” but in Qazaq, it refers to the meal that Muslims take after the sunset during the month of Ramadan.

Unlike Mirzayev and Burkhanov, others do not see any danger in using Arabic terms and wearing Hijab. Qazaq turkologist Ayman Qodar thinks that Qazaqs’ using Arabic words is a natural process. She says certain religious terms dominate despite the existence of national words. As an example, outside of Islam, she refers to *Shabbat* (“Sabbath”) and argues that followers of Judaism around the world, regardless of their nationality and ethnicity, use the Hebrew term *Shabbat*. Therefore, she claims that when

⁵⁴ Алдияр Косенов, “Депутат Камал Бурханов Высказался Против ‘Арабизации’ Казахстана,” TengriNews, September 14, 2014, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/deputat-kamal-burhanov-vyiskazalsya-protiv-arabizatsii-196872/. [Aldiyar Qosenov, “Deputy Kamal Burkhanov Spoke against the ‘Arabization’ of Qazaqstan.”] “В казахском обществе женщина - это мать, хранительница домашнего очага, почитаемая и уважаемая личность, которая никогда не была в униженном положении.”

⁵⁵ Динара Мынжасарқызы, “Ифтар Емес, Ауызашар,” Түркістан, May 16, 2019, <https://turkystan.kz/article/80520-iftar-emes-auyzashar/>. [Dinara Minzhasarqizi, “Not Iftar, but Auizashar,” Turkistan.] Mirzayev expresses his thoughts in an interview with Minzhasarqizi.

Qazaq Muslims use Arabic words though there are plenty of Qazaq words, it does not necessarily mean that the Qazaq identity is being destroyed.⁵⁶

In conclusion, as I demonstrated, Qazaqs pose different competing arguments regarding Tengrism and its relation to Islam. Most Muslim clerics and scholars tend to lean toward reconciliation of Tengrism and Islam. They use this argument to present Islam as a flexible religion when it comes to local cultural features. Thus, they argue that although Islam is an imported religion, it did not distort authentic Qazaq identity. However, some Qazaq Muslims insist on the strict distinction between the two religions. Proponents of this position argue that Islam brought improvement in all aspects of life: culture, economy, politics, and literacy.

In other words, for Qazaq Muslims, the historical significance of Tengrism in religious life is undeniable. The parties mentioned above only disagree on the modern interpretation and application. The majority, including QMDB, utilize Tengrism to endorse Islam as the legitimate ancestral faith, whereas others see Tengrism as the indigenous faith and Islam as an alien religion. But the group promoting Tengrism as the only ancestral faith is not as popular as the supporters of Islam.

Nevertheless, even among the promoters of Islam, some voices question the role of this religion. As I demonstrated above, some Qazaqs suspect that under the cover of Islamization, perhaps, Arabization is taking place. These people do not oppose the overall spread of Islam, but they wish for a Qazaq expression of the religion. Thus, Islam itself wrestles with the Qazaq quest for ethnic and national identity. Therefore, one must ask, “What is the main force for the spread of Islam in Qazaqstan?” The question remains

⁵⁶ Батырбек Имангалиев, “Коран и Паранджа не Обращают Казахов в Арабов: Отечественный Тюрколог Объяснила, Почему Казахстану не Страшна Арабизация,” Караван, Май 21, 2019, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/koran-i-parandzha-ne-obrashhayut-kazakhov-v-arabov-otechestvennyj-tyrkolog-obyasnila-pochemu-kazakhstanu-ne-strashna-arabizaciya-541624/>. [Batirbek Imangaliev, “Qur’an and Paranja [Veil] Do Not Turn Qazaqs into Arabs: Turkologist Explains Why Arabization Is Not Dangerous for Qazaqstan,” Caravan.]

crucial: Do Qazaqs accept Islam because of its message and grand narrative? Or is it a way for them to rediscover and restate their ethnic identity?

Zoroastrianism

Qazaq historians and scholars of religious studies mention Zoroastrianism as one of the religions practiced by Qazaqs before the arrival of Islam. Sapar Ospanov argues that Tengrism and Zoroastrianism have common features, which suggest that these two religions may have had a mutual impact. For instance, the role of fire is strong in both religions.⁵⁷ In Avesta, Zoroaster calls fire as the son of Ahura Mazda, who is the supreme god of Zoroastrianism. The fire possesses the power to bless and the authority to receive prayers. In *Litany to the Fire* in Avesta, we read, “Give me, O Fire, son of Ahura Mazda, well-being immediately, sustenance immediately; life immediately, well-being in abundance; sustenance in abundance, life in abundance; knowledge, holiness, a ready tongue, understanding for (my) soul; and afterwards wisdom (which is) comprehensive, great, imperishable.”⁵⁸ This particular prayer personifies fire. (As a side note, the phrase “O Fire, son of Ahura Mazda!” is reminiscent of the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ.)

Ospanov writes that in ancient Turkic civilization, fire carried spiritual importance like in Zoroastrianism. They believed the power of fire can cleanse a place from evil spirits or heal the sick. For instance, when Turks wanted to move from one place to another, they set two hearths on fire, and the caravan had to go in between them. Thus, the fire was considered a sign of purity. It should be noted that fire was not a mere

⁵⁷ Сапар Оспанов, “Зороастризм – Один из Исторических Источников Изучения Культуры Тюркских Народов,” *Вестник ЯГУ* 6, no. 1 (2009): 119. [Sapar Ospanov, “Zoroastrism Is One of the Historical Sources of the Study of Turkic Peoples Culture,” *Vestnik YaGU* 6, no. 1 (2009): 119.]

⁵⁸ Zoroaster, *Atash Niyayesh (Litany to the Fire)*, Avesta.org, accessed March 21, 2022, <http://www.avesta.org/ka/niyayesh.htm#ny5>.

tool of cleanness, but the fire itself must be kept in purity. Ancient Turks were watchful that no drops of water and pieces of food fall into the fire except for sacrifice.⁵⁹

Another meaning of fire was tightly connected to family, woman, and life. A bride first time entering her husband's yurt had to add drips of oil to the fire at the center of the yurt. By doing this, the bride introduced herself to Umay (goddess of fertility in Tengrism) and asked for her protection and blessing. Ancient Turks believed that Umay protects the pregnancy of wife, giving birth, and the newborn child. The child was under Umay's protection until he learned to walk, speak, and take responsibility for himself.⁶⁰

Ospanov also refers to the expression "give fire," which is still in use among the Qazaqs. The phrase, "give fire" (от беп) in modern Qazaq language is used to say, "feed the cattle." Ospanov considers this phrase a surviving relic from ancient times. In his opinion, "fire" was the source of life and nutrition supports life. Therefore, when a Qazaq says to give fire or feed the cattle, it means supporting the life of cattle, which is an important chain to support humans' life.⁶¹

However, Qazaq Muslims disagree with Ospanov's approach. Ospanov published his article in 2009, and in 2013, QMDB published a two-volume book titled *Religion and Tradition*. The primary objective of the book is to demonstrate that traditional Qazaq culture naturally correlates with Islamic proscriptions. In the first volume, the authors directly refer to the fire cult and acknowledge that ancient Turks indeed worshipped fire. But they insist the fire-worship was a long time ago in deep

⁵⁹ Оспанов, "Зороастризм – Один из Исторических Источников Изучения Культуры Тюркских Народов," 119. [Ospanov, "Zoroastrism Is One of the Historical Sources of the Study of Turkic Peoples Culture," 119.]

⁶⁰ Оспанов, "Зороастризм – Один из Исторических Источников Изучения Культуры Тюркских Народов," 119. [Ospanov, "Zoroastrism Is One of the Historical Sources of the Study of Turkic Peoples Culture," 119.]

⁶¹ Оспанов, "Зороастризм – Один из Исторических Источников Изучения Культуры Тюркских Народов," 119. [Ospanov, "Zoroastrism Is One of the Historical Sources of the Study of Turkic Peoples Culture," 119.]

ancient centuries, and it is inadequate/irrational trying to revive that old practice today.⁶² In chapter 3, I elaborate on Zoroastrianism's importance for Qazaq culture and demonstrate that its remnants are still present in Qazaqs' daily life.

Shamanism

The terms “shaman” and “shamanism” do not have universally accepted definitions.⁶³ Since the goal of this chapter is to summarize Qazaq arguments about local religious beliefs, I follow the popular meaning of “shaman” and “shamanism” among Qazaqs.

The Qazaq word for shaman is *baqsi* (бақсы). The primary source depicting the *baqsi* is Qazaq folklore. The image of the *baqsi* appears in different epic poems, tales, legends, and historical narratives. The *baqsi* often functions in two roles. First, he is a person who can interact with supernatural or spiritual reality. Therefore, he prays and curses on behalf of the group of people or an individual. He appeals to nature, spiritual beings, and God. His ritual performance includes chanting, dancing, and altered consciences state. Second, the *baqsi* is regarded as a wise man. He could live in the supreme Khan's court or wander in the wilderness like a hermit. Regardless of his economic state, the *baqsi*'s status as a wise man is never questioned. The wisdom he offers might be based on his knowledge of ancestral/cultural traditions or revelations from spiritual reality. During a special life event like the birth of a child, marriage, and death, the *baqsi* performs spiritual rituals and pronounces a blessing, and sometimes

⁶² Ержан Малғажұлы, ed., *Дін мен Дәстүр*, 1 том. (Алматы: Ғибрат, 2013), 26. [Erzhan Malghauli, ed., *Religion and Tradition*, vol. 1 (Almaty: Ghibrat, 2013), 26.]

⁶³ Scholars have not agreed yet on the origin of the term “shaman” and whether shamanism represents a unified religion. See Margaret Stutley, who overviews the literature and theories suggested by various scholars in the past two hundred years. She points out that shamanism was mostly practiced in Eurasia, particularly in Siberia and Central Asia. Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-5. See also Qazaq scholars' explanation, which confirms the accuracy of Qazaq popular beliefs regarding shamanism: Байтенова, Рысбекова, Құрманғалиева, *Қазақстандағы Діндер*, 21. [Baytenova, Rysbekova, and Qurmangalieva, *Religions in Qazaqstan*, 21.]

prophecy. If there is a war, drought, natural cataclysms, sickness, *baqsi* curses enemy spirits that caused the disaster.⁶⁴

Qorkit ata (also spelled Korkut) is the most famous *baqsi* figure in Qazaq folklore. The date and year of his birth are unknown no one even can name the century he lived. According to the traditional legends, Qorkit's mother was pregnant with him for three years. He started speaking and walking right after his birth. The legends also do not agree on how long Qorkit lived. Some traditions have him living a more realistic length 73- or 95-year-old, and others give the obvious legendary length of 295 years.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, no historical data is available to verify or dismiss the stories about Qorkit.

Nevertheless, the primary concern of this research is not the historicity of Qorkit's biography. Rather, his impact on the Qazaq perception of shamanism and Islam. The legends about Qorkit say that in his youth, at least before he turned forty years old, Qorkit opposed Islam in favor of shamanism. One night Allah spoke to Qorkit in a dream and told him that his life on earth would not exceed forty years unless he became a Muslim.⁶⁶ From this narrative, we learn Qorkit lived after the arrival of Islam in the Central Asia region. And it is clear that before his conversion to Islam, Qorkit practiced shamanism.

Before proceeding further on relation of Islam and shamanism in Qazaq narratives, one must ask if there were any Qazaq *baqsi*, whose historicity is proven. Considering this question provides deeper understanding the role of shamanism in Qazaq religious life. The vast majority of *baqsi*, whose lives were documented, lived in the

⁶⁴ These Qazaq beliefs about shamans mostly coincide with Western scholars' observation. For instance, Juha Y. Pentikainen writes, "The social roles of the shaman are numerous and diverse: he is a healer and a priest, a fortune-teller and a psychopomp leading the souls of the deceased to the abode of the dead, an epic-singer and a politician. This competence and its mythical background is known to the society who elects him and puts him/her into office." Juha Y. Pentikainen, ed., introduction to *Shamanism and Northern Ecology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 11.

⁶⁵ Абылай Айдосов, *Қорқытнама* (Алматы: Бастау, 1997), 23. [Abilay Aidosov, *Qorkitnama* (Almaty: Bastau, 1997), 23.]

⁶⁶ Айдосов, *Қорқытнама*, 27. [Aidosov, *Qorkitnama*, 27.]

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, the editors of *The Traditions and Customs of the Qazaq Nation* (Қазақ Халқының Дәстүрлері мен Әдет-Ғұрыптары) list *baqsi* names such as Qoylibay (Қойлыбай), Hamidolla (Хамидолла), Bala (Бала), and Suymenbay (Сүйменбай). The editors provide dates and locations for each *baqsi*.⁶⁷

To demonstrate an example of syncretism blending Islam with shamanism worth to note two facts. First, Qoylibay, from the list above, is regarded as the second-most famous *baqsi* among Qazaqs. Second, it is a widespread practice among modern Qazaqs to write a biographical book praising forefathers for perpetuating the ancestor's legacy. Usually, these types of books are funded and published by children or grandchildren of the forefather. From a historical standpoint, the books might be biased and contain factual inaccuracies. But they demonstrate religious syncretism present among Qazaqs. One such book is *The Descendants of Azanbay Baqsi*.⁶⁸

The opening section of the book is a poem dedicated to Azanbay, who is the forefather of the authors. The description of the poem says, “Devoted to the spirits of our forefather Azanbay *baqsi* and to our ancestors descending from him.”⁶⁹ The next line is the opening words of the Qur’anic suras, “Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim” (Бисмиллаһир рахмани раһим),⁷⁰ which is known as “In the name of Allah, the merciful and compassionate.” Placing Bismillah at the beginning of the book indicates that the authors are Muslims. However, they are not ashamed of their shaman/*baqsi* ancestor.

⁶⁷ С. Е. Әжіғали, *Қазақ Халқының Дәстүрлері мен Әдет-Ғұрыптары* (Алматы: Шоқан Уалиханов атындағы Тарих және Этнология Институты, 2005), 293-96. [S. E. Azhighali, *The Traditions and Customs of the Qazaq Nation* (Almaty: Shoqan Ualikhanov Atidaghi Tarikh zhane Etnologia Instituti, 2005), 293-96.]

⁶⁸ Сейітжапар Райымқұлұлы and Нұрымбет Әбдіғапбаров, *Азанбай Бақсының Ұрпақтары* (Шымкент: н.р., 2015). [Seitzhazhapar Rayimuli and Nurimbet Abdighapbarov, *The Descendants of Azanbay Baqsi* (Shymkent: n.p., 2015).]

⁶⁹ Райымқұлұлы and Әбдіғапбаров, *Азанбай Бақсының Ұрпақтары*, 3. [Rayimuli and Abdighapbarov, *The Descendants of Azanbay Baqsi*, 3.] “Азанбай бақсы бабамыз бен одан тараған ата-бабаларымыздың рухына арнау.”

⁷⁰ Райымқұлұлы and Әбдіғапбаров, *Азанбай Бақсының Ұрпақтары*, 3. [Rayimuli and Abdighapbarov, *The Descendants of Azanbay Baqsi*, 3.]

As the authors portray Azanbay, they boast that he was related to Qoylibay, to the second most famous Qazaq *baqsi*. They also mention another poem, which states that Qoylibay is their grand *baqsi*; Azanbay *baqsi* is the ancestor, and in the name of Allah, they do *zikr* (or spelled *dhikr* is the ritual prayer of Sufis).⁷¹

Thus, the presence of shamanism in the Qazaq people's religious life is undeniable, and no one can disregard it as an outdated practice. However, Qazaq Muslims who preach Islam based on Qur'an and the hadith reject syncretism and shamanism altogether. Muslims from QMDB lament that some Qazaqs believe that shamanism is an acceptable religious practice. The QMDB clerics condemn lay Muslims for their visits to shamans.⁷²

In conclusion, Qorkit, and other shamans played a crucial role in Qazaq spirituality. Today some Qazaqs Muslims venerate their shaman ancestors and dedicate books to them, which means Islam has not fully replaced it. Qazaq Muslim clerics and historians who promote Islam as the ancestral Qazaq faith know the presence of shamanism in Qazaq culture. From the first arrival of Islam, Muslims and shamans were in competition to win the masses and that rivalry between these two religions has not ended yet. I will elaborate on the tensions between shamans and Muslims in chapter 3, where I critically assess Qazaq Muslims' arguments regarding Islam.

Christianity

Unlike other non-Islamic religions, Christianity presents the most sensitive issue for Qazaqs because they view the Christian faith as a direct adversary to Qazaq identity. For a long time, Qazaqs have associated Christianity with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In the Qazaq mind, Buddhism, Hinduism, atheism, and any religion other

⁷¹ Райымқұлұлы and Әбдіғапбаров, *Азанбай Бақсының Ұрпақтары*, 14. [Rayimuli and Abdighapbarov, *The Descendants of Azanbay Baqsi*, 14.]

⁷² Малғажұлы, *Дін мен Дәстүр*, 1:3, 19. [Malghauli, *Religion and Tradition*, 1:3, 19.]

than Islam are equally wrong, but Christianity has additional negative connotations related to Russian colonization. The Russian Empire's treatment of its Muslim subjects is well articulated by Isabel de Madariaga: "During the Seventeenth century severe measures to promote conversion to Orthodoxy and punish relapse into Islam were enacted by the state, such as the stake for Moslems [sic] who seduced Christians from their faith."⁷³ Therefore, it is no surprise that modern Qazaqs, knowing the history of ROC-Muslim relations, view the ROC and Russia as an archenemy.

But the traditional Qazaq attitude toward Christianity changed after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 when Christian missionaries arrived in the country. Since then, Qazaqs have perceived two main groups of Christianity: first, traditional Christianity, specifically the Russian Orthodox Church (for Russians) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for the rest of the Western world; second, non-traditional sects, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Qazaqs do not pay attention to differences between groups and perceive evangelicals as one of the non-traditional sects. If a Qazaq converts to RCC or ROC, he is a traitor; if he starts professing non-traditional Christian beliefs, he is both a traitor and deluded.

The history of ROC in Qazaqstan is well documented.⁷⁴ Instead of diving into the historical chronology, I will survey modern Qazaqs' interpretation of ROC's history. First, it must be noted that the Russian Empire's colonial expansion always had links to

⁷³ Isabel de Madariaga, *Russian in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 524.

⁷⁴ See the entry on "ROC" in Байтенова, Рысбекова, Құрманғалиева, *Қазақстандағы Діндер*, 66-78 [Baytenova, Rysbekova, and Qurmangalieva, *Religions in Qazaqstan*, 66-78], where the authors provide the list of ROC organizations in Qazaqstan with a brief description and historical background. Since the primary concern of this chapter is not on what happened in the past but on what Qazaqs argue about non-Islamic religions, I will not discuss the history of ROC any further. Several works have been published on the history of ROC in Qazaqstan since 1991. See Ларионов М. Михайлович, "Русское Православие в Восточном Казахстане в XVIII-XX вв"; (PhD diss., Университет Кайнар, 2010) [Larionov M. Mikhailovich, "Russian Orthodoxy in Eastern Qazaqstan XVIII-XX Centuries" (PhD diss., Qainar University, 2010);] З. Е. Кабульдинов, "Об Усилении Миссионерской Политики Царизма в Казахстане в 80-е Годы XIX века," *Отан Тарихы* 79, no. 3 (2017): 5-15. [Z. E. Kabuldinov, "On Strengthening the Missionary Policy of Tsarism in Qazaqstan in the 80s of the XIX Century," *Otan Tarikhy* 79, no. 3 (2017): 5-15.]

ROC. William Gordon East, explaining the early stages of the Russian Empire's colonial expeditions writes, "The priest and the monk went forward with the trapper and the soldier, their routes through the virtually trackless forests being marked out by the rivers, navigable over great distances and separated by relatively short 'voloks' or portages."⁷⁵ Thus, colonized nations, in this case, Qazaqs, saw on the frontiers of the Russian colonial power priests marching alongside soldiers. Similarly, an article posted on the *Alashaiansy* website illustrates the popular opinion among Qazaq people regarding ROC's activity in Qazaqstan. The author of the article writes that ROC was a venue for the Russian colonization to Russify the Qazaqs. The goal of the Russian Empire was to completely conquer Qazaqstan and erase the national identity of the Qazaqs. The visible indication of someone's acceptance of the Christian faith of ROC was to make the sign of the cross as ROC and RCC do.⁷⁶ Since that time, Qazaqs associated Christianity with ROC and perceive it as a threat to national identity.

When a Qazaq accepts any version of Christianity, he is perceived as a traitor by his countrymen because Christianity is a religion reserved for Russians, who were former colonizers, and Qazaqs should profess Islam. The preference for Islam is given due to political motivations rather than theological reasoning. It should be noted that the Russian Empire abandoned the policy of spreading ROC among Qazaqs during the reign of Catherine the Great.⁷⁷ She believed attempts of proselytization only cause opposite outcomes, causing Qazaqs, like many other non-Russian Central Asian nations, to resist

⁷⁵ W. Gordon East, "Asiatic U.S.S.R. and the Mongolian People's Republic," in *The Changing Map of Asia: A Political Geography*, ed. W. Gordon East, O. H. K. Spate, and Charles A. Fisher, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1971), 573.

⁷⁶ Алаш айнасы, "Қазақ қалай шоқындырылды?," last updated January 3, 2015, https://alashainasy.kz/kazak_tarihy/kazak-kalay-shokyindyryldyi-60227/. [Alash Aynasi, "How Were Qazaq Christianized?"]

⁷⁷ De Madariaga notes, "Catherine and Potemkin both believed in religious toleration, and their policy signified the abandonment of the previous intensive and often brutal policy of conversion. Islam and its priesthood were taken into the Russian administration to perform there the same functions carried out by the Orthodox Church and its priests in Russian proper." De Madariaga, *Russian in the Age of Catherine the Great*, 381.

colonization. If indigenous peoples were allowed and even encouraged to maintain their own religious traditions, they were more inclined to accept Russian rule.

The history of the Russian Empire ended in 1917 when it was replaced by the USSR as the result of the October revolution. For most of its history, the USSR discouraged all religions, including ROC and Islam. However, the USSR had something in common with the Russian Empire in its policy regarding non-Russian nations. The USSR continued the policy of Russification. Although the official policy of the USSR was to ban all religions, ethnic Russians remained, at least culturally, ROC Christians. In the light of widespread Russification, Qazaqs experienced that their ethnic identity is suppressed by the carriers of the Christian faith. Regarding the Russification of Qazaq society, it is worth mentioning the USSR's internal migration policy, which almost extinguished Qazaqs as a nation in their own land. For instance, William Gordon East, an English geographer writes, "Kazakhstan has settled large numbers from European U.S.S.R. in its towns, mining districts, and farms so that, although Kazakhs have a high rate of natural increase, they constituted only 30 percent of the population in 1959."⁷⁸ It was USSR's deliberate effort to decrease the Qazaq population to enforce Russification.

ROC and modern Christian movements are not the only versions of Christianity in Qazaq history. Modern Qazaq historians acknowledge that the Christian faith arrived in the region before Russian colonization. Qazaq historians do not deny the history of Christianity among ancient Qazaq tribes. They often mention the tribes of Naiman and Kerei (Keraites) who professed Christianity before converting to Islam.⁷⁹ The Naimans inhabited western Mongolia before Genghis Khan's emergence, and they

⁷⁸ East, "Asiatic U.S.S.R. and the Mongolian People's Republic," 590.

⁷⁹ For a recent publication on this topic, see Динара С. Утебаева, "Қазақстандағы Миссионерлік: Тарихы және Қазіргі Заман (Дінтанулық талдау)" (PhD diss., Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, 2017), 46-47. [Dinara S. Utebaeva, "Missionary Activism in Qazaqstan: History and Modern Era (A Religious Studies Analysis)" (PhD diss., Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 2017), 46-47.]

professed Nestorianism. The Keraites followed Christianity for more than two hundred years. The Syriac chronicler Bar Hebraeus reported a legendary narrative of how the Keraites accepted Christianity. Once, a ruler of this tribe lost his way in the endless steppes of Central Asia. One of the days he had a vision when he was hopelessly wandering. In this vision, Saint Sergius gave him directions on how to find the way back home. The ruler by the directions given to him successfully arrived at his home. Through this situation, the ruler became a Christian which resulted in the conversion of the whole tribe to Christianity.⁸⁰

In conclusion, Qazaqs have a complicated relationship with Christianity. For the most part, Qazaqs have had a negative experience of Christianity because of Russian colonization. The Christian history of the Kereis and the Naimans is too far in past to consider them a legitimate ancestral legacy.

Islam

Discussions of the history of Islam among Qazaqs have two main strains. First, historically, Qazaqs were less Islamicized than their Muslim neighbors. Before the Russian colonization, Qazaqs professed Islam only nominally. Before proceeding further, it is worth restating that first Russian colonists wanted to convert Qazaqs to ROC, but when it was clear that Qazaqs would not accept ROC, Russians changed their strategy. Instead of forcing Qazaqs to accept ROC, Russians started using Islam. The main goal of the Russians was to colonize and to achieve that objective they were ready to implement the most controversial and ironic methods. For instance, as V. N Basilov and J. Kh. Karmisheva argued, Russians convinced Qazaqs that they are Muslims.⁸¹ Russian

⁸⁰ James Thrower, *The Religious History of Central Asia from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Studies in Asian Thought 27 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press), 400, 404.

⁸¹ В. Н. Басилов and Дж. Х. Кармышева, *Ислам у Казахов до 1917* (Москва: РАН Институт Этнологии и Антропологии Имени Н. Н. Мкилухо-Маклая, 1997), 7. [V. N Basilov and J. Kh. Karmisheva, *Islam among Qazaqs before 1917* (Moscow: RAN Institut Entnologii i Antrapologii Imeni N. N. Mkilukho-Malkaya, 1997), 7.]

colonists hoped that through religious structures, even if it is Islam, they will have better control over the Qazaqs. Muslim clerics could extend their authority to matters other than religious issues. Therefore, for a period Russians supported Tatar missionaries to the Qazaq lands.⁸²

According to the second narrative, Qazaqs adhered to Islam long before Russian colonization; it was not a nominal belief. In addition to the early acceptance of Islam, modern Qazaq historians emphasize the peaceful spread of the religion. It is crucial for them to establish that Islam penetrated the Qazaq society peacefully and that ancient Qazaq tribes accepted it willingly. If early Qazaq tribes' conversions to Islam were forceful, then it is no different from the Russian colonial history. But history remembers Berke Khan (d. 1266), Ozbek Khan (d. 1341), and Emir Edige (d. 1419), who made Central Asian tribes, including, the Qazaq tribes accept Islam.⁸³ Thus, either the Russian colonists during the reign of Catherine the Great or the Khans of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries forced the ancestors of the Qazaqs to convert to Islam. Therefore, modern Qazaqs need stories of Islamic heroes of faith from Central Asia to counterbalance the narratives of the forceful spread of Islam.

In this section, I present the arguments on the peaceful spread of Islam held by the majority of Qazaq historians. Nazira D. Nurtazina is one of the most prominent advocates of this view, a history professor at the Qazaq National University in Almaty. Her arguments rest on three premises. First, modern Qazaqs are the direct descendants of the Turkic-speaking tribes such as the Huns and Turks. She points out that the prophet

⁸² Sending missionaries to the Qazaq lands and using Muslim clerics to strengthen the Russian colonial rule started from the time of Catherine the Great. Regarding her religious policy, Alan W. Fisher writes, "In the third period, from 1785 until 1796, the Russian state attempted through various radical measures to bring the Islamic leadership within the actual governmental structure. It then used this leadership as a means for strengthening Russian influence over and control of the Central Asiatic frontier regions and of the Russian Muslims themselves." Alan W. Fisher, "Enlightened Despotism and Islam under Catherine II," *Slavic Review* 27, no. 4 (1968): 543.

⁸³ I will further discuss the instances of forceful conversions to Islam in chapter 3.

Muhammad heard and knew about the first Turkic Khaganate, which was established in the second half of the sixth century and coincides with the prophet's lifetime.⁸⁴ Second, Nurtazina sees divine providence in relation to Turkic tribes and Islam. She cites a medieval hadith, where Allah says, "I have an army in the East that I call Turks. When I am wrathful about a nation, I send Turks to this nation."⁸⁵ Thus, Nurtazina hints that the Turks were predestined to accept Islam. Third, Nurtazina notes that Central Asians accepted Islam through Iranian culture, and ancient Turkic tribes inhabiting the Qazaqstan territory did not directly connect with the Arabs. Therefore, the history of Islam in Qazaqstan must be studied through the lenses of medieval Iranian civilization.⁸⁶

Nurtazina's coworker and colleague Dinara Utebaeva adds that Qoja Ahmed Yassawi's missionary activism strengthened the presence of Islam among Qazaqs. She writes, "We know Islamization of the nomadic nations in the Qazaq land took place because of Ahmad Yasawwi's Sufi teachings."⁸⁷ Utebaeva describes Yassawi's role in spreading Islam among Qazaqs as something that every Qazaq is familiar with. I will examine Yassawi and his influence on Qazaq society in-depth in chapter 5. For now, sufficient to point out that Utebaeva rightly identifies Yassawi's significance in the Islamization of Qazaqs. It is also worth pointing out that Utebaeva's overall view on the spread of Islam coincides with Nurtazina's view. Both believe Islam was mostly spread peacefully. To support this view, Utebaeva refers to Qur'an 2:256, where it says, "no

⁸⁴ Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана*, 16. [Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Kazakhstan*, 16.] For an English source regarding the early Turkic Khanates, see Khawatan Luc, *Imperial Nomads: A History of Central Asia 500-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979) 33.

⁸⁵ Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана*, 19. [Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Kazakhstan*, 19.] "У Меня есть на востоке войско, которое называют тюрками, когда Я разгневаюсь на какой-нибудь народ, Я посылаю их на него."

⁸⁶ Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана*, 47. [Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Kazakhstan*, 47.]

⁸⁷ Утебаева, "Қазақстандағы Миссионерлік," 41. [Utebaeva, "Missionary Activism in Qazaqstan," 41.]

compulsion in religion.” Utebaeva believes, that every Muslim is called to spread Islam by demonstrating its superiorities/advantages compared to other religions.⁸⁸

G. R. Mukhtarova provides another nuance to the history of Islam among Qazaqs. She begins by pointing out the gradual Islamization. Particularly, she brings up geography and notes that until Russian colonization, only the southern parts of Qazaqstan were Islamicized. She explains the mass conversions to Islam of the nineteenth century as cultural resistance to Russian colonization. Her main measuring tool for the depths of Islam among Qazaqs is the observance of the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca known as Hajj. Mukhtarova mentions several names, who could have been considered “heroes of faith” due to their extreme approaches to Hajj. For instance, she refers to a rather obscure story of Abu Yusuf Hamadani (d. 1140), a supposed teacher of Ahmad Yassawi, who allegedly thirty-eight times performed Hajj. Or the story of emir Hudaidati (d. 1447), who preferred Hajj instead of assuming the royalty.⁸⁹

Perhaps Qazaq historians chose Hajj to demonstrate Islam’s solid presence because it is the most demanding and financially expensive pillar compared to the other four pillars of the religion. Only a very devout Muslim would spend his time and money on a lengthy journey from Qazaqstan to Mecca. Thus, if a man decides to go to Mecca, probably he already has fulfilled Salat (prayer), Zakat (alms), Fasting, and Shahadah (statement of faith).

For a further discussion on the significance of Hajj in early Qazaq society, one needs to familiarize oneself with the portrait of Jirau (Жырау). Elmira Kuchukulova

⁸⁸ Утебаева, “Қазақстандағы Миссионерлік,” 43. [Utebaeva, “Missionary Activism in Qazaqstan,” 43.] “Қазақ жеріндегі көшпенді халықтардың исламдануына Қожа Ахмет Яссаидің сопылық ілімі себеп болғанын білеміз.”

⁸⁹ Г. Р. Мұхтарова, *Қазақстандағы Ислам Діні: Қажылық* (Алматы: Баспалар Үйі, 2009), 4-7. [G. R. Mukhtarova, *The Religion of Islam in Qazaqstan: Hajj* (Almaty: Baspalar Uyi, 2009), 4-7.]

translates Jirau as “epic singer.”⁹⁰ However, the role of Jirau in Qazaq society is beyond a mere epic or folk singer. Jirau spoke the truth on behalf of the nation. His songs and poems were more of philosophical reasoning rather than entertainment. Mukhtar Maghauin, a Qazaq writer, points out that Jirau even had an influence on Khans and were respected by them. But Jirau did not have an official position in a ruler’s court.⁹¹

Mukhtarova acknowledges that famous Jirauas like Shalkiys (d. 1560) and Aqtamberdi (d. 1768) had a reinterpretation of Hajj differing from the classical Islamic understanding of it. These two Jirauas believed that good deeds and a sincere heart could fulfill the requirements of Hajj without embarking on the pilgrimage. They tried to see the actual meaning of Hajj instead of focusing on the physical ritual. Aqtamberdi Jirau said searching for the city of Mecca is in vain because the true pilgrimage to Mecca is man’s parents, whom he should respect and honor. Shalkiys in his songs posed that honoring the parents is more important than visiting both Mecca and Medina. But Mukhtarova refers to these lines as one of the fleeting understandings of Hajj among early Qazaqs, whereas the majority of the Qazaqs were in genuine support of Hajj.⁹²

Speaking of Jirauas, one needs to understand that they lived a couple of hundred years ago, which makes them figures of the distant past. A more recent figure, who possesses undisputed authority is Abay Qunanbaiuli (1845-1904). Abay is the unavoidable figure in discussing Islam in the history of Qazaqs and national identity. His fame and colossal influence on the formation of modern Qazaq identity have been praised by generations of Qazaqs in countless books and articles. Every megapolis and small town in Qazaqstan named after him a street, theater, square, and erected statues. In other

⁹⁰ Elmira Kuchukulova, “Introduction to Central Asian Traditions,” in *The Music of Central Asia*, ed. Theodore Levin, Saida Daukeyeva, and Elmira Köchümkulova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 49.

⁹¹ Мұхтар Мағауин, *Қазақ Хандығы Дәуіріндегі Әдебиет* (Алматы: Ана Тілі, 1992), 139. [Mukhtar Maghauin, *Qazaq Khannate Era’s Literature* (Almaty: Ana Tili, 1992), 139.]

⁹² Мұхтарова, *Қазақстандағы Ислам Діні*, 6. [Mukhtarova, *The Religion of Islam in Qazaqstan*, 6.]

words, he is the national hero and a model for true Qazaq identity. His father Qunanbay built a hotel in Mecca for the Qazaq pilgrims.⁹³ Abay's poems extensively refer to Islam. In the next section, I examine Abay's philosophy concerning the Qazaq identity and the role of Islam.

The Role of Abay in Promoting Islam

In this section, I provide Abay's biography, summarize his philosophy, and modern interpretation of his works by Qazaq scholars in the light of Maturidism. Abay was born in 1845 to a noble family of the tribe Arghin in eastern Qazaqstan. His father Qunanbay was the leader of the clan Tobiqti. Abay's birth name was Ibrahim, and the name Abay is what his mother called him benignly. Initially, Abay took lessons from a village Mullah. When he turned 10 years old, he was sent to the city of Semey to study at Ahmed Riza madrasa. There Abay learned Farsi and Arabic. At the madrasa, Abay's education mostly concentrated on Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Later, he joined a school in the Russian language, where he was familiarized with Western philosophy. When Qunanbay saw his son's exceptional success in education, he wanted Abay to apply the knowledge in practice and asked him to return to the village. Thus, as a teenager, Abay started helping his father with administrative, civil, and political issues.

During this time, witnessing the corrupt Russian colonial rulers' policy of "divide-and-conquer," Abay deeply sensed that the destiny of the very existence of the Qazaqs as a nation was at risk. Abay saw that Qazaqs needed a worldview shift to survive. He knew the old nomadic lifestyle and rites were not compatible with the changes and challenges of the nineteenth century. Therefore, he sought to refine the Qazaq identity. Abay wanted to accomplish this task by synthesizing Western and Eastern philosophies emphasizing Islamic theology to update the Qazaq national portrait.

⁹³ Л. Омаров, *Абайдың Рухани Мұрасы* (Алматы: Ел шежіре, 2007), 28. [L. Omarov, *The Legacy of Abay* (Almaty: El Shezhire, 2007), 28.]

The overarching message of Abay’s philosophy is *adam bol* (адам бол), which literally means *be a human*. He did not believe in asceticism. Abay argued a person must be well provided for and never should worry about food, garment, and shelter. A failure to ensure any of these prevents a man from building a healthy inner life and social connections. For instance, in one of his poems, Abay said having plentiful food without righteous labor corrupts a man. Here are the lines,

Тамағы тоқтық (satiety food),
Жұмысы жоқтық (having no work)
Аздырар адам баласын (corrupts man)⁹⁴

In earlier lines of the same poem Abay urged his readers to learn about farming, trading, and entrepreneurship. Abay made a strong case to gain wealth and prosperity through honest work.⁹⁵

An equally crucial component of Abay’s *adam bol* philosophy is intellectual competency. Abay prohibits feeling comfortable without finding (scientific) knowledge.⁹⁶ He urges us to disbelieve anything that contradicts rational reasoning, regardless of if it was argued by an elder or a wealthy influential politician. In these lines, Abay challenged the established societal functional rules. Unfortunately, Qazaqs have two complacent sayings: (1) аузы қисық болса да, байдың баласы сөйлесін (“Even if his mouth is crooked, let the wealthy man’s son to speak”); and (2) Атасы тұрып ұлы сөйлегеннен без, анасы тұрып қызы сөйлегеннен без (“Do not allow a boy to speak if there is his father, do not allow a girl to speak if there is her mother”); Abay went against these beliefs and put the trustworthiness of rationality above the socioeconomic status of man.

⁹⁴ Абай Құнанбайұлы, “Сегіз Аяқ,” Bilim-All, last modified April 4, 2015, <https://bilim-all.kz/olen/544-Segiz-ayaq>. [Abay Qunanbaiuli, “Eight Limbs,” Bilim-All.]

⁹⁵ Құнанбайұлы, “Сегіз Аяқ.” [Qunanbaiuli, “Eight Limbs.”]

⁹⁶ Абай Құнанбайұлы, “Ғылым Таппай Мақтанба,” Zharar, last modified May 1, 2019, https://www.zharar.com/kz/olen/1203-abay_kunanbaev.html. [Abay Qunanbaiuli, “Do Not Boast without Knowledge.”]

He was not afraid of challenging the traditions. Therefore, he is often called the reformer of Qazaq culture.

Nevertheless, Abay did not absolutize rationality. In the following lines of the above-referred poem, Abay states the words of elders are not equal to hadith or Qur’anic verse to be accepted with no questions.⁹⁷ And this is the point where Soviet and modern Qazaqs’ interpretations of Abay’s philosophy differ significantly. Qazaqs of the Soviet period argued that Abay’s attitude toward Islam was less fundamentalistic and more compatible with the Russian and Soviet ideologies, whereas modern Qazaqs insist Abay professed Hanafi Maturidism, which is the official version of Islam in Qazaqstan.

The most prominent Qazaq researcher of Abay during the USSR was Mukhtar Aueзов (1897-1961). His writings on Abay give mixed impressions. On the one hand, his zeal for Qazaq culture and history exceeds anyone else’s. He praises Abay’s philosophy, poetry, and contribution to the Qazaq literature. On the other hand, his exaltation of the Soviet ideology and appreciation of the Russian culture overshadows everything he wrote about Abay and Qazaq culture. For instance, he uses expressions such as “noble Russian culture” and “crystal as clear water Russian classics.”⁹⁸ Aueзов also states that Abay searched for Kaaba in the Western world and not on the outskirts of the Islamic civilization.⁹⁹ But today no Qazaq scholar studying Abay’s biography would speak in these terms about Islam and Russian culture.

In 2019, an article appeared in the Qazaq National University’s *Journal of Oriental Studies*, where the authors insist that Abay’s Islamic faith was nothing else but Hanafi Maturidism. Abay like, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi believed that Allah does not

⁹⁷ Құнанбайұлы, “Ғылым Таппай Мақтанба.” [Qunanbaiuli, “Do Not Boast without Knowledge.”] “Аят, хадис емес қой, Күпір болдың демес қой.”

⁹⁸ Мұхтар Әуезов, *Шығармалар Жинағы*, 15 том, *Мақалалар, Зерттеулер* (Алматы: Жазушы, 1984), 140. [Mukhtar Aueзов, *A Collection of Writings*, vol. 15, *Articles and Researches* (Almaty: Zhazushi, 1984), 140.]

⁹⁹ Әуезов, *Шығармалар Жинағы*, 15:140. [Aueзов, *A Collections of Writings*, 15:140.]

dwell in one particular (physical) place because He is omnipresent. Another indicator of Abay's alleged Maturidism is his conviction that a Muslim need to have a sincere belief in his heart. A mere verbal profession of faith and dry intellectual acknowledgment of Allah's existence does not make anyone a Muslim.¹⁰⁰

Thus, modern Qazaqs promote Islam by referring to Abay's Islamic faith. If Abay is the founder of contemporary Qazaq philosophy, thought, and literature, then he is the model to imitate. Of course, the fact that Abay was a Muslim is undeniable. However, I do not agree with the argument that Abay's Islamic faith was identical to Hanafi Maturidism promoted in Qazaqstan today. Yes, some of his thoughts coincide with Maturidi teachings, as it was demonstrated above. But it does not necessarily mean that he indeed believed in Maturidi's interpretation of Islam. If it was true, then why does he never refer to Abu Mansur al-Maturidi by name? Among many of his referrals to Islam, the Qur'an, and the prophet Muhammad, he could have mentioned at least once al-Maturidi's name.

The argument mentioned earlier that Abay, like Maturidi, demanded a sincere faith to qualify as a legitimate Muslim does not sound very convincing. Christianity and Judaism too require their followers to have an authentic faith coming from the heart. In a similar manner, no Jew and Christian believes that God is limited to a particular physical space. Therefore, it is a questionable specification that Abay professed Hanafi Maturidism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated modern Qazaqs employ historical-religious discussions to restate ethnic and national identity. Most of the conversations are distilled down to the statement that Qazaq national identity is in desperate need of Islam.

¹⁰⁰ S. B. Shakizada, K. Kurmanbaev, and A. B. Akimkhanov, "Significance of the Creed of the Maturidi School in the Works of Abay Kunanbayev and Shakarim Kudayberdiev," *Journal of Oriental Studies* (2019): 185-86.

Otherwise, without Islam, Qazaqs will have a diminished and insufficient ethnicity. As a native Qazaq speaker, I grew up in a Qazaq family, but being a Christian, I deeply disagree with the equation of Qazaqness and Islam. I do not feel myself a less Qazaq because I am not a Muslim.

The proponents of Tengrism expressed a similar disagreement on Islam's taking the place of a nation-building force. From a historical perspective, Tengrism has more rights to claim the position of ancestral faith than Islam because it was professed long before the early Qazaq tribes were introduced to Islam. The promoters of Islam insist on the priority of Islam over other religions, including Tengrism. Many Muslims argue that ancient Qazaqs abandoned Tengrism and replaced it with Islam willingly. Some Qazaq Muslims argue the ancestors made the right decision when they replaced Tengrism with Islam. Therefore, Qazaqs today ought to follow no religion but Islam because it means more than spirituality, it is meant to support the authentic Qazaq identity.

If Tengrism and Islam are competing religions to support Qazaqness, what religion, in their opinion, comes as an adversary to the Qazaq identity? Unfortunately, for many Qazaqs due to Russian colonization, Christianity is often associated with a religion of an enemy or former colonizer. At the earliest stage of colonization, Russians unsuccessfully tried to force Qazaqs to accept ROC. During the Soviet Union, Qazaqs were looked down upon, and their (our) traditional customs, language, and culture were under severe attack by the USSR's internal policy. They did not perceive the Soviets as any different from the Russian Imperial power. Therefore, today Qazaqs seek to revive what Russian Empire and the Soviet Union wanted to erase—their religious faith, culture, and language.

Again, as a native Qazaq, I share their quest for the authentic ethnic identity of my countrymen and their desire to revive our culture. However, I do not see Islam as a satisfactory source of support for Qazaqness and it never has been such in our history. In

the next chapter, I demonstrate that other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity, had a strong presence before and after the arrival of Islam in Central Asia.

CHAPTER 3

PRE-ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE QAZAQ PEOPLE

In chapter 2, I examined modern Qazaq people's historical arguments about the role of religious faith and ethnic identity. The pressing issue for Qazaqs is the meaning of true Qazaqness—what does it mean to be a Qazaq? The answer must be profound, historically appealing, ideological, patriotic, and nation-building. Many post-Soviet Qazaq thinkers are convinced that Islam must be the answer to this inquiry. Therefore, today, they broadcast the narrative that every Qazaq needs to follow Islam because their ancestors were Muslims. This narrative springs from the belief that ethnic and religious identities are inseparable.

A closer look at the historical data reveals that historically the Qazaq tribes never had one dominating religion; they professed different religions before and after the arrival of Islam, which makes Islam merely one among many historically practiced faiths. Hardly ever did Qazaqs have one religion common to all the tribes. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, modern Qazaqs reluctantly acknowledge the presence of other religions but still insist that the pre-Islamic beliefs were similar to Islam and the transition to Islam was smooth. The most popularized similarity is the alleged monotheism of Islam and pre-Islamic Tengrism. The proponents of Islam argue that ancient Qazaq tribes needed Tengrism as a temporary religion, as they were awaiting Islam. Therefore, it is imperative for Qazaqs to follow Islam in order to maintain Qazaqness. Otherwise, in their opinion,

Qazaqs cannot fully express true Qazaqness.¹ Consequently, Islam is more than a quest for spirituality and religious belief; it is a strong marker of ethnic identity.

Thus, in chapter 2, I summarized modern Qazaqs' historical arguments about why Islam must take its place as the national faith. In the current chapter, I pose historical counter-arguments and contend that early Qazaq tribes professed several religions other than Islam. First, I examine Tengrism because, as stated above, Qazaqs believe that Tengrism and Islam share similarities in terms of their monotheism. But Tengrism does not fit the description of a monotheistic religion since it had many different divinities. Second, I turn my attention to shamanism and Zoroastrianism and demonstrate that the fire cult was widespread among early Qazaqs, which precludes the argument that Islam was the only ancestral faith. The historical presence of Buddhism and Christianity will be studied in the third and fourth sections, respectively, adding to my argument that historically the Qazaq tribes followed different religions. The fifth section deals with the statement about the supposed peaceful spread of Islam among Qazaqs. I will demonstrate that the mass conversions to Islam were mostly forceful at the order of the Khans, which refutes modern Qazaqs claims about Islam's peaceful spread. Most importantly, the diverse religious life of the Qazaq people's ancestors testifies that no religion, including Islam, determined Qazaq people's national identity.

Tengrism

In this section, I argue for the dissimilarity between Tengrism and Islam from a theological perspective. The radical difference between these two religions makes it hard

¹ For instance, see the most recent book on the Qazaq customs and rituals. One of the editors of the book writes, "The content of religious consciousness in the meaning of the Qazaq culture springs from Islam. And the religious consciousness/self-awareness assist to properly evaluate the values of Islam. The religious consciousness is the essence, nature, and distinctiveness of the nation." [Қазақ мәдениетінің мәніндегі діни сананың мазмұны исламнан бастау алады. Діни сана ислам құндылықтарын ақпараттық сұрыптау рөлін атқарады. Діни сана—ұлттың болмысы, табиғаты, ерекшелігі.] Санжар Керімбай, *Салт-Дәстүр Сөйлейді* (Алматы: Атамұра, 2022), 6. [Sanzhar Kerimbay, *The Tradition and Customs Speak* (Almaty: Atamura, 2022), 6.]

to imagine that followers of Tengrism easily accepted Islam. As mentioned earlier, Qazaqs today insist that both religions had monotheistic gods—Tengri and Allah.² Therefore, I will focus on the supposed monotheism of Tengrism.

One of the earliest depictions of Tengrism as a monotheistic religion comes from the thirteenth-century travelogue of John of Plano Carpini (1185-1252), a Catholic traveler to the great Khan's court, who wrote, "They believe in one god, of whom they believe that he is the creator of all visible and invisible things."³ A potential objection to Carpini's statement may contend that he was talking about Mongols, whereas Qazaqs are descendants of the Turkic tribes. Genetically, Mongols and Turks do not have strong ties, although geographically, linguistically, and culturally, they have a lot in common.⁴ Obviously, genetics has far less influence on someone's religious preference than geography, culture, and historical context. The cultural ties of Mongols and Turks would have been enough to insist that Carpini's quote also applies to the Turks.

But we have a document written a little earlier than Carpini's travelogue that explicitly says that Turks believed in Tengri. Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), a patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, in his *Chronicle*, makes two statements regarding Turks and Tengrism. First, he identifies who the Turks are:

As the head of the prophets, the blessed Moses, says in the book of Genesis [10.2-3], "Torgom was the father of Gog and others." It is clear that the Turks, who are Gog and Magog, descend from the line of Japheth. Japheth was the father of Tiras, Torgom, Gog and others with him. From this, it is clear that the Turks are from the line of Torgom, and are called Turks from his name.⁵

² In chapter 2, I referred to N. J. Baytenova and Kymbat Karatyshkanova.

³ Walter Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 48.

⁴ H. K. G. Machulla et al., "Genetic Affinities among Mongol Ethnic Groups and Their Relationship to Turks," *Tissue Antigens* 61, no. 4 (2003): 292-99.

⁵ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, trans. Robert Bedrosian (Jerusalem, 1871), 161.

After a lengthy description of the Turks' pagan lifestyle, Michael the Syrian talks about their religion. He writes, "They worship one god, the sky, which they call gon [gok] tangri, since gon [gok] in their language means 'blue.' They worship one god and call him Ko'k'tanghri which means 'blue god,' because they believe that the sky is a god."⁶ These statements from Carpini and Michael the Syrian support modern Qazaqs' argument that Tengrism was monotheistic like Islam. However, the statements also refute the argument that Qazaqs abandoned Tengrism for Islam, for these statements are from the twelfth century, and they say that Turks still were worshipping Tengri, which is centuries *after* the first arrival of Islam in Central Asia.

Tengrism's supposed monotheism requires that one identify the meaning of the term "Tengri." Paul Pelliot, a French orientalist, posed that the term "Tengri" in both Turkic and Mongol languages meant "sky" or "god."⁷ The question is whether "Tengri" is a proper name for a particular god or a general word for a deity. When and who introduced the term "Tengri"? In this regard, it is worth briefly mentioning the parallel with the Sumerian language. The word for "god" in Sumerian is "Digir."⁸ The resemblance between how "Digir" and "Tengri," sound is apparent when pronounced in Qazaq as "Дігір" and "Тәңірі." And Jean-Paul Roux comments on "Digir's" relation to "sky" and "Tengri" as follows: "The word Digir thus means only "God," but it is applied to an ideogram representing at the same time the sky. Semantically, it can be placed near the word Tângri."⁹ From a grammatical perspective, "Digir" often functions as a

⁶ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 171. It should be noted that Jean-Paul Roux refers to the French translation of Michael the Syrian's chronicle. Jean-Paul Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris: Payot, 1984), 124.

⁷ Paul Pelliot, "Tängrim Tärim," *T'oung Pao* 37, no. 5 (1944): 167.

⁸ John Allan Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon: A Dictionary Guide to the Ancient Sumerian Language* (Los Angeles: Logogram, 2006), 43.

⁹ Jean-Paul Roux, "Tängri. Essai sur le Ciel-Dieu des Peuples Altaïques," *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 149, no. 1 (1956): 60.

determinative.¹⁰ Nevertheless, when the sky is revered as a deity, the determinative “Digir” is omitted.¹¹

Like the Sumers, Turkic people used the same word “Tengri” for “god” and “sky,” but when they referred to the god of skies, they said “Kok-Tengri” or “Gok-Tengri.” The Kok-Tengri gradually became the supreme deity, which allows for room to call Tengrism a monotheistic religion. But as Walter Heissig notes, the Mongolian prayers and hymns list countless gods of nature, fortune, health, and wealth, and all of them are designated by the usage of the qualifier “Tengri.”¹² Roux seconds Heissig’s observation and notes that the Tengri of Skies was the highest supernatural power in Turkic mythology, but many other supernatural beings existed too. For instance, Umay, the goddess of the earth, was also revered among Turkic tribes, including Qazaqs.¹³ In another work, Roux refers to Mahmud al-Kashgari (1005-1102), an eleventh-century Muslim scholar studying the Turkic languages, who said that Tengri stood for god and anything huge to human eyes.¹⁴ One way to interpret the observations of Heissig, Roux, and al-Kashgari is that Tengrism certainly had many gods; therefore, it must be considered a polytheistic system of beliefs.

Another possible interpretation is to translate “Tengri” as “spirit” when it refers to other things except for the god of the skies, Kok-Tengri. Then, translating “Tengri” as “spirit” would open the discussion to consider whether Tengrism could be

¹⁰ Regarding Digir’s function, Dietz Otto Edzard writes, “Determinatives: these are signs which precede or follow words or names in order to specify them as belonging to semantic groups.” Dietz Otto Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 9.

¹¹ Wilfred G. Lambert says the omission of Digir was necessary to avoid repetition. Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 407.

¹² Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, 50-52.

¹³ Jean-Paul Roux, “Altürkische Mythologie,” in *Wörterbuch der Mythologie*, band 7, *Götter und Mythen in Zentralasien und Nordeurasien*, ed. Egidus Schmalzriedt and Hans Wilhelm Haussig (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1965), 213.

¹⁴ Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 123.

considered a monotheistic religion. In this regard, Roux mentions Ricold de Monte Croce (1243-1320) and quotes him as saying, “They believe that over everything in the world is something sovereign which is God.”¹⁵ If this is the case, then, yes, Tengrism fits under the description of monotheism, where one supreme god rules.

Interestingly, Roux omits the part where Ricold de Monte Croce discussed the absence of pride in the Tengristic monotheism of the Turks. Ricold wrote, “In the way of life and credence they differ from all other nations of the world, for they do not boast of having the yawned law of God, as many other nations do.”¹⁶ It is not hard to imagine that by “other nations,” Ricold de Monte Croce meant Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In other words, monotheism in Tengrism carried less dogmatism than Abrahamic traditions. Turks believed in the existence of spiritual beings, and the god of the sky held the highest position. As Mircea Eliade rightly notes, “Sometimes, when the prayer to the spirits has been fruitless, they pray to him alone.”¹⁷

Thus, Tengrism and Islam share general similarities in their view of the spiritual realm. Both religions had a supreme being (the god of the sky [Tengrism] and Allah [Islam] as well as lesser beings (gods or spirits [Tengrism] and jinns, angels, and demons [Islam]).¹⁸ As for dissimilarities, Islam obviously had a more systematized set of beliefs with a strong emphasis on the oneness of Allah, whereas it seems like Tengrism was flexible. And Islam’s explicitly articulated statement of faith about the oneness of

¹⁵ Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 123. “Ils croient que sur toute chose au monde est une chose souveraine qui est Dieu.”

¹⁶ Ricold de Monte-Croce, “Relation: Du Voyage de Frere Bieul,” in *L’extrême Orient Au Moyen-Âge*, ed. Louis de Baecker (Paris: E. Leroux, 1877), 279. “En manière de vivre et de créance different il[s] de toutes aultres nacions du monde, car il ne se vantent point de avoir loy baillé de Dieu, comme pluseurs aultres nacions metent;”

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 60.

¹⁸ I acknowledge that some scholars do not view Tengri as the supreme god. For instance, Jack Weatherford writes, “Tengri was not a supreme God so much as a vast reservoir of spiritual energy that inspired and guided men by granting them power and fortune or denying them.” Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Quest for God: How the World’s Greatest Conqueror Gave Us Religious Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2016), 58.

Allah makes these two religions different. The Islamic statement of faith, Shahadah, says, “There is no god but Allah.” This statement precludes the possibility of the existence of any other divine being other than Allah. Jinns, demons, and angels are not divine. But in Tengrism, people not only acknowledged the existence of other supernatural beings but also worshipped and prayed to them.

Nevertheless, debates about whether Tengrism was monotheistic or polytheistic remain unsolved due to various historical reports. Most likely, Tengrism had gone through the process of evolution from polytheism to monotheism under the pressure of politics.¹⁹ For instance, in Mongke Khan’s (1209-1259) letter to the king of France, the Khan’s opening words are as follows: “The commandment of the eternal God is, in Heaven, there is only one eternal God, and on Earth, there is only one lord, [Genghis] Chingis [K]Chan. This is the word of the Son of God, Demugin, (or) Chingis ‘sound of iron.’”²⁰ From this statement, one can discern that Mongol Khans promoted the idea of the oneness of Tengri or God to justify their sole rulership. The idea behind this is that there must be only one supreme Khan, just as there is only one supreme god, which is the god of the skies—Tengri.

Thus, from a theological perspective, Tengrism was a polytheistic religion, which makes it radically different from Islam. Tengrism was endorsed as a monotheistic religion to support the Khan’s authority. Therefore, I can repeat after Roux, who states, “Monotheism and polytheism coexisted.”²¹ In conclusion, modern Qazaqs’ argument about the monotheism of Tengrism is correct from the perspective of the historical-

¹⁹ Later Tengrism is depicted as a monotheistic religion by modern Qazaqs.

²⁰ William Woodville Rockhill, trans. and ed., *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55: As Narrated by Himself. With Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian De Carpine* (Farnham, UK: Hakluyt Society, 2010), 248-49.

²¹ Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 122. “Il y a, on le voit, un polythéisme coëxistant avec le monothéisme.”

political agenda of the Mongol Empire's Khans, but it is inaccurate from a theological perspective. Tengrism was a polytheistic religion that recognized multiple divine beings.

Zoroastrianism

In the previous section, I dealt with modern Qazaq people's argument about the monotheism of Islam and Tengrism and demonstrated that, theologically, Tengrism was not a monotheistic religion. In this section, I focus on Qazaqs' argument about Zoroastrianism. In chapter 2, I referred to Erzhan Malghauli, a representative of QMDB, who acknowledges the presence of Zoroastrianism in Qazaq history but argues that its impact was minuscule. Nevertheless, the available historical data and contemporary Qazaq customs demonstrate that Zoroastrianism had a significant presence in Qazaq history, and its traits are still alive in our culture today. Therefore, first, I briefly examine the history of Zoroastrianism.²² Then, I proceed to discuss its teachings and customs that are still present in contemporary Qazaq culture.

History of Zoroastrianism

In chapter 2, I mentioned Sapar Ospanov, who, based on Tengrism and Zoroastrianism's sharing a common feature, fire cults, argued that these religions must have a mutual impact on each other.²³ But historically, Zoroastrianism had more interaction with the earliest version of Hinduism than with Tengrism.²⁴ That is, there are shared terminology and common divinities in Vedic and Avesta texts. For instance, Mary

²² I am not completing a literature review concerning Zoroastrianism since it is not the main focus of this dissertation. However, I leave here reference to one the most comprehensive literature reviews; see Michael Stausberg, "On the State of the Study of Zoroastrianism," *Numen* 55, no. 5 (2008): 561-600.

²³ Сапар Оспанов, "Зороастризм – Один из Исторических Источников Изучения Культуры Тюркских Народов," *Вестник ЯГУ* 6, no. 1 (2009): 119. [Sapar Ospanov, "Zoroastrism Is One of the Historical Sources of the Study of Turkic Peoples Culture," *Vestnik YaGU* 6, no. 1 (2009): 119.]

²⁴ Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, *The Early Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 3. Mary Boyce was one of the most rigorous and authoritative scholars on Zoroastrianism in Anglophone academia. Therefore, I will primarily be relying on her works throughout this section.

Boyce wrote, “Various collective terms used by the Indians and Iranians for their divine beings. One was Vedic *deva*, Avestan *daēva*, an ancient word cognate with Latin *deus* and coming from an Indo-European base ‘shine, be bright.’ The ‘Shining Ones’ were also called the ‘Immortals’ (Vedic *amṛta*, Avestan *aməša*).”²⁵ These similarities allow for the conclusion that Hinduism and Zoroastrianism had at least a linguistic kinship. Moreover, as Oktor Skjærvø pointed out, “Old Avestan is extremely archaic by Indo-Iranian standards, its grammar being largely identical with that of the oldest Rigveda.”²⁶ This grammatical closeness led Skjærvø to argue that the authors of Rigveda and Avesta shared the same linguistic and cultural heritage. He continued, “It is therefore commonly, and justly, assumed that the Old Avestan texts were composed by authors who lived a few centuries later than the separation of the Indian and Iranian tribes, who still knew well the poetic language of the common Indo-Iranian period.”²⁷ Thus, the evidence for the close relationship between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism is undeniable.

Nevertheless, the historical and linguistic ties of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism do not preclude the possibility that Zoroastrianism had a connection with Tengrism at the same time. It is still possible that ancient tribes professing Zoroastrianism encountered the tribes in the modern territories of Qazaqstan who believed in, among many other faiths, Tengrism. Archaeological discoveries indicate that ancient Indo-Iranian civilizations interacted with the Central Asian steppe culture. For instance, Asko Parpola writes, “The here-assumed pre-Rgvedic wave of Indo-Aryan speakers probably came from the Petrovka culture, which succeeded the Sintashta culture and spread with horse-

²⁵ Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 1:23.

²⁶ P. Oktor Skjærvø, “The Avesta as Source for the Early History of the Iranians,” in *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, ed. George Erdosy (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), 161. Skjærvø makes this assumption based on the grammatical similarities. He notes, “More specifically, it has preserved the old aspect system, with a living opposition between the present/imperfect and the aorist, and the old injunctive has preserved its old functions.”

²⁷ Skjærvø, “The Avesta as Source for the Early History of the Iranians,” 161.

drawn chariots from the Trans-Urals to Kazakhstan and southern Central Asia.”²⁸ Parpola makes this statement in his article on the discoveries of chariot burial near Delhi in India. It should be noted that the travel route from the Petrovka settlement to Delhi crosses the modern Qazaqstan territory from the northwest toward the southeast. In addition, regarding the earliest contact of Indo-Iranians with steppe people, David W. Anthony brings up the vocabulary exchange, writing, “During the initial phase of contact, the Sintashta or the Petrovka cultures or both borrowed some vocabulary and rituals from BMAC, accounting for the fifty-five terms in common Indo-Iranian.”²⁹ Thus, Indo-Iranians had some interaction with the people who lived in the modern territories of Qazaqstan. Therefore, Ospanov’s argument—that Zoroastrianism and Tengrism could have mutually influenced each other—seems to be valid.

However, the timeframe between the above-mentioned archaeological findings and Zoroaster’s lifetime would have been insufficient to pose that Zoroastrianism was present in the modern territories of Qazaqstan. Despite the fact that no precise date is established among scholars on the lifetime of Zoroaster, the debates remain constrained to sometime between 400 and 1000 BC, and even the earliest of these dates is still too distant from the archaeological findings.³⁰ The Petrovka culture, BMAC, and the chariot

²⁸ Asko Parpola, “Royal ‘Chariot’ Burials of Sanauli near Delhi and Archaeological Correlates of Prehistoric Indo-Iranian Languages,” *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 8, no. 1 (2020): 192. The abstract reads, “The article describes the royal cart burials excavated at the Late Harappan site of Sanauli near Delhi in the spring of 2018 on the basis of the available reports and photographs. The author then comments on these finds, dated to about 1900 bce, with the Sanauli cart burials being the first of their kind in Bronze Age India. In his opinion, several indications suggest that the Sanauli ‘chariots’ are actually carts yoked to bulls, as in the copper sculpture of a bull-cart from the Late Harappan site of Daimabad in Maharashtra. The antennae-hilted swords associated with the burials suggest that these bull-carts are likely to have come from the BMAC or the Bactria and Margiana Archaeological Complex (c.2300-1500 bce) of southern Central Asia, from where there is iconographic evidence of bull-carts. The ultimate source of the Sanauli/BMAC bull-carts may be the early phase of the Sintashta culture in the Trans-Urals, where the chariot (defined as a horse-drawn light vehicle with two spoked wheels) was most probably invented around the late twenty-first century BCE.” BMAC stands for Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex.

²⁹ David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 456.

³⁰ For further discussions on Zoroaster’s lifetime, see Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 1:3, 180-87, 285-87; A. Shapur Shahbazi, “The ‘Traditional Date of Zoroaster’ Explained,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 40, no. 1 (1977): 25-35.

discovered near Delhi in 2018 all are dated around or earlier than 2000 BC, predating both Rigveda and Avesta, the major texts of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, respectively. The lack of detailed historical records about the spread of Zoroastrianism among the Qazaq people creates even more obstacles.

Therefore, I will rely on archaeological findings to argue for Zoroastrianism's presence among the early Qazaq ancestors. Otherwise, it will appear that the only connection between the Qazaq ancestors and Zoroastrianism seems to be pre-Zoroastrian beliefs. In this regard, it is worth quoting Peter B. Golden, who wrote, "In addition to pre-Zoroastrian cults focusing on natural elements (fire, water, earth, air), Sogdians and Khwarazmians venerated the mythical Iranian hero, Siyâvûsh, who was associated with birth, death, and rebirth."³¹

In 1957, a Soviet archaeologist Lazar I. Rempel discovered a Zoroastrian ossuary near the city of Taraz in southern Qazaqstan.³² In the nearby area, Karl Baypakov a renowned Qazaq archaeologist, discovered coins with an inscription reading "to the King of Kings worshipper of Mazda," which is dedicated to the Sasanian king Hormizd II, who reigned 303-309. Accordingly, the coins are dated to the fourth century.³³ The most striking Zoroastrian artifact found in Qazaqstan was discovered in 2011. This relatively new discovery is a Zoroastrian fire altar dated to the tenth or eleventh century.³⁴ The Zoroastrian tradition, as Mario Vitalone rightly notes, had three categories

³¹ Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

³² Gregoire Frumkin, *Archaeology in Soviet Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 22.

³³ Karl Baypakov, E. A. Smagulov, and A. A. Erzhigitova, *Early Medieval Burial Sites of South Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Baur, 2005), 173.

³⁴ Kazinform, "Народ в Потоке Истории: В Таразе на Территории Бывшего Рынка Археологи Раскопали Древнейшее в Казахстане Исламское Медресе и Зороастрийский Алтарь," last modified July 12, 2013, https://www.inform.kz/ru/narod-v-potoke-istorii-v-taraze-na-territorii-byvshego-rynka-arheologi-raskopali-drevneyshee-v-kazahstane-islamskoe-medrese-i-zoroastriyskiy-altar_a2573815. [Kazinform, "People in the Flow of History: In Taraz, on the Territory of the Former Market, Archaeologists Unearthed the Oldest Islamic Madrasah in Qazaqstan and a Zoroastrian Altar."] Unfortunately, I could not find academic reports of this discovery. The only information comes from mass

of the temple fires—Ataš Bahrām, Ādarān, and Dādġāh. Among these, only the lesser-grade fire Dādġāh could be carried out by layman, whereas the other two greater-grade fires required the priesthood.³⁵ Unfortunately, it has not been specified what kind of fire altar was discovered in Taraz. Nevertheless, taking into account the distinctively Zoroastrian artifacts mentioned above, I can argue that Zoroastrianism was one of the beliefs among Qazaqs from the fourth century through eleventh century, which precludes the argument that Islam replaced all the other faiths upon its arrival.

In the next section, I examine the Zoroastrian customs and rites that modern Qazaq people practice to this day, supporting my argument that Zoroastrianism had a significant presence among Qazaqs, which precludes the exclusivity of Islam as the ancestral faith of Qazaqs.

Modern Qazaqs' Zoroastrian Practices

It is essential to examine Zoroastrian practices among modern Qazaqs because specific timeframes and geography confine historical and archaeological arguments. In the previous section, I demonstrated that most of the archaeological discoveries are dated to the fourth through eleventh centuries, and all of them were found in southern parts of Qazaqstan. But in this section, I focus on the Zoroastrian practices widespread among the vast majority of Qazaqs.

The most notable Zoroastrian trait in modern Qazaqs' life is the celebration of the new year—Nowruz (also spelled as Nauryz [Наурыз]). In Qazaqstan, Nowruz is a national holiday celebrated with the coming of the spring equinox on March 21-23. During Nowruz, people say good wishes to each other and ask for God's blessing for the year. The modern-day holiday itself is not religious, but its roots are. Mary Boyce's

media news sources. The interviewee in the article is Ruslan Boranbaev, a historian and archaeologist in Qazaqstan.

³⁵ Maria Vitalone, "Fires and the Establishment of *Ataš Bahrāms* in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 425-27.

opening words in her entry on “Nowruz” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, state, “Nowruz, ‘New Day,’ is the holiest and most joyful festival of the Zoroastrian year.”³⁶ One may wonder how a pre-Islamic religious festival could have survived in Iran after the festival’s heavy alteration by Arab conquests and the expansion of Islam. The answer to this question is twofold. First, in the words of A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Nowruz survived because it was so profoundly engrained in Iranian traditions, history, and cultural memory that Iranian identity and Nowruz mutually buttressed each other.”³⁷ Another view on the survival of Nowruz maintains that Islam made the festival better; this view is held by Ali Shariati and Mehdi Abedi, who wrote, “Islam, which cleansed the colors of nationality and revolutionized traditions, gave Nowruz a shinier polish, made it firm, and, bestowing it with a strong protective covering, saved it from decadence in the time that Iranians became Muslims.”³⁸

A similar influence of Islam on Nowruz can also be observed in Qazaqstan. During the celebration of Nowruz, a Muslim preacher usually teaches, prays, and reads the Qur’an. However, considering Qazaqs’ argument that Islam is the ancestral faith and their equating it with ethnic identity, it is legitimate to ask how the non-Islamic holiday Nowruz survived in Qazaq culture. Why did Qazaqs, who allegedly have been Muslims for centuries, choose a non-Islamic festival as their main holiday? The only adequate explanation is that Zoroastrianism must have had a significant presence in Central Asia, and Islam was merely one of the many different faiths among the proto-Qazaq tribes.

Another question to ask is whether Nowruz carried any religious implications in Zoroastrianism. Boyce argues that pre-Zoroastrian Iranians held a pagan festival to

³⁶ Mary Boyce, “NOWRUZ i. In the Pre-Islamic Period,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* (online ed., 2016), last updated November 15, 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-i>.

³⁷ A. Shapur Shahbazi, “NOWRUZ ii. In the Islamic Period,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* (online ed., 2016), last updated November 15, 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-ii>.

³⁸ Ali Shariati and Mehdi Abedi, “Nowruz,” *Iranian Studies* 19, no. 3/4 (1986): 238.

observe the spring equinox. She writes, “That of the spring equinox is still kept joyfully by Zoroastrians, and probably many features of the present festival go back to pagan times, for it is essentially an occasion for rejoicing at the end of winter and is celebrated out of doors amid the renewed greenness of earth.”³⁹ In other words, the celebration of spring equinox, like in many other cultures, was present among ancient Iranians. But the meaning with which this holiday was endowed by Zoroaster completely coincides with modern Qazaqs’ interpretation of Nowruz. Boyce notes, “But whatever the situation was in this respect when Zoroaster was born, the prophet evidently chose (if the choice was then necessary) the feast of the spring equinox to be the New Year for his people, plainly because of the deep religious symbolism which he saw in the annual resurgence of life at this season.”⁴⁰ Even though Qazaqs do not connect Nowruz with the Zoroaster’s birthday, they know that Nowruz has Zoroastrian roots.

Two Qazaq scholars, S. T. Seydumanov and E. Q. Kasabekova, in their article on the Zoroastrian elements in the religious life of Qazaqs, explicitly state that Nowruz’s origins go back to Zoroastrianism.⁴¹ Throughout the article, the authors refer to various Zoroastrian rituals still practiced by Qazaqs. Moreover, the authors support those practices. Their proposition is that modern Qazaqs should maintain a syncretistic version of Islam to preserve true ancestral cultural values, which predate Islam. As an example, the authors mention the use of fire for ritual purification purposes. They also mention the veneration of dead people’s spirits and the worship of water, the moon, the sky, and other elements. All of these practices fall under the Islamic condemnation of *shirk* (i.e., the sin

³⁹ Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 1:172.

⁴⁰ Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 1:175.

⁴¹ S. T. Seydumanov and E. Q. Kasabekova, “Zoroastrian Elements in the Religious Traditions of Kazakhstan,” *Adam Alemi* 92, no. 2 (2022): 168. It should be noted that these two authors believe that Zoroastrianism was professed widely before the arrival of Islam (164).

of idolatry). The authors acknowledge these practices as *shirk* from a strict Islamic perspective but allow them as a Qazaq expression of Islam.⁴²

In conclusion, Qazaq lands hosted pre-Zoroastrian beliefs in the very distant past, around 2000 BC. With the arrival of Islam to Persia and Central Asia, Zoroastrianism lost its popularity, but it was not completely extinguished. Historical writings and archaeological artifacts indicate the presence of Zoroastrianism among Qazaq tribes. Also, certain preserved and still-practiced Zoroastrian rituals evidence that Zoroastrianism was one of the beliefs held among the ancestors of the Qazaq people. At least two Qazaq scholars, S. T. Seydumanov and E. Q. Kasabekova, acknowledge Zoroastrianism as part of the Qazaq people's historical heritage. Therefore, equating Islam with the Qazaq ethnic and historical identity is unacceptable. In the following two sections, I examine the history of Buddhism and Christianity in the history of Qazaqs in order to support my argument that Islam was merely one of many beliefs that Qazaqs held.

Buddhism

In previous sections, I examined the history of Tengrism and Zoroastrianism among Qazaqs, which does not prove Qazaq historians' claim that our ancestors abandoned those religions in favor of Islam. Examining the history of Buddhism in Central Asia, including the modern territories of Qazaqstan, advances my thesis that the ancestors of Qazaqs had a diverse religious life, and Islam was merely one of many held beliefs. If Qazaq proponents of Islam could justify the presence of Tengrism and Zoroastrianism based on their alleged monotheism, then the case of Buddhism proves nothing but religious diversity. Therefore, in this section, I examine available evidence

⁴² Seydumanov and Kasabekova, "Zoroastrian Elements in the Religious Traditions of Kazakhstan," 165.

for the historical presence of Buddhism in Qazaq lands. I probe the current state of Buddhism in Qazaqstan first and then proceed to the historical research.

Current State of Buddhism in Qazaqstan

Buddhism in Qazaqstan is primarily professed by Koreans, with the rare exceptions of ethnic Qazaqs and Russians. Unlike Qazaqs, Koreans never were indigenous inhabitants of Central Asia. Therefore, a brief historical overview is necessary to explain how, when, and why they became the inhabitants of Qazaqstan and other parts of Central Asia.

Several reasons caused the mass migration of Koreans from the Korean peninsula to the far-east Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century. Famine aggravated the plight of farmers in feudal Korea, and the Russian Empire's favorable policy encouraged immigrants to settle in underpopulated far-east regions of the empire. Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 drove even more Koreans to migrate to the eastern parts of Russia. Later, in 1937-1938, the Soviets forcefully deported Koreans from far-east Russia to Qazaqstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The Soviets feared that Korean immigrants might fight on the side of Japan against the USSR in case of war. As an immigrant community, Koreans were already socio-economically vulnerable in Russia, and forceful relocation from this new place to another intensified their suffering.⁴³ Thus, as of today, Koreans have lived in Qazaqstan for several generations.

Speaking of Buddhism in post-Soviet Qazaqstan and in Central Asia, in general, necessitates pointing out the Russification throughout the lands controlled by the

⁴³ Pohl J. Otto, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949*, Contributions to the Study of World History 65 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 10-11. See also Всеволод И. Вагин, "Корейцы на Амуре," in *Сборник Историко-статистических Сведений о Сибири и Сопредельных Ей Странах*, том 1, часть 8 (Санкт-Петербург, 1875), 7. [Vsevolod I. Vagin, "Koreans in Amur," in *A Collection of Historical-Census Records about Siberia and the Countries Bordering with It*, vol. 1, pt. 8 (Sankt-Peterburg, 1875), 7.] This is a report of eyewitnesses stating that Koreans were dying of hunger and cold during a Russian winter.

Soviet Union, including Koreans. Soviet rule sought to construct a unique Soviet identity common to all of the nationals of the USSR. Since Russians comprised the largest people group, the Soviet identity mostly resembled the Russian identity. Unlike usual national identities, the Soviet identity was supposed to be devoid of religious connotations. For instance, being Arab almost always means being Muslim, and Americans or Western Europeans are expected to be Christian. In the case of the Soviet Union, national identity meant being irreligious and atheist. Identity disruption in the Koreans' case occurred as they took Russian first names (e.g., Yuriy, Andrei, Sergei) but retained Korean last names (e.g., Kim, Nam, Tsoi).⁴⁴

When the Soviet Union ceased in 1991, all of the nationals, including Koreans, strove to revive their pre-Soviet ethnic identities tied to historical religious faith. If for Qazaqs, that meant reviving Islam, then for Koreans, that meant culturally reconnecting with the Republic of Korea (a.k.a. South Korea). I do not have census data on how many Central Asian Koreans migrated to South Korea since 1991, but I have witnessed how Central Asian Koreans are impressed and possessed by South Korean culture and people. The most vivid example is evangelical churches started by South Korean missionaries. If the pastor is from South Korea, then most of the congregation consists of local Koreans (in Qazaqstan, Kyrgyzstan, and—especially—Uzbekistan).

The same phenomenon is observed in Buddhist temples in Central Asia launched by South Korean missionaries. For instance, Kim Tae-il is a Buddhist missionary who first arrived in Qazaqstan in 1992 and started hosting a small Buddhist group in his apartment. After two years, he bought a piece of land and built a temple, which hosted its first service in 1997 (it is still functioning today). Most Buddhists in this temple are local Koreans, a fact that can be confirmed just by glancing at the pictures of

⁴⁴ Валерий С. Хан and Хон Е. Сим, *Корейцы в Центральной Азии: Прошлое и Настоящее* (Москва: МБА, 2014), 52, 151-54. [Valeryi S. Han and Hon E. Sim, *Koreans in Central Asia: Past and Present* (Moscow: MBA, 2014), 52, 151-54.]

the service.⁴⁵ The same can be noted about the single registered Buddhist temple in Uzbekistan. The temple in Qazaqstan, like this temple in Uzbekistan, was founded by a Korean missionary (Young Kee Hoon) soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴⁶

In conclusion, the current state of Buddhism in Qazaqstan conveys that it is a small movement mainly professed by an ethnic minority. Today, both Qazaqs and Koreans perceive Buddhism as an imported religion due to Korean migration to Central Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, Buddhism had a longer and more complex history in the region, and it was professed by indigenous Turkic tribes—the Qazaq people’s ancestors.

Historical Presence of Buddhism

The geographical spread of Buddhism in Central Asia before Islam expanded from Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan) up to the north to Sogdiana (from the southern parts of modern Qazaqstan to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan). In these new territories, Buddhism coexisted with Zoroastrianism, which was a dominating religion in the area. Of course, there were other minor animistic beliefs with certain peculiarities depending on the location and the tribe. Buddhism and these other minor faiths seem to have existed side by side in relative peace.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Зауре Медерханова, “Казахстанцы в поисках нирваны: как буддизм пришел в Казахстан,” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, modified January 14, 2019, <https://cabar.asia/ru/kazahstantsy-v-poiskah-nirvany-kak-buddizm-prishel-v-kazahstan>. [Zaure Mederkhanova, “The Qazaqs’ Quest of Nirvana: How Buddhism Came to Qazaqstan,” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting.]

⁴⁶ Дарина Солод, “Частичка Дзэна в Ташкенте: Как устроен единственный действующий буддийский храм в Центральной Азии,” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, modified January 30, 2019, <https://cabar.asia/ru/chastichka-dzena-v-tashkente-kak-ustroen-edinstvennyj-dejstvuyushhij-buddijskij-hram-v-tsentralnoj-azii>. [Darina Solod, “A Part of Dzen in Tashkent: How the Only Functioning Buddhist Temple in Central Asia Works.” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting.]

⁴⁷ И. В. Колосова, “Буддизм в Центральной Азии и России: История и Современность,” *Проблемы Постсоветского Пространства* 7, no. 2 (2020): 242. [I. V. Kolosova, “Buddhism in Central Asia and Russia: History and Present State,” *Post-Soviet Issues* 7, no. 2 (2020): 242.]

Of the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hsüan-Tsang (ca. 600-664), Richard Strassberg states, “In addition to his journey through western China, his itinerary took him through parts of modern Kirghizstan, Qazaqstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and India.”⁴⁸ Upon his arrival in Samarkand around the 630s, Hsüan-Tsang witnessed that Buddhism was declining there.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this historical reality firmly establishes that Buddhism was one of the many religious beliefs confessed by Turks before the arrival of Islam. Moreover, well-known scholar of Buddhism Alexander Berzin notes that Turks in the sixth century translated Buddhist texts. In this regard, he writes,

The Eastern Turks ruled Mongolia and continued the Ruanruan form of Khotanese/Tocharian Buddhism found there, combining it with northern Han Chinese elements. They translated many Buddhist texts into the Old Turk language from a variety of Buddhist tongues with the help of monks from northern India, Gandhara, and Han China, but particularly from the Sogdian community in Turfan.⁵⁰

Thus, we must answer the question of why Hsüan-Tsang saw the decline of Buddhism in Samarkand. The reason may be twofold. First, Buddhism in Central Asia was always less developed than Buddhism in India and China, from where Hsüan-Tsang came. Therefore, one possible explanation for Hsüan-Tsang’s observation is that Buddhism was not declining at all; it merely did not have as strong of a presence in Central Asia as Hsüan-Tsang was accustomed to seeing in China and India. As already mentioned, Buddhism was one of many religions professed among Turk and Mongol

⁴⁸ Richard E. Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 97.

⁴⁹ Clifford E. Bosworth, “The Appearance of the Arabs in Central Asia under the Umayyads and the Establishment of Islam,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 4, *The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the end of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. M. S. Asimov and Clifford E. Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), 28.

⁵⁰ Alexander Berzin, “Buddhism in Central Asia before the Advent of the Arabs,” Study Buddhism, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/history-culture/buddhism-islam-advanced/buddhist-muslim-interaction-umayyad-caliphate/buddhism-in-central-asia-before-the-advent-of-the-arabs>.

tribes. Second, Buddhism and other religions declined during the Arab/Muslim conquests in Central Asia.

Buddhist texts were translated into the Turkic languages, indicating indigenous or local people's devotion to the religion. I begin by mentioning that Chinese sources report of Buddhism's spread among the Turks. In her work *History of Uighur Religious Conversions: 5th-16th Centuries*, Tang Li lists extensive Chinese records documenting the Turks' dedication to Buddhism. She poses that Buddhism could have entered China through Xinjiang, which means that the Turks converted to Buddhism before the Chinese did.⁵¹ Of course, this statement's historical accuracy requires in-depth research, which is outside of the objectives of this chapter. Nevertheless, I must point out that I cannot entirely agree with Li. Most likely, Buddhism came to Central Asia and China independently.⁵²

The earliest translation of a Buddhist text into the Turkic language was made upon the request of Tapar Qagan (a.k.a. T'-o-po and Taspar), who asked for the translation of *Nirvana Sutra*. However, this translation has not been preserved, which forces me to deal with this narrative without a textual artifact support it. All of the English literature about this story appeals to German scholars, who refer to earlier scholarship but do not provide source details.⁵³ Unfortunately, during this research, I

⁵¹ Tang Li, *History of Uighur Religious Conversions: 5th-16th Centuries*, Working Papers Series 44 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2005), 28. Li refers to numerous sources in Chinese and argues that Buddhism was one of the widespread religions of the Turkic people (28-33).

⁵² Hans-Joachim Klimkeit argues that Buddhist temples were erected in eastern Turkestan as early as the sixth century. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, "Buddhism in Turkish Central Asia," *Numen* 37, no. 1 (1990): 54. The author refers to Annemarie von Gabain, "Buddhistische Tilkenmission," in *Asiatica. Festschrift Friedrich Weller, zum 65. Geburtstag gewidmet von seinen Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern*, ed. Johannes Schubert (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954), 162-63. Nevertheless, Richard Foltz argues that the Ming emperor from the Han dynasty was already familiar with Buddhism when he first encountered Turkic people from eastern Turkestan. Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 49-50. Therefore, it is difficult to accept Li's argument; however, she holds to a widespread position. Here, I am referring to a few of the many works that can be used for discussions concerning Central Asians' accepting Buddhism before China.

⁵³ Klimkeit, "Buddhism in Turkish Central Asia," 54. See also Carter V. Findley, *The Turks in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.

could not identify an original source that would talk about Tapar Qagan’s request for the translation of *Nirvana Sutra*. Fortunately, however, reports of British, German, and Russian archaeological expeditions to Turfan conducted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are well documented. Therefore, my research leans on those reports because archaeologists discovered many ancient manuscripts, including Buddhist texts.⁵⁴

For instance, the Bower Manuscript is a collection of Sanskrit texts discovered in eastern Turkestan, northwest of modern China. Regarding this collection, Rudolf Hoernle pointed out that although the manuscripts were found in eastern Turkestan, they were written on birch-bark. Writing on birch-bark was exclusively practiced in northwestern India. Therefore, Hoernle justly concluded that the writers of those texts most likely were native to northwestern India.⁵⁵ It is thus possible to argue that Buddhism in Central Asia was practiced only by immigrants from traditionally Buddhist lands or pilgrims going from one shrine to another throughout Central Asian territories. In either case, one may argue that people indigenous to Central Asia did not practice Buddhism.

The first Buddhist text to pose as a counter-argument is *Lotus Sutra*.⁵⁶ Abdurishid Yakup cites the Uighur fragment of this text translated from Chinese. Yakup brings attention to the opening phrase of the Uighur translation (“bahšim ärsär bo sudur ardirtäriir, bo nom čäčäki sudur”) and suggests two possible translations for the first part (“My teacher is this sūtra-jewel” or “As for my teacher, he is this sūtra-jewel”) and offers a single translation of the second (“This sūtra-jewel of the Blossom [of the Fine]

⁵⁴ Numerous catalogues and manuscript collections are available online. See, e.g., Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, “Turfanforschung (Turfan Studies),” accessed December 22, 2020, <https://www.bbaw.de/en/research/turfanforschung-turfan-studies>.

⁵⁵ Rudolf A. F. Hoernle, ed., *The Bower Manuscript: Facsimile Leaves, Nagari Transcript, Romanised Transliteration and English Translation with Notes* (Calcutta, 1893), xlvii-xlviii.

⁵⁶ “Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law,” in *Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism Library*, accessed December 22, 2020, <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/L/59>.

Dharma”).⁵⁷ Yakup points out that although the Uighur text is supposedly translated from Chinese, no Chinese manuscript parallels the above-quoted Uighur fragment. Consequently, either ancient Uighurs composed a new version of the *Lotus Sutra* or the original Chinese source has not been preserved from which Uighur translation was made.⁵⁸

The second Buddhist text written in a Central Asian language is the document called manuscript “E.” Russian scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have studied this document thoroughly. They identified the language of manuscript “E” as Khotanese-Sakas and dated it around the seventh to eighth centuries (AD). This source mainly speaks about the Buddhist worldview and practices. Vladimir S. Vorobyev-Desjatovskij and Margarita I. Vorobyeva-Desjatovskaya made a transcript of this document and translated it into Russian. This work in Russian is titled *Сказание о Бхадре* (*A Saying about Bhadra*) the content of the document speaks about the goddess Bhadra and other random topics.⁵⁹

In his article “Notes on the Tale of Bhadra,” Ronald E. Emmerick provides a detailed commentary on Vorobyev-Desjatovskij and Vorobyeva-Desjatovskaya’s work on manuscript “E.”⁶⁰ Of course, Bhadra’s legend in manuscript “E” is not the only Buddhist text found in Central Asia. In their article “New Buddhist Texts from Central

⁵⁷ Abdurishid Yakup, “An Old Uyghur Fragment of the Lotus Sutra from the Krotkov Collection in St. Petersburg,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 64, no. 4 (2011): 412.

⁵⁸ Yakup, “An Old Uyghur Fragment of the Lotus Sutra,” 412.

⁵⁹ Владимир С. Воробьев-Десятовский, and Маргарита И. Воробьева-Десятовская, *Сказание о Бхадре (Сакская Рукопись “Е”)* (Москва: Наука, 1965). [Vladimir S. Vorobyev-Desjatovskij, and Margarita I. Vorobyeva-Desjatovskaya, *A Saying about Bhadra (Sakas Manuscript “E”)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965).]

⁶⁰ Eric R. Emmerick, “Notes on the Tale of Bhadra,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1967): 83-94. Emmerick’s commentary is very technical and critical, making it comparable to the textual apparatus of Nestle-Alland’s Greek New Testament. Therefore, non-specialists on Buddhism will greatly benefit from reading these works together.

Asia,” Grigory Bongard-Levin and Edward N. Tyomkin summarize the archaeological expeditions conducted by Russian scholars and analyze the discovered texts.⁶¹

Finally, in his article “Two Chinese Buddhist Texts Written by Uighurs,” Kōichi Kitsudō affirms that Uighurs from Turfan translated Chinese Buddhist texts. Koichi also argues that Uighurs even produced Buddhist texts in Chinese: “Worship of the Dharma Treasure” and “The Ritual of Summoning Maitreya.” The first text includes excerpts from *Samuyakṭa-Agama Sūtra* and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*, and the second one was an unknown Buddhist text written on the verso side of the Chinese manuscript *Madhyama-Agama*. It was common among Uighurs to put Uighur text on the verso side of Chinese manuscripts that featured Chinese text on the recto side.⁶² Thus, based on the broken grammar of the Chinese sentences and characters in these manuscripts, it is reasonable to conclude that the scribe was not a native Chinese person but, in this case, a Uighur. However, one may argue that this grammatical feature does not necessarily mean the writer was not Chinese; perhaps, he was a poorly educated Chinese man. As a counter-argument here, Koichi would point out that Uighur spellings and terms crept into the broken Chinese grammar, which shows that the scribe was a Uighur. For instance, instead of saying “Buddha,” the scribe used the Uighur term “Burxan.”⁶³

Indigenous Central Asians, at least Uighurs and Khotanese Sakas, produced Buddhist texts in their languages. Most of the texts were translations from Chinese and Sanskrit. They needed these texts for ritual practices and to deepen their understanding of the religion.

⁶¹ Grigory Bongard-Levin and Evgeniy N. Tyomkin, “New Buddhist Texts from Central Asia,” *Journal of Asiatic Society* 11, no. 1 (1969): 64.

⁶² Kōichi Kitsudō, “Two Chinese Buddhist Texts Written by Uighurs,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 64, no. 3 (2011): 326, 331.

⁶³ Kitsudō, “Two Chinese Buddhist Texts Written by Uighurs,” 326.

Finally, archaeologists discovered tombs with the signs of Buddhism and other religions together. Therefore, when studying Buddhist temples, shrines, and other religiously essential sites, one must remember that conversion to Buddhism did not demand abandoning previous beliefs, unlike in Christianity or Islam. In Buddhism, as Valerie Hansen notes, that was not the case; a new convert could retain his former faith and still be a Buddhist.⁶⁴ Therefore, archaeological findings in addition to gravestones and tombs are necessary to strengthen the case for Buddhism's historical presence in Qazaqstan.

One such place is Tamgaly-tas in Qazaqstan, which perplexes Muslim Qazaq scientists and tourists with petroglyphs of Buddha and bodhisattvas. The images are preserved well enough that it is undeniable that they are Buddhist art.⁶⁵ Local Islamic guides leading tours say that those images carved on the rocks were by Buddhist travelers passing by. They need this explanation to fit the grand narrative about Islam's being the sole ancestral faith. Of course, Buddhist images in Qazaq lands do not fit this narrative. Therefore, the local guides must emphasize foreign authorship. In addition to the Buddhist texts, tombs, and temples mentioned above, the Tamgaly-tas petroglyphs must be taken as a compelling argument for the presence of Buddhism in Qazaq history.

In the following two sections, I examine the history of Christianity and Islam in Qazaqstan, which runs counter to the widespread belief among modern Qazaqs. The history of Christianity again proves that Islam was merely one of the many beliefs that early Qazaq tribes professed. In addition, a closer look at the history of Islam disrupts the narrative that its spread was peaceful.

⁶⁴ Valerie Hansen, "The Path of Buddhism into China: The View from Turfan," *Asia Major* (Third Series) 11, no. 2 (1998): 41.

⁶⁵ Kamila Zhumabayeva, "Kazakhstan's Mysterious Rock Carvings: Tamgaly Tas," Edge KZ, accessed December 23, 2020, <https://www.edgekz.com/kazakhstans-mysterious-rock-carvings-tamgaly-tas/>. I have chosen to include this article here even though it is not an academic entry because (1) it is in English and (2) it includes high-quality pictures of the petroglyphs.

Christianity

Traditionally, the Christian branch in Central Asia is often designated as Nestorianism. Maria Adelaide Lala Comneno points out several challenges in dealing with the history of Christianity. First, the history of Christianity in this region has been inaccessible for study because most of the respective territory was under Chinese and Russian/Soviet rule. Second, modern Central Asian nations, including Qazaqstan, are mentally detached from their Christian history due to centuries of Islamization. However, the abundance of literary and archaeological findings indicates the solid historical presence of Christianity in the region. Third, since most of the ancient Central Asian tribes were nomads, it is difficult to precisely identify the geographic borders of their inhabitation. Therefore, their lifestyle, customs, and faith are often attested indirectly, mostly by outside witnesses like travelers, merchants, neighbors, or conquerors. Fourth, because of the Arab-Muslim conquests, Nestorian/Christian churches/temples were turned into mosques, thus diminishing the archaeological evidence. Lastly, geographically, Central Asia is far away from political and religious centers like Rome and Constantinople. Therefore, ecclesial historians often overlooked the history of the church in this region.⁶⁶

The presence of Christianity among the early Qazaq tribes is attested by archaeological, textual, and historical records. It is difficult to pinpoint the name and date of whomever first brought the Christian faith to Central Asia. A secondary issue is determining which version of Christianity came to the region first. Traditionally, it is thought that the church in Central Asia appeared as a byproduct of Christological controversies about the terms Θεοτόκος (*Theotokos*) and Χριστοτόκος (*Christotokos*), which were debated at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, where Nestorius was condemned as a heretic. Sebastian Brock laments that most church historians from the

⁶⁶ Maria Adelaide Lala Comneno, "Nestorianism in Central Asia during the First Millennium: Archaeological Evidence," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 11, no. 1 (1997): 20-53.

time of Eusebius of Caesarea consistently ignored the Christian tradition beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Brock speculates that the entry of Christianity into Central Asia could have happened as early as the second century.⁶⁷

Brock and other historians of Eastern Christianity base their argument on Bardaisan's expression "Nor do our (Christian) sisters among the Gilanians and Bactrians have any intercourse with strangers."⁶⁸ Bardaisan (also spelled Bar Daysan) was a second-third-century Gnostic thinker.⁶⁹ Alphonse Mingana referred to another Syriac document titled *The Doctrine of Apostles* dated no earlier than AD 250 where it states that Gog and Magog received ecclesiastical ordination from Aggai the missionary. Mingana clarified that Gog and Magog in Syriac writings of the time meant Turks and Tartars.⁷⁰ In previous chapters of this research, I have pointed out that modern Qazaqs consider themselves the descendants of ancient Turks. Thus, Christianity arrived in Central Asia before the Nestorian controversy.

A hagiographical document written by an anonymous author about Mar Aba I (d. 552) stated that Mar Aba consecrated a bishop for the Hephthalites upon their own request.⁷¹ The Hephthalites were white Huns, whom Qazaqs consider as their ancestors. According to another account, around the same time, when Romans captured some

⁶⁷ Sebastian Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 no. 3 (1996): 32-33. Gilan is a province in north Iran on the southwestern coasts of the Caspian Sea. Geographically, it is very close to the modern territory of Qazaqstan.

⁶⁸ Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1925), 7.

⁶⁹ P. Oktor Skjærvø, "Bardesanēs," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, last updated December 15, 1988, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bardesanēs-syr>.

⁷⁰ Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East*, 8.

⁷¹ Roger Pearse, trans., *Life of Mar Aba*, Tertullian Project, accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/life_of_mar_aba_1_text.htm. See also Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, trans. Miranda G. Henry (London: Routledge, 2003), 73.

Turks, it was discovered that Central Asian Turks were Christians.⁷² Regarding the Christian or non-Islamic history of the Turks, it is worth mentioning the observation of al-Biruni (d. 1048), a renowned Muslim historian. First, al-Biruni stated that most of the Turks were not Muslims.⁷³ Second, he wrote that Nestorian Christians lived in Khorasan, which covers the southwestern parts of modern Qazaqstan's territories.⁷⁴

Catholic travelogues all unanimously report Christianity among the Keraites (also spelled Kereis) in medieval times. Modern scholars often name William of Rubruck, John of Plano Carpini, and Marco Polo as the medieval eyewitnesses of Christianity in Central Asia—particularly, among the Naimans and the Kereis, Qazaq tribes.⁷⁵ Though no doubts can be raised about the Christianity of the Keraites, I am not confident about the historicity of the supposed mass conversion of 200,000 people.⁷⁶ According to one story, one of the Keraites rulers lost his way during a hunt. While the ruler was still wandering, he met Mar Sergius. Mar Sergius promised to help the ruler if he accepted Christ. When the two agreed, Mar Sergius said, “Close your eyes,” and the ruler did so, and when Sergius said to him, “Open your eyes,” the ruler found himself in the camp. This story is supposedly reported in a letter that ‘Abdisho I, the metropolitan of Merv, sent to the Catholicos Iwanis (d. 1009).⁷⁷ The problem with this report is rooted in

⁷² Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, trans., *The History of Theophylact* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 146-47. The captured Turks had the sign of cross on their foreheads.

⁷³ Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations; an English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athâr-ul-Bâkiya of Albîrûnî, or “Vestiges of the Past”*, trans. C. Edward Sachau (London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain & Ireland by W. H. Allen, 1879), 191.

⁷⁴ Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, 282.

⁷⁵ Rockhill, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World*, 111.

⁷⁶ There is a problem with the translation of numbers. Alphonse Mingana and Rene Grousset read it as 200,000 people accepting the faith, whereas David Wilmshurst reads it as 2,000. All of them are referring to Bar Hebraeus. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East*, 15; René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 191; Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesial Chronicle*, trans. David Wilmshurst, *Gorgias Eastern Christianity Studies* 40 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2016), 398.

⁷⁷ Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesial Chronicle*, 398-400.

the fact that it comes from Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), who lived two centuries after this supposed conversion. Another issue is that the conversion story of Ibn Raja (d. 1020) follows the same pattern. On his return from a trip, Ibn Raja had separated from his caravan in the desert and was destined to die. But he was miraculously delivered by a saint, who brought him to Saint Mercurius Church, where he accepted Christ and was baptized.⁷⁸ The apparent plot similarity between these miraculous desert rescue stories does not allow me to accept them as historical facts.

Apart from historical records testifying to the presence of Christianity in at least two Qazaq tribes (the Naimans and the Kereis), evidence from the ground (i.e., findings discovered within the modern territories of Qazaqstan) speaks to the same point. For instance, archaeologist Rempel discovered Nestorian artifacts in the region—in addition to Zoroastrian artifacts, which I mentioned above in the section on Zoroastrianism.⁷⁹

Codex Cumanicus is a dictionary supposedly created by Catholic missionaries aiming to proselytize Turkic people around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The codex served as a language guide for the missionaries to communicate with the Cumans (a Turkic tribe, a.k.a. Qipchaq). The Cuman language was the *lingua franca* of the Golden Horde.⁸⁰ The document contained vocabulary giving the translation of the Turkic words in Latin, Persian, and German. However, Louis Ligeti pointed out that the extant document is a later copy compiled around 1330 and that the original must have been

⁷⁸ David Bertaina, “Būlus ibn Rajā on the History and Integrity of the Qur’an: Copto-Islamic Controversy in Fatimid Cairo,” in *Arab Christians and the Qur’an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, ed. Mark Beaumont (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 176-77. I know that Bertaina believes ibn Raja’s story is true since ibn Raja himself reports it.

⁷⁹ Frumkin, *Archaeology in Soviet Central Asia*, 22.

⁸⁰ Of course, as a massive empire, the Golden Horde had many different languages. Nevertheless, since Turkic and Mongol tribes were the ruling class, it is not surprising that their language became the *lingua franca* of the empire. Bertold Spuler, a renowned scholar of the Golden Horde, has an entry in his book on this subject; see Bertold Spuler, *Die Goldene Horde: Die Mongolen in Rusland 1223-1502* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965), 285-93.

produced in 1294. According to Ligeti, initially, *Codex Cumanicus* served commercial purposes, and later editors inserted missiological texts.⁸¹ The document contains biblical passages (e.g., the Lord's Prayer) in the Turkic Language. Other biblical texts and the Nicene Creed in the document indicate the Christian presence among the Turkic people around the late medieval times.⁸²

There are other documents with biblical texts in Turkic languages, in addition to *Codex Cumanicus*, that indicate the history of Christianity among the Turkic people. Archaeologists discovered many Christian inscriptions and fragments of the Bible in Central Asia. The famous Turfan expeditions led by German (at the time Prussian) scholars discovered numerous manuscripts with Christian texts in different local languages, such as Sogdian and Old Turkic Uyghur, most of which are dated to the ninth through thirteenth centuries.⁸³ But none of these manuscripts contains the full translations of the Bible, perhaps due to the fact that the liturgy language of the Church of the East was Syriac. Therefore, Christians living in Central Asia, including the modern territories of Qazaqstan, did not see the pressing need for the full translation of the Bible into their own language. In addition, Turkic and Mongol tribes did not seem to have a compelling concern for preserving texts. For instance, the Golden Horde and Europeans made treaties between them, and these were written down as bilingual documents. However, usually, the European copies survive, whereas the Turkic or Cuman copies are lost.⁸⁴ Therefore,

⁸¹ Louis Ligeti, "Prolegomena to the Codex Cumanicus," *Acta Orientalia Scientiarum Hung* 35, no. 1 (1981): 8.

⁸² Peter B. Golden, "The Codex Cumanicus," in *Central Asian Monuments*, ed. Hasan B. Paksoy, *Analecta Isisiana: Ottoman and Turkish Studies* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1992; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 45-74.

⁸³ Mark Dickens, "Multilingual Christian Manuscripts from Turfan," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009): 23. Mark Dickens has written extensively on the history of Christianity in Central Asia. See for his publications on the subject here: <https://www.nestorianstudies.org/index.php/en/about-us/our-staff/dr-dickens>.

⁸⁴ Ligeti, "Prolegomena to the Codex Cumanicus," 11.

given the massive presence of Christianity among Turkic tribes, it is plausible to conclude that the Bible in the language of the Turks once existed but did not survive.

Lastly, speaking of Christianity among Qazaqs, the name of Sultanmahmut Toraygirov (1893-1920) cannot go without mention. As his lifetime indicates, he was among the Qazaq intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary Qazaq evangelicals believe he was a Christian based on his poem titled *Who Is Jesus?* The poem contains the following lines:

If I say today Jesus is that way,
They will kill me at the end of the spear.
They will not allow my body to be buried,
And dogs will drag my body to play.⁸⁵

According to unproven reports, Toraygirov came to faith sometime between 1914 and 1916 while visiting the eastern parts of Qazaqstan. From his biography, it is known that he had a poor experience with local Muslim authorities. As was the custom of the time, he studied under several Mullahs and even went to a madrasa (Islamic school), but he did not enjoy any of these studies. His Muslim teachers often treated children with cruelty, which included disciplining them through whipping or beating. It is not a surprise that witnessing these types of cruelties with other children suffering under Mullahs, Toraygirov could not but have a negative view of Muslims. Mukhtar Qul-Muhammed rightly observes that Toraygirov's poems condemning Muslim clerics were written because of those days.⁸⁶

Regardless of his Christian faith, Toraygirov is still respected today as one of the most influential Qazaq poets of the twentieth century. His poem *Who Is Jesus?* was

⁸⁵ Sultanmahmut Toraygirov, *The Rain of Sariaqqa* (Almaty: Zhazushi, 1987), 151.

⁸⁶ Mukhtar Qul-Muhammed, "Literature Processes in the Beginning of the XX Century," in *The History of the Kazakh Literature*, vol. 6, ed. Mukhtar Qul-Muhammed (Almaty: KazAqparat, 2006), 249-92.

included in the 1987, 1993, 2002, and 2003 publications,⁸⁷ though it is absent in the 2009 publication.⁸⁸ When one takes into account the popularized narrative in the past twenty years that Islam is the historical and national faith of the Qazaqs, it is not easy to believe that exclusion of *Who Is Jesus?* from the last publication was an accident.

In the next section, I examine the history of Islam among Qazaqs and evaluate the truthfulness of the claims about its peaceful spread.

The Spread of Islam

In this section, I argue that the spread of Islam among the Qazaq tribes in particular and throughout Central Asia in general was far from peaceful and voluntary. The traditional Islamic sources contradict the arguments about the peaceful spread of Islam in the first place. The Qur'an, hadith literature, and classical Islamic historians celebrate the defeat of the nations they viewed as infidels. There is a hadith that says, "Allah's Apostle said, 'The Hour will not be established until you fight with the Turks; people with small eyes, red faces, and flat noses. Their faces will look like shields coated with leather. The Hour will not be established till you fight with people whose shoes are made of hair.'"⁸⁹ According to this hadith, the Turks, the ancestors of the Qazaqs, must be fought by the Muslims. Militant language of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources often means victory and defeat in actual warfare. Instead of diving into discussions over what "jihad" means, I will base my arguments on classical Islamic texts and traditional Muslim interpretations.

⁸⁷ Toraygirov, *The Rain of Sariarqa*, 151; Toraygirov, *Two Volume Collections of Compositions* (Almaty: Gilim, 1993), 139; Toraygirov, *Alash Urani: The Selected Compositions* (Almaty: Altin Qalam, 2002), 120; Toraygirov, *Three Volume Collections of Compositions* (Almaty: Zhibek Zholy, 2003), 42.

⁸⁸ Sultanmahmut Toraygirov, *The Circle of the World Rolls* (Almaty: International Club of Almaty, 2009).

⁸⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 4, book 52, no. 179, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_4_52.php.

For instance, the famous verse Qur'an 9:5 (a.k.a. the verse of the sword) explicitly commands the Muslims to slay infidels and idol worshippers. Before proceeding further, for fairness, I must acknowledge the modern Muslim response to this criticism. Asma Afsaruddin brings up multiple medieval interpreters' explanations of Qur'an 9:5 and insists that the verse refers to an isolated circumstance and is not a general principle for the spread of Islam.⁹⁰ However, other traditional Islamic literature—such as *Sira*, *Maghazi*, *Futuh*, and countless hadith narratives—report Muslim conquests and military expeditions. Regardless of the historicity of these books, it is clear that early Muslim communities commended launching wars against non-Muslims. In other words, if all of the Islamic conquests and military expeditions described in the literature took place in history, then Islam cannot be a religion that spread peacefully. If those wars were a product of Muslim authors' imagination and creativity, then violence is something wished for and desired by Muslims.

The historical truth regarding those who praise Muslim conquests in Islamic literature must be somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, from the non-Islamic literature, we know that Arabs launched wars against Romans and Persians, who were not Muslims. On the other hand, the victories and feats of Muslim warriors are overexaggerated in Islamic literature. Even today in the twenty-first century, non-Muslims are not safe in Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia), whereas Muslims enjoy the rights of free speech and expression of thought in the Western world.

⁹⁰ Asma Afsaruddin refers to al-Tabari, al-Wahidi, Mujahidi, and others. However, the most interesting interpretation is from al-Qummi, where Afsaruddin writes, "It is worth noting that Furat regards Qur'an 9:6 as abrogating Qur'an 9:5." Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88-89. It is difficult to accept that 9:6 abrogates 9:5, whereas matters are the opposite for the inverse. It is a well-known fact that all four Sunni schools of thought (Madhhabs) reached the consensus that 9:5 and 9:29 abrogate the peaceful verses—that is, 9:5 and 9:29 abrogate verses that say to leave non-Muslims alone or to restrain oneself to only warning or debating with non-Muslims. Thus, it was widely accepted among Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an that the Qur'an commands a literal war against the infidels and people of the book. See Ella Landau-Tasseron, "Jihad," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 3, *J-O*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 40.

Therefore, it is unbelievable to imagine that medieval Muslims would have spread their faith exclusively in a peaceful manner. It is even more challenging to expect tolerance from typically cruel Mongol and Turkic rulers after their conversion to Islam. The names of the Muslim rulers Berke Khan and Ozbek Khan may not be familiar to the general audience, but the name of Tamerlane, a Turkic-Mongol ruler and zealous Muslim, is well-known due to his excessive ferocity toward his enemies.⁹¹ Thus, we have a religion with traditions that welcome violence and Central Asian rulers known for their fierceness; the synthesis of the two precludes the peaceful spread of Islam in the region.

An important note is necessary for a discussion on the spread of Islam among the early ancestors of the Qazaqs. Devin DeWeese, in his book *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, discusses the issue from the perspective that Islam was brought to the Golden Horde.⁹² However, the historical sequence of events is in fact the other way around—Mongols came to the Muslim lands.

The earliest arrival of Islam in Central Asia was by the means of military expeditions as early as the Umayyads, who were in power five centuries before the Mongol conquests. Qutayba ibn Muslim (d. 716) was the commander of Muslims conquering Central Asia. His swift conquests reached as far as the modern territories of Uzbekistan, which border Qazaqstan.⁹³ When the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads, the borders of the Islamic caliphate expanded further. Within the Abbasid Empire emerged the Samanid dynasty in Central Asia, which later became an independent state.⁹⁴ The

⁹¹ I will introduce Berke Khan and Ozbek Khan below.

⁹² Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 5.

⁹³ Clifford E. Bosworth notes that Qutayba's success was due to his military skill and ruthlessness. Bosworth's statement supports my argument that Islam was introduced to Central Asians by the power of the sword. Clifford E. Bosworth, "Kutayba b. Muslim," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 5, *KHE-MAHI*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 541.

⁹⁴ Michael Bonner refers to the geographic and economic context that gave Samanids more freedom compared to the other provinces of the Abbasid Empire. In other words, Samanids were

Samanids fell under the pressure of the Qarakhanids, who ruled the region for nearly three centuries.⁹⁵ Qarakhanids were succeeded by the Khawarzmian Empire, which fell under the Mongols.⁹⁶ All of the empires replacing one another were Muslims except the Mongols. Before the Mongol marches, with few exceptions, most of the Qazaq tribes lived outside of those empires in the north. Thus, most Qazaq tribes were exposed to Islam within and during the Mongol Empire.

The next crucial question is the broader political and historical context within the Mongol Empire surrounding the rulers' decision to adopt Islam as a state religion. Simply speaking, the Mongol Empire was too vast to be ruled from one center. After the death of the great Genghis Khan, the empire was divided among his sons, who would eventually go to war with one another. When the empire expanded to the southeast and conquered Muslim powers, Mongols, in their tradition of religious tolerance, allowed Islam to remain alive.⁹⁷ But more importantly, one of the most robust military policies of the Mongols that brought them success was to recruit soldiers from among the conquered people. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mongol rulers needed to claim or pretend to be

geographically far away from Baghdad and resided right on the Silk Road, which made them economically independent from Baghdad. Michael Bonner, "The Waning of Empire," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Formation of the Islamic World Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 344-46. See also Richard Frye, "The Samanids," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, *The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. Richard Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 136.

⁹⁵ Svat Soucek writes, "The Qarakhanids were by then Muslims like the Samanids, and the fervor of some khans seems to have surpassed that of their predecessors." The emphasis here is that Muslim Qarakhanids replaced Muslim Samanids. Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83.

⁹⁶ Regarding the Islamic nature of the Khwarazmian Empire, Robert Irwin writes, "The empire of the Kharazmshahs (or Khwarazmians) was certainly the greatest power in the Muslim world in the opening decades of the thirteenth century." Robert Irwin, "The Rise of the Mamluks," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 5, c. 1198-c. 1300, ed. David Abulafia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 610.

⁹⁷ However, their religious tolerance was selective and limited. For instance, Muslims were forbidden from halal slaughter and circumcision. See Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and The Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 306-7. Qubilai Khan went the farthest and issued a death penalty for halal slaughter. See Christopher P. Atwood, "Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century," *International History Review* 26, no. 2 (2004): 251.

Muslim in order to please their freshly conquered subjects. It was essential for Mongol conquests within Islamic lands because they now had to deal with the new subjects, who were unified under a religion that dramatically differed from previously conquered steppe tribes who had no unifying ideology. In this regard, the name of Berke Khan (d. 1266) is usually listed as the first Khan of the Mongol Empire to accept Islam.⁹⁸

As Beatrice Forbes Manz rightly points out, by the time of Berke, Mongols already were in touch with the Europeans since Western Christendom was seeking the Mongol alliance to fight the Muslims. But Berke's situation forced him to accept Islam and side with Mamluks in order to address his own challenges. He needed this alliance because at the time the Mongol Empire was going through internal turbulence, and there was infighting between the Mongol rulers.⁹⁹ To put it simply, Berke's situation forced him to seek Muslim help to fight other Mongol rulers. Thus, he opened the door for the spread of Islam in the Golden Horde for political reasons, and his religious loyalty was very questionable. The vast territories of the Golden Horde were within the modern territory of Qazaqstan.

The alleged conversion of Ozbek Khan (d. 1341, also spelled Özbek or Uzbek) was the next step for the Islamization of the Golden Horde. The conversion narrative of Ozbek Khan is legendary, composed by the later generation of Timurid Muslims, rather than a reflection of the actual historical event. According to this conversion story, Baba Tukles, a Muslim, came to the Khan's court for a contest with shamans. The Khan promised to accept the winner's religion. In order to find out whose religion is true, contestants had to be thrown into the oven with fire. The shaman thrown into the oven

⁹⁸ For instance, Ira M. Lapidus makes a sharp distinction between the Islamic faith of Berke Khan and Ozbek Khan and the consequences for the Golden Horde. Berke's faith is criticized as insincere, whereas Ozbek is praised for his true faith in Islam. See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 418.

⁹⁹ Beatrice Forbes Manz, "The Rule of the Infidels: the Mongols and the Islamic World," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3, *The Eastern Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145.

died immediately, whereas even the hairs of Baba Tukles did not catch fire after he had been in the oven for an extended period of time. Thus, Uzbek Khan accepted Islam when he saw the apparent winner and, thus, the truthfulness of Islam.¹⁰⁰

Aside from the apparent allusion to Daniel 3 in the Old Testament, two historical problems need to be addressed regarding this conversion narrative. First, DeWeese himself points out that the story was written by Ötemish Hajjī around the 1550s, whom he quotes as saying, “The words and stories written in this work are not found in any *daftar* or chronicle; I have written all of them from what I have heard. And it is well known that most of the talk that one hears is a lie.”¹⁰¹ Considering the two-century gap between Uzbek Khan’s life and his miraculous conversion story, the narrative cannot be accepted as anything but a legend created around the 1550s. The second problem is that modern scholarship does not possess compelling evidence that would have indicated the degree of the Mongol rulers’ exposure to Islam. DeWeese rightly notes that popular Muslim accounts are of later origin and are not contemporary to the events they describe. Moreover, he writes, “But we find no written sources arguing the importance of converting the Mongols to Islam, nor any urging Sufis or *akhīs* to carry Islam to the infidels.”¹⁰²

Regarding Mongol rulers’ support of Islam, Istvan Vasary rightly notes, “It was in the third and fourth generation of the Chinggisids that the Islamic conversion of the rulers launched the process of the total, large-scale Islamisation of Mongols both in the Golden Horde and Iran.”¹⁰³ Uzbek Khan’s conversion to Islam was crucial for the

¹⁰⁰ DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 157-58.

¹⁰¹ DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 144.

¹⁰² DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, 136.

¹⁰³ Istvan Vasary, “Yasa and Shari’a: Islamic Attitudes towards the Mongol Law in the Turco-Mongolian World (from the Golden Horde to Timur’s Time),” in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism*, ed. Robert Gleave and Istvan T. Kristo-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 77.

religious life of the Golden Horde. Badr al-Din al-Ayni (d. 1453), an Islamic historian, reported that Ozbek Khan sought to convert the Golden Horde to Islam upon his ascension to the throne. When Ozbek Khan faced resistance from his subjects to accept Islam, he ordered them to be sentenced to death.¹⁰⁴

Thus, we have two accounts of the Golden Horde rulers' accepting Islam—first, Berke Khan's politically motivated conversion and then Ozbek Khan's alleged sincere faith. However, the effect of these Khans' conversion was not impactful enough to affect the Qazaq tribes' religious life. Hence, the question remains open as to when Qazaqs or the early ancestors of the Qazaqs accepted Islam. The answer is that the significant spread of Islam took place thanks to Tamerlane's military campaigns. It is important to note that Tamerlane was born and raised near Samarkand, which fell under the conquest of Qutayba in the eighth century. Thus, by the time of Tamerlane, this region of Uzbekistan was thoroughly Islamicized.

Nevertheless, the version of Islam that Tamerlane was accustomed to was highly syncretistic, which he exported when he became the world conqueror. Regarding his religiosity, Manz writes, "Temur's religious practices with their admixture of Turco-Mongolian shamanistic elements belonged to the Sufi tradition of the marches, and his primary religious loyalty belonged almost certainly to the Naqshbandi Sufi order whose power and influence was already well fixed in Transoxiana."¹⁰⁵ Ahmad ibn Arabshah (1389-1450), the famous biographer and contemporary of Tamerlane, describing his

¹⁰⁴ I consulted the Russian translation of the excerpts from Badr al-Din al-Ayni's book *The Pearl of Necklace*. See Владимир Г. Тизенгаузен, *Сборник Материалов, Относящихся к Истории Золотой Орды*, том 1, *Извлечения из Сочинений Арабских* (Санкт-Петербург, 1881), 515-16. https://archive.org/details/libgen_00158347/page/n263/mode/2up?q=%D0%9E%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BA. [Vladimir G. Tiesenhasen, *The Collection of the Material Related to the History of the Golden Horde*, vol. 1, *Excerpts from the Arabic Compositions* (Saint-Petersburg, 1881), 515-16.]

¹⁰⁵ Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 17.

ruthlessness, wrote that Tamerlane erected towers from the skulls of his enemies.¹⁰⁶ We do not know for sure if he built the same towers in conquered cities of the Golden Horde, but we do know that Toktamys (1342-1406), the last ruler of the Golden Horde, rightly could have been considered the archenemy of Tamerlane.¹⁰⁷ Islam, in the form of Yassawi Sufism, entered the modern Qazaqstan region toward the end of Tamerlane Toktamys's wars and lives. Tamerlane died in 1405, and Toktamys died in 1406. Before his death, Tamerlane, who once built towers of skulls, ordered the construction of the Ahmad Yassawi Mausoleum to venerate the Sufi Shaykh (1093-1166).¹⁰⁸ In chapter 5, therefore, I will discuss Yassawi Sufism and its impact on the Islamization of the Qazaqs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the religious history of the Qazaq people and discovered that historical and archaeological findings do not support the argument that Islam is *the* ancestral faith of Qazaqs. Nor do these findings conform with the statement that the pre-Islamic religion Tengrism was monotheistic and thus allowed ancient Turks to switch easily to monotheistic Islam. Moreover, non-monotheistic Zoroastrianism and even Buddhism seem to have no less merit than Islam to be called the ancestral faith of the Qazaqs. Similarly, the history of Christianity among Turkic tribes attested by textual artifacts and historical records. The presence of Islam is attested on several occasions, but it was not introduced by means of the peaceful proclamation and spread of the faith.

¹⁰⁶ Ahmad Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane: The Life of the Great Amir*, trans. J. H. Sanders, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 125.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 198-99.

¹⁰⁸ Manz writes, "One of the most splendid and beautiful building complexes done at Temur's orders was the shrine of Shaykh Ahmad Yasawi." Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, 17.

From its earliest arrival to the Sufi emergence in the region, Islam was spread either by cruel rulers or to serve the political needs of the Khans.

As for final remarks, it is worth pointing out that the teachings of Islam remained within the southern borders of post-Soviet Central Asia until the most recent times. Even then, new converts in the modern territories of Qazaqstan did not manifest sincere and pure Islamic faith because by the time of Russian colonization, the vast majority of the Qazaqs either were not Muslims at all or professed the highly syncretized Yassawi Sufism. Also, one should note that all of the Islamic scholars from Central Asia emerged during the pre-Mongolian conquests when the Muslims were in power, which initially was introduced forcefully during the time of Qutayba ibn Muslim. Abu Hanifa, al-Maturidi, al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and other renowned Muslim scholars were born outside of Qazaq lands and spoke Arabic, which makes them culturally and linguistically disconnected from the Turkic tribes. In the next chapter I will examine Hanafi Maturidism, which is the state recognized and promoted version of Islam in Qazaqstan.

CHAPTER 4

HANAFI MATURIDISM

In this chapter, I examine the history of Hanafi Maturidism in modern Qazaqstan since, Qazaqs today are taught that it was the main version of Islam of our ancestors. To understand the history of Maturidism today in Central Asia, particularly in Qazaqstan, one needs to note that the time frame between the first arrival of Islam in Central Asia and the Islamization of the region took a long time. Muslim feet first stepped in Central Asia in the eighth century, and Qazaqstan territory became a Muslim land only by the sixteenth century. Among Qazaqs, even in the climax of the spread of Islam in the eighteenth century, the religion remained a non-scriptural and highly syncretized popular spirituality—Yassawi Sufism. Alma Sultangalieva is one of the several Qazaq historians to name who agrees with the shallow profession of Islam up until the eighteenth century.¹

But from the early twentieth century, with the rise of the Soviet Union, Islam, like other religions, was banned. Islam restored its grip in Central Asia when the USSR collapsed in 1991. In this chapter, I argue that Maturidism became a popularized branch of Islam in Qazaqstan only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. To substantiate this statement, I examine the biographies, works, and main ideas of al-Maturidi (d. 944; founder of Maturidism) and Abu Hanifa (d. 767; founder of Hanafi madhhab) to see if they indeed had a significant impact on the Qazaq people's religious life.

¹ Алма Султангалиева, “Эволюция Ислама в Казахстане,” Центральная Азия и Кавказ, accessed May 6, 2021, https://ca-c.org.ru/journal/1999/cac-05-1999/st_06_sultangal.shtml. [Alma Sultangalieva, “Evolution of Islam in Kazakhstan,” Central Asia and Caucasus.] Sultangalieva points out that Qazaqs were not familiar with the classical version of Islam until they started interacting closely with Tatars under the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Maturidism needs to be studied in its broader historical and theological context—Hanafi madhhab. Also, crucial to note that both Abu Hanifa and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi spoke and wrote in Arabic and lived under the Muslim Persian powers (Hanifa under the Abbasids and al-Maturidi under the Samanids).² Arabic never was the native or primary language for the Qazaqs. Qazaq tribes spoke a Turkic language and lived a Turkic-Mongolian nomadic lifestyle. Consequently, the language and cultural barrier between the Qazaqs and Hanafi Maturidism was great.

I first briefly examine the history and theology of Hanafi madhhab to provide a context for Maturidism. Examining Hanafi madhhab includes the biography of its founder Abu Hanifa, his works, and his teachings. Second, I present Maturidism, which includes the biography of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, the founder of Maturidism, and his teachings. Third, I examine the modern Qazaqs' perspectives on Maturidism as they view it as a historical faith of the nation. Fourth, the geographic spread of Maturidism disproves Qazaqs' argument because promoters of Maturidism lived outside of the modern territories of Qazaqstan.

Introductory Notes on Hanafi Madhhab

Islam, as the second-largest religion in the world, consists of many branches, denominations, and sects within itself. The two main groups of Islam today are Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. In the traditional history of Islam, the division into Shi'as and Sunnis arose right after the prophet Muhammad's death over the debate about who should be the prophet's successor. One group believed a companion of the prophet should lead the Muslims, whereas the other group insisted on the candidacy of a household member of

² Maturidism is always mentioned along with Hanafism. For instance, Elton L. Daniel writes, "Likewise, the influence of the legal school of Abu Hanifa and the theology of al-Maturidi were pervasive in the Samanid Islamic east, but were neither monolithic there nor absent elsewhere." Elton L. Daniel, "The Islamic East," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Formation of the Islamic World Sixth to Eleventh Century*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 501. It should be noted that the southern most parts of modern Qazaqstan partially were within the northern most parts of Samanid Empire.

Muhammad. Since the prophet Muhammad did not have a son, Muslims had to choose either Abu Bakr (573-634), the companion of the prophet, or the closest male relative, Ali ibn Abi Talib (600-661) the cousin (and a companion) to become the next leader.

Unlike Shi'as who insisted on the concept of *Ahl al-Bayt* (أهل البيت), which refers to the household of the prophet Muhammad as the legitimate rulers of the Muslim community, Sunnis came up with the concept of prioritizing the tradition and community of the prophet Muhammad. The word Sunni is a derivative of the Arabic phrase *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jama'ah* (أهل السنة والجماعة), which means the followers of the tradition and the community. Abu Bakr won the campaign, but supporters of Ali did not accept his leadership. Since winners write the history and comprise the majority, today, most Muslims are Sunnis.

The term madhhab is often associated with Islamic jurisprudence. Gregory Mack writes, “The shari’a, imposed on humankind by God’s revelation and embodied in the foundational texts of the Qur’an and hadith, is explained and elaborated by the interpretive activity of jurists.”³ Thus, madhhab is the way of interpreting and applying the Islamic law—Shari’a. Hanafi madhhab is one of the four major schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. The other three are Shafi’i, Maliki, and Hanbali madhhabs, each of them named after the (supposed) founder. The final introductory note on these groups is in the words of W. Watt Montgomery, who wrote, “It is convenient to speak about the Hanafites as a distinct group or school although at first—probably until after 850—there was no clear line of demarcation.”⁴ Therefore, Hanafi Muslims, in beginning, probably, did not self-identify as Hanafi Muslims. In the next two sections, I introduce the biography of Abu Hanifa and his contribution to *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”).

³ Gregory Mack, “Jurisprudence,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 288.

⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (1998; repr., Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 285.

Abu Hanifa (699-767): Biography

The name “Abu Hanifa” was not his actual name, his actual name was Nu'man bin Thabit bin Marzuban. No one can say with certainty how Nu'man bin Thabit bin Marzuban became Abu Hanifa. One of the explanations states that Hanifa is the name of his daughter who was very pious and intelligent. She even had a group of students she mentored in religious matters. Once, some women asked her how she could consolidate people of different genders and families to work for the common good. To their question, Hanifa requested each of them to bring a cup of milk and fill the jar. When they did so, she asked them if anyone is able to distinguish which part of milk was brought by whom. Then these women understood that despite gender and/or family differences, people still can work toward the common good. Because of his daughter's piety and intelligence, people began to call Nu'man bin Thabit bin Marzuban father of Hanifa, which in Arabic is Abu Hanifa.⁵

According to another tradition, Abu Hanifa had only one child, and it was a son, which precludes the narrative about his pious daughter. This tradition's explanation of Abu Hanifa's name states that he always carried with him a writing instrument under his belt. The word Hanifa in an Iraqi dialect can communicate the meaning of this writing instrument. Therefore, people called him Abu Hanifa.⁶ I do not find this explanation of Abu Hanifa's name convincing, but I acknowledge that most scholars today are inclined to think that Abu Hanifa had a son. The supposed son's name was Hammad ibn Abu Hanifah, and he is mentioned as one of the transmitters of Abu Hanifa's teachings.⁷ Nevertheless, Hammad, if he ever existed, was not the main figure contributing to the

⁵ Махалля, “История о том, как Ан-Ну’ман стал Абу Ханифой,” last updated May 15, 2015, http://mahalla1.ru/history_rubric/interesting/istoriya-o-tom-kak-an-numan-stal-abu-xanifoj.php. [Mahallya, “The Story of An-Nu'man Becoming Abu Hanifa.”]

⁶ Духовное Управление Мусульман Республики Татарстан, ““Маленькая Тайна’ в Имени Имама Абу-Ханифы,” last updated July 31, 2016, http://dumrt.ru/ru/news/news_14308.html. [Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan, “‘A Small Secret’ in the Name of Imam Abu Hanifa.”]

⁷ The question remains as to why Abu Hanifa's name is not Abu Hammad.

spread of Hanafism. Below I will show that Abu Yusuf (d. 798), one of the students of Abu Hanifa, was the main propagator of Hanafism.

Abu Hanifa was born in Kufa during the time of the Umayyad caliphate. According to the traditional Sunni Muslims, when Abu Hanifa was sixteen years old, he accomplished Hajj with his father. During the Hajj, he had a chance to meet some of the companions of Muhammad, particularly, he met Abdullah ibn al-Harith. Thanks to this Hajj, Abu Hanifa heard from the companions many deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad. It is also reported that Abu Hanifa met the great companion of Muhammad Anas ibn Malik. Anas ibn Malik (d. 709) was Muhammad's companion for ten years helping him with daily routines.⁸

To illustrate the importance of the narratives of Abu Hanifa's interaction with the prophet Muhammad's companions, one may compare it to the Christian traditions claiming that Polycarp of Smyrna (69-167) met John the apostle, and Clement I (35-99) met apostle Paul. But neither of them ever mentioned that they met any of the apostles. Most likely, these narratives came to life to serve the polemical and theological challenges of the later generation of Christians. Similarly, as a great Muslim theologian and jurist, Abu Hanifa's biography needed a narrative to support his credentials as a teacher.

The traditions regarding Abu Hanifa's education claim that he studied in Kufa. Among his teachers were well-known scholars such as Ata ibn Abi Rabah (d. 732/733), Hisham ibn Urwah (d. 772), and Nafi 'al-Madani (d. 785).⁹ Abu Hanifa also was a student of Ja'far as-Sadiq. One of his classmates was Malik ibn Anas, who was the

⁸ U. F. 'Abd-Allāh, "Abu Hanifa," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, last updated July 19, 2011, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/abu-hanifa-noman-b>.

⁹ 'Abd-Allāh, "Abu Hanifa."

founder of the Maliki school of thought.¹⁰ Abu Hanifa's interest in Islam developed through his family tradition. His grandfather was a slave captured by the Muslims who conquered Kabul.¹¹ It seems that these reports on Abu Hanifa's education sought to highlight his theological credentials. Eerik Dickinson writes, "Around the beginning of the fourth/tenth century some Hanafites, including Ahmad b. al-Salt, started to write biographies and musnads which were aimed at establishing the credentials of the eponym of their school in the discipline of hadith."¹²

Abu Hanifa's vocation was not limited to studying and teaching. He was also a trader which made him wealthy person and he got involved in political intrigues which led to his imprisonment. Abu Hanifa was born during the reign of the Umayyads and continued teaching when the Abbasids took over. He was a supporter of the unsuccessful Zaydi revolt against the Umayyad dynasty.¹³

We do not know if any of the stories about Abu Hanifa are historically reliable. But in this research, I am interested in what Sunni Muslims believe about Abu Hanifa and how it affects the modern Qazaqs' historical claims. Therefore, the stories mentioned above are necessary as they shape what Muslims choose to believe today. Abu Hanifa's biography demonstrates that he never interacted with Central Asian Turkic tribes. Thus, during the lifetime of Abu Hanifa, he did not reach the Qazaq tribes. The next section will examine the major features of Abu Hanifa's teachings based on the books attributed to him.

¹⁰ Cyril Glassé, "Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta," in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 23. Ja'far as Sadiq was the founder of Ja'afari school of thought among the Shi'a Muslims.

¹¹ Carl Brockelmann, *History of Islamic People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), 110.

¹² Eerik Dickinson, "Ahmad b. al-Salt and His Biography of Abu Hanifa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 3 (1996): 406.

¹³ Glassé, "Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta," 23.

Interpretive Methods of Abu Hanifa

One way to describe Abu Hanifa's approach to Islamic jurisprudence is a rationalization of Shari'a. As already mentioned, the primary sources for Shari'a were the Qur'an and the traditions about the prophet Muhammad's deeds, sayings, and community. The Qur'an and traditions, however, did not address all possible circumstances that would require a legal ruling. Therefore, an interpretative method and application were needed. Adamec W. Ludwig argues that Abu Hanifa responded to this need by using the principles of Qiyas (analogical reasoning) and allowing Ra'y (personal opinion).¹⁴ Whereas according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, it was the other way around, Abu Hanifa primarily relied on Ra'y and occasionally used Qiyas.¹⁵

The term Qiyas is used to observe equality or close similarity between the Qur'anic text and a relevant hadith. Then Qiyas functions as an extension of Shari'a since Shari'a dealt with an original case that was regulated by the text of the Qur'an, hadith, and/or sunnah. These original principles are extended through Qiyas to apply to new cases. Thus, Qiyas was not the origination of new law but rather an application of existing law.¹⁶

Ra'y is described as a jurist's personal opinion based on his studies of religious sources. But at the time of Abu Hanifa, hadith literature, the second most important source of Shari'a did not even exist in written form. Reliable hadith collections by Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim were not yet compiled, and *Muhammad's Biography (Sira)* was still in the process of origination by Ibn Ishaq.¹⁷ Therefore, Ra'y was the only option

¹⁴ Adamec W. Ludwig, "Abu Hanifah," in *Historical Dictionary of Islam*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements 37 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 27.

¹⁵ John L. Esposito, ed., "Abu Hanifah, al-Numan ibn Thabit ibn Zuta," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁶ Mohammad H. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 264-65.

¹⁷ Glassé, "Hadith," "Ibn Ishaq," and "Ibn Hisham, Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik," in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 159, 195. When I say "reliable hadith collections," I do not mean that these

to solve whatever situation and case were brought to the jurist.¹⁸ But the predicament arose as Muhammad Shafiq wrote, “The subject of controversy was whether or not use of Ra’y in Islamic law would affect its divine nature.”¹⁹ Comparing the two: Ra’y and Qiyas, Ahmad Hasan summarized, “After studying ra’y and qiyas one concludes that the scope of the former is much wider than that of the latter, for ra’y stand on the legal acumen of a lawyer, while qiyas is based on some authority, i.e. a text of the Qur’an, or of a tradition or ijma”²⁰ Regardless, of the primary method for Abu Hanifa either ra’y or qiyas, it is clear that both were at use. These methods are one or two steps removed away from the Qur’anic and hadith literature.

Therefore, if we accept the Qazaq Muslims’ argument that classical Islam, particularly Hanafism’s presence in the Qazaq history was strong, then from the time of Abu Hanifa himself, it was not the version of Islam based on the Qur’an and hadith. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Qazaqs had nothing in common with Abu Hanifa’s teachings. In the next section, I will demonstrate how Abu Hanifa’s teachings coincided with the Qazaq beliefs.

Historical Background

From the history of Islam, we know that the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids in 750-751.²¹ When the Abbasids took power, they wanted the religious

collections are historically reliable textual sources; I merely mean that these collections are considered by Muslims as the most reliable hadith collections.

¹⁸ Hallaq B. Wael, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul Al-Fiqh* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15. See also Wael, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 114; Wael, *Shari’a Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44-45.

¹⁹ Muhammad Shafiq, “The Meaning of Ra’y and Nature of Its Usage in Islamic Law,” *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 1 (1984): 22.

²⁰ Ahmad Hasan, “The Principle of Qiyas in Islamic Law: An Historical Perspective,” *Islamic Studies* 15, no. 3 (1976): 203 (*ijma* means a consensus).

²¹ For discussions on the historical political background of the Umayyads versus the Abbasids, see Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formative Period of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chaps. 11-12.

authorities to take political positions and serve them. Regarding this, Tayeb El-Hibri noted, “Unlike the Umayyads, the ‘Abbasids displayed an interest in the activities of religious scholars and tried to have them serve in official capacities.”²² Abu Hanifa, as a leading scholar of his time, was very attractive to the Abbasid caliphs. The brother of the first Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, wanted Abu Hanifa to take the position of the chief judge in Baghdad. But Abu Hanifa refused this proposal and consequently was put in jail.²³ The position of chief judge in Baghdad was taken by one of Abu Hanifa’s students, Abu Yusuf (731-798).²⁴ Most likely, al-Mansur needed the support of religious authorities to consolidate the caliphate since there were many threats to his leadership/ruling.²⁵

The story of Abu Hanifa’s refusal seems to demonstrate his piety and genuine conviction in Islam. However, the fact that his student became the chief judge tremendously impacted to the spread of the Hanafi school of thought. Ira M. Lapidus pointed out that the Hanafi school was the first jurisprudence school that was spread in the whole empire.²⁶ Paul L. Heck makes the same observation that the spread of Hanafi thought was done by Abu Yusuf.²⁷ Once Abu Yusuf was appointed as the chief judge by the Abbasids, it is not surprising that they supported the spread of the Hanafi school of thought. Regarding this, W. Heffening wrote, “Having originated in Iraq, the Hanafi

²² Tayeb El-Hibri, “The Empire in Iraq, 763-861,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Formation of the Islamic World Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 278.

²³ In fact, he was put in jail twice—first by the Umayyads and again by the Abbasids. Hiroyuki Yanagihashi, “Abu Hanifa (d 150/767),” in *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, ed. Oussama Arabi, David S. Powers, and Susan A. Spector, 9-25. *Studies in Islamic Law and Society* 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 9-25.

²⁴ Joseph Schacht, “Abu Yusuf Yakub b. Ibrahim al-Ansari,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 1, *A-B*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb. (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 164.

²⁵ Hugh Kennedy, “Al-Mansur,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 6, *MAHK-MID*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 427-28.

²⁶ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 126.

²⁷ Paul L. Heck, “Abu Yusuf (ca. 731-98),” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 15-16.

school was favored by the first ‘Abbasid Caliphs. It has always been well represented in its home country and in Syria.”²⁸ Thus, Abu Hanifa personally did little for the spread of his teachings; rather, it was accomplished by his student holding significant political power.

As the final note regarding Abu Yusuf’s role in the spread of Hanafism, it is worth mentioning Nurit Tsafir’s categorization of unquestionable, questionable, and semi-Hanafis. Interestingly, Tsafir names only Baghdadi Muhammad b. Sama’a (d. 847) and Basri Hilal al-Ra’y (d. 859). But does not mention Abu Yusuf as an unquestionable Hanafi scholar. Instead, Tsafir writes regarding questionable Hanafis, “For example, some scholars followed the Hanafi legal method together with another legal method. Are they to be considered Hanafis or not?”²⁹ Tsafir’s question raises another question if Abu Yusuf’s Hanafism is unquestionable. For instance, Sohbi Mahmassani noted that Abu Yusuf disagreed with Abu Hanifa on different occasions. He wrote about Abu Yusuf, “In addition, he enriched it by his contribution to fatwas in the course of his judicial functions, and by judgments based on traditions which he believed to be authentic, and which he received based on authority of traditionalists he knew personally. This compelled him on various occasions to disagree with the views of Abu Hanifah.”³⁰ The internal debates within Islam of the ninth century demonstrate that its theology was not crystalized at the time. Also, none of these religious struggles reached the territories of Qazaqstan, disproving the modern Qazaqs historical claims that Hanafi Maturidism was the ancestral faith.

²⁸ W. Heffening, “Hanafiyya,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 3, *H-IRAM*, ed. B. Lewis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 163.

²⁹ Nurit Tsafir, *The History of Islamic an Islamic School of Law: The Early Spread of Hanafism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

³⁰ S. Mahmassani, *Falsafat al-Tashri fi al-Islam: The Philosophy of Jurisprudence in Islam*, trans. Farhat J. Ziadeh (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 21.

Source Criticism

Studying anyone's teachings should begin by identifying the sources. The issue of source criticism becomes even more pressing in the case of Abu Hanifa's teachings since the spread of Hanafism was immensely aided by the Abbasid rulers. Therefore, important to clarify what is attributed to Abu Hanifa by later Muslims and what is indeed said and written by himself. Joseph Schacht, in this regard, wrote,

Shaibani, for instance, refers at the beginning of his *Kitab al-Makharij fil-Hiyal* to the final authority of Abu Hanifa, as transmitted to him through Abu Yusuf; this does not mean that the books in question were in any way based on works or lectures of Abu Hanifa and Abu Yusuf, but implies only the general relationship of the pupil to master.³¹

Muhammad Abu Zahra insisted that Abu Hanifa did not write a book because writing books was not common in his time.³² The possible objection to this statement would have been the name of Urwah ibn Zubayr (644-713), who allegedly was the first Islamic historian and wrote a lot of books. If it was true, then the statement that Muslims did not write books during the time of Abu Hanifa would be refuted. However, Muslims themselves question the validity of ibn Zubayr as the earliest historian since everything we know about him comes from Ibn Ishaq (704-767) and other later authors. The contributors of the Muslim Scholar Database write about ibn Zubayr, "It is uncertain whether he wrote a book, but there are many traditions that have been handed down in his name by Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Sa'd, and al-Tabari."³³ Thus, it is questionable if any Muslim from that period, including Abu Hanifa, ever wrote a book.

³¹ Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 238.

³² Muhammad Abu Zahra, *Imam Abu Hanifa: His Life, Opinions, and Fiqh* (n.p.: Maktabah, 1945), 54, <https://archive.org/details/ImamAbuHanifa--alhamdulillah-library.blogspot.in/pdf/page/n53/mode/2up>.

³³ Muslim Scholars Database, "'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr عروة بن الزبير,'" accessed May 12, 2022, <https://muslimscholars.info/>. This website is the database of all the known Muslim scholars from the time of the prophet Muhammad.

Carl Brockelmann a renowned oriental studies scholar noted that none of the books attributed to Abu Hanifa survived. But Brockelmann admitted that *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* could have been traced back to Abu Hanifa. He wrote, “Writings by Abū Ḥanīfa himself do not exist, but the following circulate under his name: I. al-Fiqh al-akbar I, an ‘aqīda comprising 10 articles of faith that define the ‘Orthodox’ position, compared to that of the Khārijis, the Qadariyya, the Jahmiyya, and the Shī‘a, and which, in its basic outline, may go back to Abū Ḥanīfa himself.”³⁴ In other words, we do not have any unequivocal evidence for Abu Hanifa’s authorship of *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*.

Nevertheless, Arent Jan Wensinck a Dutch historian examining the available manuscripts of *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, concludes that Abu Hanifa did not write it. Moreover, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* never circulated as a separate book. In one instance, it occurs as a part of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi’s writings, but it hardly suggests that he authored it. In another instance, which is more interesting, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* comes as part of *al-Fiqh al-Absat* another book attributed to Abu Hanifa. Wensinck believes that the copy of *al-Absat* preserved in Cairo must be authentic. He mentions that *al-Absat* was written based on Abu Hanifa’s answers on theology to his student Abu Muti al-Balkhi.³⁵

It should be noted that Wensinck refers to another document also titled as *al-Akbar al-Fiqh*, which is also attributed to Abu Hanifa. Therefore, Wensinck examines these two documents separately *al-Akbar I* (pp. 102-24) and *al-Akbar II* (pp. 188-247). If, as stated above, Wensinck believes that *al-Akbar I* might be based on Abu Hanifa’s utterances, then he completely rejects Abu Hanifa’s authorship of *al-Akbar II*.³⁶ At the

³⁴ Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Arabic Written Tradition Supplement*, vol. 1, trans. Joep Lameer (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 284.

³⁵ Arent Jan Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 122-23.

³⁶ Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 185.

same time, Wensinck was perplexed by the fact that nobody distinguished the difference between these two documents.³⁷

Regarding *Kitab al Wasiyyah* (“The Book of Bequests”), which is also attributed to Abu Hanifa, Wensinck wrote, “The authenticity of the Wasiyat Abi Hanifa can hardly be seriously defended. Nothing is known to us of the means by which such a literary work should have come down to us from Abu Hanifa.”³⁸

However, Abdur Rahman ibn Yusuf Mangera a modern Muslim scholar argues for Abu Hanifa’s authorship of *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*. His argument is based on the chain of transmitters that can be traced back to Abu Hanifa. Mangera extensively quotes from above mentioned Wensinck’s book and tries to refute his arguments point by point.³⁹ The debate between Mangera and Wensinck goes beyond the primary focus of this research but is enough to illustrate the source criticism issue with *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*.

Nevertheless, I will proceed further with the premise that Abu Hanifa wrote *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (“The Greater Knowledge”) and *Kitab al Wasiyyah* (“The Book of Bequests”), where he laid out his approaches to Shari’a and Islam in general.⁴⁰ Thankfully, the digital copies of some of the manuscripts attributed to Abu Hanifa are available online.⁴¹

³⁷ Wensinck writes, “It is a strange fact that neither in Arabic literature nor in the European catalogues of Arabic manuscripts is any discrimination made between the two.” Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 103.

³⁸ Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 185.

³⁹ Abdur Rahman ibn Yusuf Mangera, *Imam Abu Hanifa’s Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained* (2007; repr., London: White Thread Press, 2014), 25, 28.

⁴⁰ I will rely on this edition: Abu Hanifa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar: An Accurate Translation*, Ghayb, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://ghayb.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Al-Fiqh-Al-Akbar-An-Accurate-Translation.pdf>.

⁴¹ Nasafi, Maymūn ibn Muḥammad. “Baḥr al-kalām: Manuscript, undated, MS Arab 283, مخطوطة: بحر الكلام في علم التوحيد: ميمون بن محمد.” Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/islamic-heritage-project/catalog/40-990073786700203941>.

Teachings of Abu Hanifa

Al-Fiqh Al Akbar is mostly dedicated to the foundational issues of the Muslim faith. The opening statement of the book reaffirms Allah's oneness, "Allah Most High is One, not in terms of the number, but in that, he has no partner. He neither begets nor is He begotten, and there is none coequal or comparable unto Him. He is not like unto anything from among His creation and nothing from among His creation is like unto Him."⁴² This quotation demonstrates that Abu Hanifa's view on the essence of Allah fits the overall Qur'anic view. The expressions such as "He neither begets nor is He begotten, and there is none coequal or comparable unto Him." are direct quotations from Surah 112.

After stating Allah's oneness, Abu Hanifa proceeds to the descriptions of Allah's omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, justice, and other incomparable abilities. If the opening statement was true that there is no one like Allah, then no one is supposed to be omnipotent, omniscient, just, and eternal. But Abu Hanifa held that the Qur'an is uncreated. If the Qur'an is uncreated, then it must be eternal like Allah, which contradicts the earlier statement that there is no one like Allah. In response to this criticism, Abu Hanifa wrote,

Our uttering of the Qur'an is created, our writing of it is created, and our reciting it is created, but the Qur'an is uncreated. Whatever Allah Most High has said in the Qur'an in quoting Musa (Moses) and other prophets (upon them be peace), and Pharaoh and Iblis (Satan), is all the speech of Allah Most High informing [us about them. The speech of Allah Most High is uncreated, while the speech of Musa and that of other created beings is created. The Qur'an is the speech of Allah Most High therefore pre-eternally existent-unlike their speech.⁴³

The argument that the speech of eternal Allah, too, must be eternal makes sense. If Muslims believe that the Qur'an is uncreated and, in this way, shares one attribute, eternity, of Allah, then they also should be able to accept the doctrine of the

⁴² Abu Hanifa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 33.

⁴³ Abu Hanifa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 34.

Trinity. Particularly Christian arguments that derive from the first chapter of John regarding Christ's divinity, where it says Jesus is the word of God.

But the Islamic doctrine of abrogation (*Naskh*; نسخ) prevents making an analogy between Christ and the Qur'an. The doctrine of abrogation is Islamic teaching based on the Qur'anic texts such as 2:106 and 16:101, which state that Allah replaces fully or partially one verse of the Qur'an (or ruling) with another (better one). Considering the belief that the Qur'an is uncreated and eternal, the doctrine of abrogation raises a simple question, are the abrogated (or replaced) and abrogating (or replacing) texts of the Qur'an eternal and uncreated too? Do both abrogated and abrogating verses coexist eternally?⁴⁴

Another crucial aspect of Abu Hanifa's teaching in relation to created and uncreated is the doctrine of predestination. It derives from the same statement that Allah and his speech, the Qur'an are uncreated. Therefore, everything else, including one's sayings and deeds, is created by Allah. In other words, Allah, in his omnipotence, predestines even righteous and evil, even obedience and disobedience of people to him. Abu Hanifa wrote,

All actions of servants pertaining to their motion and stillness are in reality their acquisition, while Allah Most High is their Creator. They are all through His will, knowledge, ordainment, and decree. All acts of obedience are obligatory through the command of Allah, His love, approval, knowledge, will, ordainment, and decree; and all acts of disobedience are through His knowledge, ordainment, decree, and will, but not through His love, approval, or command.⁴⁵

The final phrase "but not through His love, approval, or command" leaves room for the humans' freedom of will. Regarding the free will, Abu Hanifa wrote, "Allah

⁴⁴ Debates on whether the Qur'an was created have taken place within Sunni Muslim circles. Abu Hanifa's view later became the orthodox view, whereas the opposing view mostly held by the Mutazilites was condemned as heresy. Some Mutazilites denied the doctrine of abrogation. Ahmad Hasan, "The Theory of Naskh," *Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (1965): 184-85. See also Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodard, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 75.

⁴⁵ Abu Hanifa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 36.

does not compel anyone to unbelief or true faith. He does not create people believers or unbelievers but creates them as [pure] individuals; to believe or disbelieve is the action of the servants.”⁴⁶ Thus, on the one hand, Allah created people as neutral actors with the freedom to believe or disbelieve, on the other hand, the actions that they may actualize are created by Allah too. But it is not clear if Allah creates endless actions for humans to choose from or limits the number of possible scenarios for each person.

Anyway, Abu Hanifa’s concept of predestination is a crucial aspect of his theology that comes close to the Qazaq worldview. Qazaqs have two types of predetermined destinies. First is the general predestination determining someone’s life. For instance, poverty, orphanage, wealth, royalty, happiness, and others. Qazaqs have a proverb, “ЖАЗМЫШТАН ОЗМЫШ ЖОҚ” (“Nothing can pass by what is written”). This proverb springs from the traditional belief of the Qazaqs, which says that every person’s destiny is written on his or her forehead. Often, people refer to this type of predestination to accept an unfortunate situation and comfort someone facing harsh circumstances.

The second type of predestination is the consequence of one’s choice. The vast majority of the Qazaq proverbs and words of wisdom are on making the right decision. Initially making a bad decision leads to worse conditions that cannot be changed. Therefore, Qazaq proverbs like the proverbs of any other nation often pursue warning, prohibiting, encouraging, commanding, and describing.⁴⁷ In this regard, it is worth retelling the story Qazaq Muslims put together to encourage people to perform the Islamic prayer Salat by relying on this second concept of predestination. The story begins by speaking about a man who comes to his teacher and says that performing Salat was

⁴⁶ Abu Hanifa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 36.

⁴⁷ Erik Aasland, a missionary who lived in Qazaqstan for twelve years, wrote in his PhD dissertation, “For Kazakhs, proverbs are the traditional resource for defining problems, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.” Erik Aasland, “The Narrativization of Kazakh Proverbs: College Students’ Language Ideologies Concerning ‘Community’” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2012), 1.

not written on his forehead. The teacher in response says that the man should clean himself as Islam commands and pray two times, then it will be written on his forehead that he had to pray.⁴⁸ Most importantly, the doctrine of predestination fits the statement that a person who was born Qazaq must be a Muslim. And within this Islamic life, he or she learns to navigate and make the right decisions. But the Qazaq peoples understanding of predestination does not spring from Abu Hanifa's teachings. Rather, the concepts of predestination in Hanafism and Qazaq culture were developed independently from each other. (Also, it must be remembered that many cultures and religious systems have a type of predestination.)

In his book *Kitab al Wasiyyah*, Abu Hanifa discusses thirteen different topics that are important for Muslims how to live righteously in an Islamic community. These instructions also cover the issues addressed in *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*. Therefore, there is no need to examine all of them, however, instructions 1, 2, and 7 should be pointed out since they are crucial for Abu Hanifa's theology.⁴⁹

The first instruction says that the testimony of Shahadah is a verbal proclamation and an affirmation in the heart. A mere proclamation by itself cannot be considered a sign of genuine faith (*iman*).⁵⁰ If a verbal proclamation of Shahadah were considered a genuine testimony of faith, then anyone could pretend to be a Muslim. At the same time, just the faith of the heart is also not enough, because, the people of the book would have, at least, partial iman since they also believe in God. Therefore, to be considered a true Muslim, verbal proclamation of Shahadah and its verification through

⁴⁸ ҚМДБ, “Маңдайға Жазылған,” last updated April 28, 2015, <https://www.muftyat.kz/kk/articles/edification/2015-04-28/20255-madaja-zhazyilan/>. [QMDB, “Written on Forehead.”]

⁴⁹ Abu Hanifa, *Kitab al-Wasiyyah*, trans. Tahir Mahmood Kiani (n.p.: T. M. Kiani, 2012), “Faith, Action, and What Emanates from a Person Is Created,” Kindle.

⁵⁰ Abu Hanifa, *Kitab al-Wasiyyah*, “Faith.”

the faith in heart are required.⁵¹ Of course, a Muslim had to affirm Muhammad's prophethood since it is stated in the second part of the Islamic statement of faith.⁵²

Instruction number two is dedicated to the actions. Abu Hanifa makes a distinction between faith and actions. Faith is mandatory for everyone regardless of their physical, geographical, and health conditions. But actions can be waived depending on one's circumstances. For instance, a severely sick person cannot perform prayer or fast. In the same way, a poor man does not have the ability to pay alms. But both poor and sick still must have a sincere faith.⁵³

Abu Hanifa writes three types of actions: mandatory, desirable, and prohibited. Mandatory actions are the direct commandments of Allah and are in accordance with his will, love, and desire. The desirable actions please Allah but they are not commanded by him. Prohibited actions are not commanded and they do not please Allah nor does he love them, but he created and foresaw them.⁵⁴ This point matches Abu Hanifa's doctrine of predestination mentioned above. However, the human being is still responsible for his actions or and doing the prohibited actions. Allah did not require him to do them, Allah merely created the possibility to do them. Thus, a human being is responsible for his choice.

Instruction number seven is a further development of Abu Hanifa's doctrine of predestination and human responsibility. This instruction states that a slave (he viewed all humans as slaves of Allah) is created with his actions and faith. If someone is created by Allah, then all of his or her deeds are created as well. However, this statement does not

⁵¹ Abu Hanifa, *Kitab al-Wasiyyah*, "Faith."

⁵² The second part of Shahadah regarding Muhammad's prophethood precludes any possibilities for the Insider Movement's missiological strategy. The prophet Muhammad does not meet the biblical requirements for a prophet. Therefore, we do not accept him as a true prophet of God in biblical terms.

⁵³ Abu Hanifa, *Kitab al-Wasiyyah*, "Action."

⁵⁴ Abu Hanifa, *Kitab al-Wasiyyah*, "Action."

preclude the harmony between predestination and human responsibility since the latter has the ability to desire. For instance, if someone wants to stand up, Allah can create this action for him; when Allah creates such action for someone, that person is considered a healthy man, but when Allah does not create the action, that person is considered as a sick man. Thus, both actions belong to Allah, therefore, good health is not an essential quality of human beings, rather it is the creation of Allah.

This principle is also applicable to sin. If someone wants to sin, Allah can create the action of sin, but the human being will still be responsible since he had desired it. Another example is the ability to walk. A person can walk and go to a Mosque to hear the word of Allah, or he can walk and go to sin. The same action of walking but with completely different intentions. This means that responsibility is not related to action but is related to desire. Of course, a mentally sick person who is not able to adequately judge his actions and intentions will not be responsible for his desires. However, there are certain actions that Allah creates in people regardless of their desire such as heart beating, blood circulating, breathing, and other natural processes. This means Allah creates all the actions of humans whether based on human desires or natural processes.⁵⁵

In conclusion, unlike in Tengrism, which I examined in chapters 2 and 3, Abu Hanifa's concept of predestination comes close to fatalism and requires complete submission to Islam. Modern Qazaqs argue that every Qazaq is predestined to be a Muslim, which in Abu Hanifa's terms, to be slaves of Allah. But as it was studied in chapter 2, the word Qazaq means free and independent. Therefore, Qazaqs should find a way to come to God's presence as free men, not in the robes of enslaved people.

⁵⁵ Абу Ханифа, *Аль-Васья*, Даруль-Фикр, last updated January 13, 2018, <http://darulfikr.ru/story/aqydah/al-wasiya>. This is the Russian translation of Abu Hanifa's *al-Wasiyyah* with extended comments. [Abu Hanifa, Al-Wassiya, Darul-Fikr.]

Maturidism

In this section, I will examine Maturidism, which is widely promoted in Qazaqstan as the most preferable version of Islam. Modern Qazaqs argue that pre-Soviet and pre-Russian colonization, Qazaq thinkers professed the Maturidi version of Islam. But I disagree with those statements and argue that Maturidism became popular only after 1991 when Qazaqstan became an independent country. In chapter 5, I will demonstrate that most of the pre-Russian colonization Qazaq thinkers derived their philosophies from Yassawi Sufism rather than Hanafi Maturidism. The goal of this chapter is to show the difference between Maturidism and Qazaq thinkers' thoughts. Therefore, I first examine Maturidi's theology, which will include his biography, works, and main statements. Then, I critically assess modern Qazaqs' attempts to interpret Maturidism through Qazaq philosophy.

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853-944) was born in a small village called Maturid near Samarqand in modern-day Uzbekistan.⁵⁶ Unlike Ahmed Yassawi, al-Maturidi's biography is not surrounded by legends and myths. As Ulrich Rudolf puts it, "Nothing indicates that he held any public office, nor that he possessed more disciples, popularity or even associations with the Sāmānid court of Bukhārā than anyone else."⁵⁷ In other words, he lived the simple life of an ordinary man.

Rudolf lists authors who wrote about al-Maturidi's biography, but none is available in English.⁵⁸ Similarly, Jeffrey R. Halverson laments that not much is known

⁵⁶ Samarqand was one of the two Central Asian centers of Islam. The other city was Bukhara. Both cities are in modern Uzbekistan, which is a neighboring country of Qazaqstan. Ludmila Polonskaya and Alexey Melashenko rightly point out, "In Central Asia, the Hanafi school had the largest number of adherents. . . . The two centers of Sunni theology of the Hanafi school were Samarkand and Bukhara." Ludmila Polonskaya and Alexey Melashenko, *Islam in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Reading, 2008), 10.

⁵⁷ Ulrich Rudolf, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 125. See chapter 5 for the legendary stories about Ahmad Yassawi.

⁵⁸ Rudolf, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 126. These are the names that Rudolf lists: "Abī l-Wafā' (d. 775/1373), Ibn Quṭlūbughā (d. 879/1474), Kamālpashazāde

about al-Maturidi in modern scholarship. Halverson states the language of *Kitab al-Tawhid* written by al-Maturidi is overly complex, which holds back many from working on it.⁵⁹ However, for the purpose of this project, I am more interested in the portraits of al-Maturidi in the modern Qazaq and broader Central Asian Muslim community.

Central Asians today praise his contributions to Islamic theology and apologetics. In the first place, they are proud that he was born and lived geographically close to them in the city of Samarqand. For instance, the Students Union of Uzbekistan in Ukraine, describing al-Maturidi's works, remarks, "The other works of *our ancestor* are devoted to this topic as well."⁶⁰ Almost every entry on al-Maturidi's biography written by Central Asian authors points out that he systematized theological issues in Hanafi Madhab, composed apologetical works, and wrote on the interpretation of the Qur'an. And in his works, like Ash'ari, Maturidi relied on human reasoning but did not go as far as Muta'zalites did. Therefore, his approach and overall arguments are similar to Asha'ri's.⁶¹

(d. 940/1533), Tashköprüzāde (d. 968/1560), Ḥājjī Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657), Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bayāḍī (d. 1078/1687), al-Sayyid al-Murtaḍā l-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1791), and finally, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī (d. 1304/1886)."

⁵⁹ Jeffrey R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam, The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 23.

⁶⁰ Союз Студентов Узбекистана в Украине, "Абу Мансур аль-Матуриди – Великий Теолог Средневековья (870-944)," accessed May 9, 2021, <http://student.uzbekistan.org.ua/en/news/abu-mansur-al-maturidi-velikij-teolog-srednevekovya-870-944gg.html>. [Students Union of Uzbekistan in Ukraine, "Abu Mansur al-Maturidi – Great Theologian of Medieval (870-940)."] "Этой же тематике посвящены и другие труды *нашего предка*" (italics mine).

⁶¹ Сәмет Оқанұлы, "Имам Матуриди – Мұсылмандардың Ақидасына Енген Қателерді Түзетуші," Үммет Рухани-Ағарту Порталы, accessed May 9, 2021, <https://ummet.kz/islam-tarihy/366-islam-star/11844-imam-maturidi-musylmandardyn-akidasyna-engen-katelerdi-tuzetushi.html>. [Samet Oqanuli, "Imam Maturidi – The Corrector of Mistakes Crept into the Muslims' Aqidah," Ummet Ruhani-Aghartu Portali.] For a comparison of Maturidi and Ash'ari schools, see Өбсаттар Қажы Дербесәлі, "Ақида Ілімі – Матуриди және Әшғари Мектептері," Азан, accessed May 9, 2021, <https://azan.kz/kz/maqalat/read/aqida-ilimi-maturidi-zhane-ashgari-mektepteri-11160>. [‘Absattar Qaji Derbes’ali, "The Doctrine of Aqidah – Maturidi and Ash'ari Schools," Azan.]

Source Criticism

The crucial question one must ask and answer in studying al-Maturidi's works is why he wrote in Arabic if he was born and lived near Samarqand, in modern-day Uzbekistan? The answer is that for about three centuries (710-999), Samarqand was under Muslim rulers who enforced Arabic as an administrative language.⁶² Muslims in 999 were overthrown by the Qarakhanids—a Central Asian Turkic Khanate.⁶³ Al-Maturidi lived during this time, when Arabic was the dominant language in Samarqand and the surrounding area. The work on which I will focus is *Kitab al-Tawhid*, which means the book on the oneness of God. The Cambridge facsimiles are available online.⁶⁴ However, scholars still debate the authenticity of the extant manuscripts. Daniel Gimaret, a French scholar, asked two questions: (1) Can the manuscripts indeed be attributed to al-Maturidi? (2) Do those manuscripts consist of *Kitab al-Tawhid* or other work of al-Maturidi? Gimaret answered his first question positively; to the second question, his answer was negative.⁶⁵

A Turkish historian M. Sait Ozervarli argues for the authenticity of the manuscripts. M. Sait Ozervarli's argument is based on the direct quotes of Maturidi's follower Abu l-Mu'in Maymun b. Muhammad al-Nasafi (d. 1115), citing him. Nasafi, in

⁶² S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 113-117.

⁶³ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 167. See also the chapter 3 entry on Islam.

⁶⁴ Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (MS Add. 3651), Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-03651/8>. Joseph Schacht wrote the following about these manuscripts: "(a) it is the first text to become available from the pen of the eponym of the second great school of (orthodox) Muhammadan theology, which has been curiously neglected by specialists up to now." Joseph Schacht, "New Sources for the History of Muhammadan Theology," *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953): 24.

⁶⁵ M. Sait Ozervarli, "The Authenticity of the Manuscript of Maturidi's *Kitab al-Tawhid*: A Re-Examination," *Islam Araştırmaları Dergisi* [Journal of Islamic Studies] 1 (1997): 23. The original questions in Gimaret's book are as follows: "Mais ici se pose une question préliminaire: celle de l'authenticité de ce *Tawhid*. En fait, le problème est double: 1) le texte du ms. de Cambridge est-il bien de Maturidi? 2) si oui, s'agit-il réellement de son *K. al-Tawhid*?" Daniel Gimaret, *Théories de l'acte Humain en Théologie Musulmane* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1980), 175.

his work *Tabsirat al-Adilla*, refers to Maturidi; and Ozervali brings up the fact that both *Kitab al-Tawhid* and *Tabsirat al-Adilla* contain at least ten identical or almost identical passages. Given the context—Nasafi quoting from Maturidi—Ozervali concludes that the Cambridge manuscripts of *Kitab al-Tawhid* must be authentic.⁶⁶

Even if one agrees to accept that *Kitab al-Tawhid* was written by al-Maturidi, it does not ease the task to examine it due to its complicated language. I already referred to Halverson who said that *Kitab al-Tawhid*'s complex language is the main hinderance, and the similar thought was expressed by Wilferd Madelung, who wrote that to study *Kitab al-Tawhid*, one would benefit from *Tabsirat al-Adilla*. Madelung wrote,

Abu l-Mu'in quotes from al-Maturidi most frequently and only rarely deviates from his teaching. Given the linguistic obscurity of al-Maturidi's own writings, Abu l-Mu'in's work, written in a lucid if somewhat prolix style, became the most influential and authoritative exposition of Maturidi doctrine for the later adherents of the school.⁶⁷

Therefore, it would have been worth studying *Tabsirat al-Adilla*, but it is not available to me.⁶⁸

It must be noted that Joseph Schacht believed that the Cambridge manuscript copies of *Kitab al-Tawhid* indeed were written by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi.⁶⁹ However, J. MERIC PESSAGNO brings up the fact that an inscription on the *recto* of the title page of the manuscript says, "Praise be to God for His favors to His servant who is needful of Him. [This manuscript was transcribed] by the efforts of al-Amin al-Hanafi al-Shafi'I on the

⁶⁶ Ozervali, "The Authenticity of the Manuscript of Maturidi's *Kitab al-Tawhid*," 24.

⁶⁷ Wilferd Madelung, "Abu L-Mu'in Al-Nasafi and Ash'ari Theology," in *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, vol. 2, *The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, ed. Carole Hillenbrand (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 318.

⁶⁸ As of May 2022, no library in the United States of America has this book, and it is not on sale either. I know its French edition is held at several libraries in Europe. See Abu l-Mu'in Maymun b. Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsirat al-Adilla fi usul al-din 'ala tariqat al-imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi*, 2 vols., ed. Claude Salame (Damascus: Institut Francais de Damas, 1993). But it was quoted and referred to by another Nasafi, whose biography and work I will examine in the next section.

⁶⁹ Schacht, "New Sources for the History of Muhammadan Theology," 24.

fifteenth of Sha'ban, 1150 (i.e., November 1737)."⁷⁰ The numbers in this inscription evidence that the Cambridge manuscripts are not al-Maturidi's original autographs and are very late copies. Between the Maturidi's death and the Cambridge copy, which is the only copy, at least seven centuries. Therefore, I first examine Nasafi's interpretation of al-Maturidi's theology, which is an earlier document than *Kitab al-Tawhid*. Even these introductory notes demonstrate that Maturidism, which the modern Qazaqs promote, has weak documentary support for its main source.

Nasafi's Summary of al-Maturidi Creed

History knows at least two persons pertinent to this research who are called Nasafi, and both lived in Uzbekistan and both promoted Maturidism. The first Nasafi's full name is Abu'l-Mu'in Maymun b. Muhammad al-Nasafi, who was born in 1046 and died in 1115, in the city of Nasaf, and this Nasafi is the author of *Tabsirat al-Adilla* that I mentioned above. Muslim theologians consider him the most important theologian of Maturidism in Central Asia.⁷¹ But not much is known about his biography and modern Qazaqs refer to another Nasafi in their works about Maturidism.⁷²

The second Nasafi, on whose work I will focus lived in 1068-1142, his full name is Najm ad-Din Abu Hafs an-Nasafi, and he was born in the same city as al-Maturidi, Samarqand. Abu Hafs an-Nasafi summarized al-Maturidi's views based on the

⁷⁰ J. Meric Pessagno, "The Uses of Evil in Maturidian Thought," *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984): 61.

⁷¹ Muammar Iskenderoglu, "Nasafi, Abu'l-Mu'in (c. 438-508/c. 1046-1115)," in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 367. The president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, during his visit to Nasafi's Mausoleum, noted the importance of Nasafi's legacy for the modern time. And this can be viewed as an example of post-Soviet Central Asian nations' quest for the revitalization of national identity. Uza, "President Shavkat Mirziyoyev Got Acquainted with Creative Work Carried Out in Abul-Muin an-Nasafi Mausoleum," accessed May 16, 2022, <https://uza.uz/en/posts/president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-got-acquainted-with-creative-wo-29-01-2018>.

⁷² Kymbat Karatyshkanova et al., "Background Teachings of Maturidi Formation and Its Impact on the Spiritual Knowledge of the Kazakhs," *Current Science* 112, no. 8 (2017): 1945.

first Nasafi's *Tabsirat al-Adilla*.⁷³ To examine the Abu Hafs an-Nasafi's interpretation of al-Maturidi's theology, one needs to rely on the work titled *Nasafi's Maturidi Creed*, which is an interpretation of Abu'l-Mu'in al-Nasafi's *Tabsirat al-Adilla*.

Nasafi's Maturidi Creed begins by establishing an epistemological method, which states that the cause of knowledge for the created things is three, "sound senses, true report, and reason."⁷⁴ He argues that this epistemology goes against the Sufis' epistemology. The "sound senses" for Nasafi are the five natural human senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing). His definition of the "true report" could have been employed by Yassawi Sufis to promote Sufism. Nasafi argues for two kinds of true reports. First, is a "widely-transmitted report," which means if many people attest to something, it must be accurate because it is impossible that all of them wrongly believe in something not true. Second, a report by a messenger which is confirmed by a miracle.⁷⁵

Then Nasafi proceeds to the issue of God's sovereignty and human free will. He adheres to the ideas of predestination and God's complete freedom to do whatever He wants to do. For instance, Nasafi says, "God is the creator of all the acts of human beings, whether [acts] of unbelief or faith, of obedience or disobedience. All these acts are by His will and volition, by His judgment, His decreeing and His determining."⁷⁶ From these statements only one conclusion can be derived, that God is responsible for good and evil.

To the question of sin and punishment, Nasafi says that heaven and hell, questioning in the tomb, the bridge, and everything else about the afterlife is true.

⁷³ Wilferd Madelung wrote, "Most important in the dissemination of Maturidi dogma was the creed (*'Aka'id*) of Najim al-Din Abu Hafs al-Nasafi (d. 537/1142) which closely followed Abu l-Mu'in's formulations in his *Tabsirat al-adilla*." Wilferd Madelung, "Maturidyya," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 6, *MAHK-MID*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 848.

⁷⁴ Abu Hafs an-Nasafi, "Nasafi's Maturidi Creed," trans. W. Montgomery Watt, in *Islamic Theological Themes: A Primary Source Reader*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 154.

⁷⁵ An-Nasafi, "Nasafi's Maturidi Creed," 154.

⁷⁶ An-Nasafi, "Nasafi's Maturidi Creed," 155-56.

However, he still insists, “God leads astray whom He wills, and guides whom He wills. It is not obligatory for God to do the best for a human being.”⁷⁷

One may ask about the role of “reason” if God punishes those whom he leads astray? The question about punishment and responsibility for the acts springs from the notion of justice. However, in the entire document, *Nasafi’s Maturidi Creed*, the term “justice” never occurs. Thus, the idea of “justice” is irrelevant in the light of God’s sovereignty. Regarding the “reason,” Nasafi writes, “Reason, again, is also a cause of knowledge. What is established by immediate intuition is necessary, such as the knowledge that *everything is greater than its part*.”⁷⁸

In conclusion, Nasafi relies on human reasoning only to establish the greatness of God. His arguments about the “true reports” do not appear to withstand criticism. History has proven many times that masses easily can be deluded and crowds believe impossible things. Each era had its ridiculous conspiracy theories. Who would have expected that after all the modern achievements of science, the “Flat Earth” theory would have supporters? Therefore, a shared report by many does not qualify for the sole legitimate indicator of truth. But Nasafi needed this approach to justify the legitimacy of the hadith literature.

The character of God in Nasafi’s creed appears self-contradictory. Describing God, Nasafi writes, “God is speaking with a Speech that is a pre-eternal attribute for Him and which is not of the class of letters and sounds. It is an attribute that excludes silence and defect. God speaks with this [attribute], commanding, prohibiting and making statements or [reporting].”⁷⁹ When this statement is compared with the ones quoted

⁷⁷ An-Nasafi, “Nasafi’s Maturidi Creed,” 156. As a side note, it is interesting that debates over predestination, human free will, and God’s absolute sovereignty were ongoing within the Islamic world before the Calvinism-Arminianism controversies.

⁷⁸ An-Nasafi, “Nasafi’s Maturidi Creed,” 155 (italics mine).

⁷⁹ An-Nasafi, “Nasafi’s Maturidi Creed,” 155.

earlier, which say that God leads people astray or creates the actions of disobedience, then God is making people break his own commandments and prohibitions.

Al-Maturidi's Contribution to Islamic Theology

What makes al-Maturidi's theology distinctively different from other versions of Islam? Answering this question necessitates understanding the main theological problems of the ninth through tenth centuries when al-Maturidi lived. Two interpretative methods have been competing for dominance in the ninth century—reason and tradition. Most of the supporters of reason lived in Basra and they were known as Mutazilites whereas Muslims insisting on the priority of tradition, lived in Baghdad. In George F. Hourani's summary, Mutazilites relied on rationalism in their interpretation of the Qur'an. But their adversaries, traditionalists, argued that depending on individual reasoning and logic distorts the perfectly articulated word of Allah given in the Qur'an. Instead, the Qur'an must be understood literally, and Muslims should rely on the interpretations that were brought to them through the chain of transmitters. Thus, the tension was between rationalistic or intellectual (*aql*) and traditionalist (*naql*) interpretations of the Qur'an and Islam in general.⁸⁰

In the light of those debates, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi is praised for his balanced approach. Regarding this Mustafa Ceric wrote,

It is in this process of the freeing of the Islamic doctrine from the unnecessary sediments of traditionalism and the over-reaching expectations of rationalism and, in due course, of the making of a synthesis between these two extremes, tradition and reason, that al-Maturidi has shown the aptitude of his mind, the originality of his intellectual character and the uniqueness of his contribution to Islamic theological thought.⁸¹

⁸⁰ George H. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7-8.

⁸¹ Mustafa Ceric, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam: A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi (d. 333/944)* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), 45.

Al-Maturidi's balance between reason and tradition is found in his book *Kitab al-Tawhid*. In the next section, I examine *Kitab al-Tawhid*.

Kitab al-Tawhid

In this section, I focus on *Kitab al-Tawhid*, on the translation of Sulaiman Ahmed. As an introductory note, I should mention the translator warns that this is only the first half of *Kitab al-Tawhid*, and the other part is yet to be translated.⁸² In this translation, the portions of al-Maturidi's alleged debates with Christians are not found, but they are found in the Turkish edition. Kymbat Karatyshkanova et al. argue that al-Maturidi successfully refuted Christian teachings about Jesus Christ.⁸³ Therefore, I refer to the Turkish translation of *Kitab al-Tawhid* when I examine al-Maturidi's conversations with Christians.⁸⁴

Another note must be made: I do not summarize any of the translations but rather focus on the topics pertinent to the Qazaq Muslims' arguments about the history of Islam in Qazaqstan and possible missiological opportunities from the Christian perspective. The content of *Kitab al-Tawhid* allows choosing the topics freely since the book itself is not on one overarching topic with structured outline/content. The translator of English edition Ahmed writes, "I personally believe that his work was not meant to be in book format, but instead existed as notes from his lectures."⁸⁵ I proceed further sharing Ahmed's belief regarding *Kitab al-Tawhid*'s content.

In the very first entry of *Kitab al-Tawhid*, al-Maturidi argued that religious faith must be accepted based on evidence instead of submitting to someone else's

⁸² Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed: God and the Universe: A Manual of Sunni Theology*, trans. Sulaiman Ahmed (n.p.: Maturidi Institute, 2019), xxx.

⁸³ Karatyshkanova et al. "Background Teachings of Maturidi," 1940.

⁸⁴ Ebu Mansur el-Maturidi, *Kitabu't-Tevhid: Aciklamali Tercume*, trans. Bekir Topagolu, (Istanbul: Isam, 2014).

⁸⁵ Ahmed, trans., *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, xxix.

authority. Al-Maturidi wrote, “It is compulsory upon [each individual] to choose their faith by themselves and [as a result] know the truth. The proof should be such that when it is presented to them it is compelling to people [and so they accept it].”⁸⁶ Al-Maturidi’s this requirement to accept a religion goes contrary to the argument that today Qazaqs must accept Islam because it allegedly was the faith of Qazaq people’s ancestors. Moreover, al-Maturidi continues his discussion regarding the evidence by saying, “It should be of such a level that a proof with similar [strength] is not present on the opposing side [of the argument].”⁸⁷ He explains further, “[This is] because the [strength of the] evidence for the truth should be that which overcomes [the countering argument] and it must point out the errors and weaknesses of the opposing contention.”⁸⁸ Unfortunately, al-Maturidi did not elaborate in this section on how to decide if each of the opposing parties possesses equally compelling arguments and evidence in favor of their position. Again, al-Maturidi’s statement opens the doors to critically assess the claims of Islam. Therefore, if Qazaqs truly follow al-Maturidi’s version of Islam, they must establish that their claims regarding the history of Islam in Qazaqstan and the traditional narratives about the prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an, in general, can withstand criticisms posed by anyone. The pressing question is, do they?⁸⁹

Al-Maturidi argued that the sources for the knowledge of religion are tradition and intellect. He wrote, “Faith is tested and recognized by two methods: tradition and the

⁸⁶ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 2 (brackets are original; I will retain all the brackets whenever I directly quote this text).

⁸⁷ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 2-3.

⁸⁸ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 3.

⁸⁹ Patricia Crone, Fred Donner, Ibn Warraq, Yehuda Nevo, and other revisionists criticized the traditional narratives about the history of the Qur’an. Some of them even went as far as questioning whether the prophet Muhammad ever existed. See, e.g., Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2007); Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and Rise of Islam* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).

intellect. This is because in order to find the truth, people must have agreed foundational principles that are accepted by everyone who uses them.”⁹⁰ Then he proceeds to explain each of these methods—tradition and intellect. But his explanation of tradition is dimmed in light of his discourse on intellect. Al-Maturidi’s explanation comes down to merely stating that people accept a tradition that fits their own beliefs. He wrote, “In relation to statements or tradition, there is no one who follows a particular ideology who does not encourage people towards their [own ideology].”⁹¹ In other words, tradition is transmitted only among those who already share its postulates. It should be noted that he is explaining the role of tradition under the heading *Knowledge of the Religion is Acquired through Transmission (Sam’) and the Intellect (‘Aql)*.⁹²

Al-Maturidi elaborates on the role of tradition in a more sophisticated way when he discusses it under the heading *Humans Have Essentially Three Means of Acquiring Knowledge: a) The Senses, b) Transmission, c) Intellect*.⁹³ Al-Maturidi wanted to reconcile the tradition/transmission and intellect. He acknowledged the flaws of transmission, and wrote, “The reports which come to us from the Prophets are passed on by people who can make errors or fabricate, because they do not have any proof for their protection from such errors and fabrications, nor do they possess proof of their infallibility.”⁹⁴ His solution to this predicament coincides with Nasafi’s formulations that reports need to be proven by multiple witnesses, practically, or withstand intellectual criticism. Then, how to deal with the highly theoretical statements that cannot be proven or disproved by either of these methods? One of such complex issues is the oneness of God, which is the most dividing doctrine between Christian and Muslims.

⁹⁰ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 4.

⁹¹ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 4.

⁹² Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 4.

⁹³ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 9-16.

⁹⁴ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 11-12.

Al-Maturidi argued that the term *Wahid* (“the One”), from which the term *Tawhid* (“the oneness of God”) is derived, has four-fold meaning:

[The first is] a *Kull* (totality) which cannot be doubled. [The second is] the *Juz'* (part) that cannot be halved. [The] third is something which is between these two that allows for both operations, larger than that which cannot be halved and smaller than that which cannot be doubled, since there is nothing beyond the totality. The fourth is that through which the [first] three exist; Him, not Him; and He has concealed who He is. He is the One before whom the tongue falls silent, and the One that you cannot comprehend, the One before whom the imagination fails, and reason is at a loss. That is God, the Sustainer of the Universe.⁹⁵

The translator, Sulaiman Ahmed, rightly notes that al-Maturidi’s explanation of the Oneness of God is based on nothing else but Neoplatonic philosophy.⁹⁶ On the one hand, it is undeniable that both Christianity and Islam had a complex history of interacting with Neoplatonism.⁹⁷ On the other hand, one must ask three questions. First, if Maturidi’s Neoplatonic understanding of the oneness of God fits the Qazaq understanding of God. Did Qazaqs ever think about God in the terms of Neoplatonism? Second, if Qazaqs ought to accept Maturidism as the national faith, which turns out to embrace Neoplatonism then why do we need Abu Mansur al-Maturidi’s interpretation of Neoplatonism instead of focusing on the original source(s)? The third question to ponder is al-Maturidi’s thin reliance on the Qur’an in his arguments. Regarding the oneness of God, he entirely omitted the Qur’an.

The answer to the first question is “no,” the Qazaq worldview and philosophy were far removed from Neoplatonism. Particularly, regarding the oneness of God, Qazaqs did not think in terms of divisibility and indivisibility of the perfect one. Instead, the

⁹⁵ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 85.

⁹⁶ Ahmed, trans., *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 85n153.

⁹⁷ Due to limited space and time, I cannot dive into the discussions of Islamic and Christian interactions with Neoplatonism. Therefore, I merely refer to two books that directly address the subject: Parviz Morewedge, ed., *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 5 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Dominic J. O’Meara, ed., *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 3. (Norfolk, VA: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1981).

Qazaq philosophy spoke about harmony and maintaining the best possible relationship with the spiritual/transcendent reality, nature (on earth), and society. In other words, Qazaqs did not try to find out the origins of the universe but demanded that each member of society knows his or her personal genealogy. The second question about studying Neoplatonic philosophers is rather rhetoric than real. But the third question about the role of the Qur'an in al-Maturidi's theology needs attention.

The proponents of Maturidism, defending his use of the Qur'an refer to another document attributed to him. It is a book titled *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah*, which is al-Maturidi's tafsir or commentary on the Qur'an. However, like in the case of *Kitab al-Tawhid*, we do not possess the original manuscripts. Manfred Götz points out, "For we are fortunate to have a commentary (sarh) on the *Ta'wilat al-Qur'an* written by the Hanafi 'Ala ad-din Afimad b. Muhammad Abu Bakr as-Samarqandi (d. 540/1145), a student of Nasafi (d. 508/1114) and Bazdawi (482/1089)."⁹⁸ Moreover, even that commentary was not written by al-Maturidi. Götz refers to the introductory note of Samarqandi, where he says that the document was written by al-Maturidi's students based on his teachings and lectures.⁹⁹

For the sake of completeness of the discussion on al-Maturidi's use of the Qur'an, one must ask why his commentary is called *Ta'wil* instead of traditional *Tafsir*? Ahmad Mohmed Ahmad Galli explains it as follows:

The meaning of ta'wil, however, is to give all the possible meanings implied in the verse, therefore it is not limited to the companions of the Prophet as tafsir, but is open to all qualified scholars. There are no restrictions on ta'wil, because unlike tafsir, ta'wil does not state that God meant a certain meaning by a certain verse, but it is simply an attempt to disclose or discover the meaning which might possibly be

⁹⁸ Manfred Götz, "Maturidī und sein Kitāb Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān," *Jahresband* 41, no. 1 (1965): 30. The original text reads, "Wir sind nämlich in der glücklichen Lage, einen Kommentar (sarh) zu den Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān zu besitzen, der aus der Feder des Hanefiten 'Alā' ad-dīn Afimad b. Muhammad abū Bakr as-Samarqandi (gest. um 540/1145)15), einem Schüler des Nasafi (gest. 508/1114) und des Bazdawi (482/1089)16)."

⁹⁹ Götz, "Maturidī und sein Kitāb Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān," 30-31.

implied in the verse; its utmost achievement is to point out that the meaning of a verse might be so or so.¹⁰⁰

Again, al-Maturidi's approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an and stating theological doctrines, in general, was in tension between Allah's word and human understanding of it. And al-Maturidi did not adhere to the original meaning of the Qur'an, instead, he used it to promote his own ideas, which were based on Neoplatonism. Speaking of al-Maturidi's Neoplatonism, one needs to consider where and how he learned about it. Ulrich Rudolf rightly guesses that the Nestorian Christians could have brought Neoplatonism to the northeastern borders of Muslim lands.¹⁰¹

Ahmad Choirul Rofiq notes as another uniqueness of al-Maturidi's methodology in *Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah*, is that he never mentioned the chain of transmitters (*isnad*) of a hadith when he was using it to interpret a Qur'anic verse. Rofiq speculates that, perhaps, al-Maturidi wanted to avoid clogging his texts with the secondary matters and wanted his reader to remember the main thing—the meaning of the verse.¹⁰² Rofiq's speculation is not baseless, but the omission *isnad* also could mean that al-Maturidi was introducing a new interpretation to the Qur'anic text. In the next section, I will examine al-Maturidi's view on Christianity, which also was under the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy for centuries.

Al-Maturidi's Debates with Christians

Kitab al-Tawhid contains portions where Abu Mansur al-Maturidi debates with the representatives of other religions and some branches of Islam. In this section, I will focus on his disagreements with Christians. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi in his debates with Christians addressed the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Since

¹⁰⁰ Ahmad Mohmed Ahmad Galli, "Some Aspects of al-Maturidi's Commentary on the Qur'an," *Islamic Studies* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 4.

¹⁰¹ Rudolf, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 175.

¹⁰² Ahmad Choirul Rofiq, "The Methodology of al-Maturidi's Qur'anic Exegesis: Study of Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah," *Al-Jami'ah* 47, no. 2 (2009): 325-26.

these issues are the most discussed topics in Christian-Muslim relations and al-Maturidi's anti-Christian arguments are not particularly unique, I will not spend too much time on them. Instead, I briefly outline his main statements.

Al-Maturidi argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is wrong because it directly goes against *Tawhid*—the oneness of God. In *Kitab al-Tawhid*, al-Maturidi only once explicitly speaks about the Trinity and the rest of the anti-Christian arguments why Jesus Christ cannot be God. Regarding the Trinity, al-Maturidi wrote, “The Christians argue that [God is] one entity and three hypostases, and each hypostasis excludes partiality and dimension. They also argue that He was incorporeal and then became corporeal, while it is known that bodies are forms which are divisible and can be partitioned.”¹⁰³ Even this very statement against the Trinity hints at the divinity of Christ.

Regarding why Jesus is not God, al-Maturidi poses counterarguments in response to the supposed Christian declarations of why Jesus is God. He brings up the issue of miracles that Jesus performed. He writes, “If they base the divinity of Jesus on his healing of the blind and leprosy and similar disease, reviving the dead is a greater miracle than this, and they have to admit that this [resurrecting the dead] was also done by Elijah and Elisha.”¹⁰⁴ Al-Maturidi, in a similar manner disproves that the ascent of Jesus Christ to heavens does not mean that he is God because the same thing happened to Elijah, but nobody calls Elijah God.¹⁰⁵ He also argues that Jesus consistently manifested his inferiority to God because he worshipped and prayed to God.¹⁰⁶

In conclusion, al-Maturidi's interaction with Christians demonstrates that modern Qazaqs treatment of Christianity does not follow his approach. Al-Maturidi

¹⁰³ Al-Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab At-Tawheed*, 245.

¹⁰⁴ The Turkish translation reads, “Eğer îsâ'nm ulûhiyyetine onun körü ve alacalıyı iyileştirmesi ve benzerleriyle istidlâl ederlerse ölüyü canlandırmak bundan daha büyük bir olaydır, bunun da İlyâ ve Elyesa' için vâW olduğunu kabul ediyorlar.” El-Maturidi, *Kitabu't-Tevhid*, 323.

¹⁰⁵ El-Maturidi, *Kitabu't-Tevhid*, 323.

¹⁰⁶ El-Maturidi, *Kitabu't-Tevhid*, 326.

debated with Christians based on theological disagreements, whereas Qazaqs dismiss Christianity based on imagined history that Islam is the ancestral faith. If modern Qazaqs indeed want to imitate al-Maturidi, they must come to dialogue or conversations with Christians on the matters of faith, scripture, and theological doctrines.

Qazaq Perspectives on Maturidism

The works in Qazaq on al-Maturidi and his theology can be divided into two: (1) articles on Qazaq Islamic websites, which are typically generic and for a broad audience, and (2) academic works such as doctoral dissertations, monographs, and articles. However, I will not survey the website articles; instead, I will focus on the academic works. The main approach of the modern Qazaqs in arguing that Maturidism is the ancestral faith is that to find similar or identical thoughts in the works of al-Maturidi and Qazaq thinkers, poets, writers, and other figures, who shaped the Qazaq worldview. Thus, the argument is made that those Qazaq thinkers gained their ideas from al-Maturidi. The arguments to attach Maturidism to the Qazaq history also point out that he was born in neighboring Uzbekistan, assuming it was not far away geographically for his teaching to reach the Qazaqs. For instance, Erzhan Seituli Qalmakhan remarks that Maturidi is our own men, who was born in Samarqand, in his pamphlet explaining Maturidi's teachings.¹⁰⁷

But this approach is entirely futile for obvious reasons. First, nearly every religion calls for a higher morality and has the notion of good and evil. Second, no Qazaq thinker and philosopher before 1991 explicitly stated that he received his beliefs from Abu Hanifa or al-Maturidi. Third, Angelika Brodersen lists the most important teachers of Maturidism with an introduction to their biographies and works, and none of them was

¹⁰⁷ Ержан Сейтұлы Қалмахан, *Матуриди Ақидасы-Әбу Ханифа Ілімінің Жалғасы* (Алматы: Баспалар Үйі, 2014), 5-6. [Erzhan Seituli Qalmakhan, *Maturidi's Aqida Is the Continuation of Abu Hanifa's Teachings* (Almaty: Baspalai uii, 2014), 5-6.]

a Qazaq.¹⁰⁸ Thereby, historically, Maturidism and Qazaqs were disconnected. Maturidism was introduced only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in independent Qazaqstan.

Historical-Religious Perspective

Zikiriya Zhandarbek is one of the most outspoken champions of promoting Maturidism in Qazaqstan. In his endeavors, he highlights al-Maturidi's emphasis on human reasoning for theology. His views on Maturidism are based on the belief that the modern Qazaqs are descendants of ancient Turkic nations. He also acknowledges the role of Tengrism before the arrival of Islam and admits that Yassawi Sufism was popular among Qazaqs. And he wants to eliminate contradictions and conflicting points between Tengrism, Yassawi Sufism, and Maturidism.

Zhandarbek argues that the Turkic people's philosophy also had a strong focus on human reasoning before absorbing Islam. As an example, he cites Sonmez Kutlu (a Turkish scholar), "If people act under the idea of goodness coming from Tengri, their lives improve; with this, the layman becomes a ruler. Intellect also is Tengri's goodness given to man. If rulers use intellect when they rule, society prospers; if not, society perishes."¹⁰⁹ Although Zhandarbek cites a Turkish researcher, this is an overall narrative among Qazaqs and other Central Asians. They often claim that Turks accepted Islam because it had a lot in common with their pre-Islamic beliefs.¹¹⁰ After citing Kutlu,

¹⁰⁸ Angelika Brodersen, *Der Unbekannte Kalam: Theologische Positionen der Fruhen Maturidiya am Beispiel der Attributenlehre* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), 25-47.

¹⁰⁹ Зікірія Жандарбек, *Қазақтың Дәстүрлі Дінінің Негіздері*, Қожа Ахмет Яссауи Атындағы Халықаралық Қазақ-Түрік Университеті (Алматы: Ел-Шежіре, 2017), 20. [Zikiriya Zhandarbek, *The Foundations of Qazaqs' Traditional Faith*, Qoja Ahmel Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University. Almaty: El Shezhire, 2017.] The original text reads: "Адамдар Тәңірден келген құттың идеясына сәйкес әрекет етсе, өмірі жақсарар және бұл құтпен хан болар. Ақыл да Тәңірінің берген бір құты. Қағандар адамдарға басшылық жасағанда ақылды қолданар болса, қоғам жақсарады. Ақылды қолданбаса, қоғам жоқ болар."

¹¹⁰ I have encountered this narrative many times in Qazaqstan during personal conversations with Qazaqs. Also, in the summer of 2020, I interviewed two Qazaq Muslim scholars in Almaty for the 86110 Ethnographic Research and Worldview Identification seminar at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Both interviewees believed that the acceptance of Islam has not altered the authentic Qazaq culture because Qazaq culture has a lot in common with Islam.

Zhandarbek argues that the idea “because of intellect one becomes a ruler” indicates that Turks from ancient times paid particular attention to the role of human reasoning. Then he makes this conclusion, “Turks’ reliance on the usage of intellect, their evaluation of Islam, and their discovery that it (Islam) is correct, made them accept Islam.”¹¹¹ Thus, Zhandarbek argues that Turkic people’s conversion to Islam was based on rational reasoning.

Zhandarbek acknowledges that aside from Maturidism, Yassawi Sufism is also a dominant version of Islam in Qazaqstan. Instead of giving preference to one or another, Zhandarbek seeks to reconcile these two branches of Islam. He insists Yassawi believed the same as Abu-Hanifa and al-Maturidi did, and he (Yassawi) used their theological methods in preaching Islam.¹¹² Although Zhandarbek argues that Yassawi fully accepted and taught Abu-Hanifa’s *madhhab* and al-Maturidi’s *aqidah* to the Turkic people, he admits that there is not an unbroken connection between the Yassawi and al-Maturidi traditions. Nevertheless, to connect Yassawi with al-Maturidi, Zhandarbek refers to the term “wisdom” (*hikmet*), present in both of their works.¹¹³ In other words, Zhandarbek believes Yassawi, like al-Maturidi, demonstrated the role of wisdom in Islam. Zhandarbek’s method based on the occurrence of one word (*hikmet*) in the writings of al-Maturidi and Yassawi does not sound convincing.

He then turns to the works of Qazaq poets who are considered the founders of modern Qazaq literature, thought, and philosophy. As an illustration, he refers to Abay Qunanbaiuli (1845-1904) and Shakarim Qudayberdiuli (1858-1931), who in their poems

¹¹¹ Жандарбек, *Қазақтың Дәстүрлі Дінінің Негіздері*, 20. [Zhandarbek, *The Foundations of Qazaqs Traditional Faith*, 20.]

¹¹² Жандарбек, *Қазақтың Дәстүрлі Дінінің Негіздері*, 25. [Zhandarbek, *The Foundations of Qazaqs Traditional Faith*, 25.]

¹¹³ Жандарбек, *Қазақтың Дәстүрлі Дінінің Негіздері*, 26. [Zhandarbek, *The Foundations of Qazaqs Traditional Faith*, 26.] Most likely, Zhandarbek is referring to al-Maturidi’s book *Kitab al-Tawhid* because he describes this as a “response to those who do not accept *Hikmet* and God who is the creator and owner of the true knowledge” (Хикмет және Ілім Иесі Бір Жаратушыны қабыл етпегендерге жауап).

explicitly and implicitly often promoted the idea of relying on intellect and thinking well.¹¹⁴

However, as the years of the life of Abay and Shakarim demonstrate, they lived long after al-Maturidi and Yassawi. Even if Abay and Shakarim used the word “intellect” and promoted the idea of preference of human reasoning in their poems, it does not necessarily mean that they acquired it directly from al-Maturidi’s works. Moreover, neither Abay nor Shakarim mentions al-Maturidi or Abu-Hanifa, even in the specific poems that Zhandarbek refers to.

A common practice of the Qazaq proponents of Islam to bring up early poets and national heroes to argue that Islam is the authentic, historical religion of the Qazaqs. Nazira Nurtazina, like Zhandarbek, refers to Qazaq poets though she does not specify that it was Maturidism. She gives three names: Muhammed Haidar Dulati (1499-1551), Qidirali Zhalair (1535-1607), and Qazibek Tausaruli (born in 1692). But all these three men, as Nurtazina admits, adhered to Yassawi Sufism.¹¹⁵

Thus, because Sufism was prevalent in the works of earlier poets, the only plausible conclusion is that Maturidism was not popular up until recently. The question demanding an answer is “Why did it become popular?” Research conducted without religious bias sheds light on why Maturidism is considered the official version of Islam in Qazaqstan. This is presented in the next section.

Before proceeding to the next section, a final note on Zhandarbek’s attempt to reconcile Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism. First, other scholars from Uzbekistan and Turkey have tackled this endeavor to connect Sufism in Central Asia with Maturidism/Hanafiya. Secondly, none of them seem to be familiar with the document

¹¹⁴ Жандарбек, *Қазақтың Дәстүрлі Дінінің Негіздері*, 28 (Shakarim), 31 (Abay). [Zhandarbek, *The Foundations of Qazaqs Traditional Faith*, 28 (Shakarim), 31 (Abay).]

¹¹⁵ Назира Д. Нуртазина, *Ислам в Истории Средневекового Казахстана* (Алматы: Фараб, 2000), 260-63. [Nazira D. Nurtazina, *Islam in the Medieval History of Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Farab, 2000), 260-63.]

called *Makamat-I-Sayyid Ata'i*. I did not have access to the document itself, but the annotation to it in Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office describes it as follows,

The life, miracles, and spiritual teachings of the great Saint of the Yassawi order, Jamal-aldin Khwajah Diwana Sayyied Ata-I of Khwarizm and Khaiwak, who was born in the reign of Shah Isma'il Safawi . . . and died A. H. 1016=A.D. 1607, 1608. . . . This work was compiled by the Saint's younger son, Muhammad Kasim . . . and completed the first of Muharram, A. H. 1036=A. D. 1626 September 22.¹¹⁶

In this description, the numbers are the most pertinent to the discussion of whether Maturidis and Yassawi Sufis might be connected. The numbers indicate that a Yassawi Sufi wrote *Makamat-I-Sayyid Ata'i* about his father, a Sufi too, soon after his father's death. In other words, this is an early historical source, almost contemporary to Yassawi's *Diwani Hikmet*, which will be examined in chapter 5.

Devin DeWeese conducted rigorous research on the *Makamat-I-Sayyid Ata'i*. He clarifies that the correct title of the document must be *Manaqib al-akhyar*.¹¹⁷ But most importantly, in studying *Manaqib al-Akhyar*, DeWeese came across the statement that refers to Yusuf Hamadani, one of the teachers of Ahmad Yassawi. DeWeese, surprised by this, writes, "The latter's [Hamadani's] genealogy, *curiously*, is traced back to the Imam Abu Hanifah."¹¹⁸ Thus, *Manaqib al-akhyar* would have served Zhandarbek's endeavor to marry Maturidism with Yassawi Sufism. But Zhandarbek is not alone. Two scholars (Fatkhiddin Mansurov and Faudzinaim Hj. Badaruddin) in an article in Turkish say that some sources indicate that Hamadani was a descendant of Abu Hanifa. But Mansurov and Badaruddin do not refer either to *Manaqib al-Akhyar* or to any other

¹¹⁶ Hermann Ethé, "644 Makamat-i-Sayyid Ata'I," in *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office* (Oxford: Horace Hart, 1903), 268-69.

¹¹⁷ Devin DeWeese, "A Neglected Source on Central Asian History: The 17th Century Yasavi Hagiography *Manaqib Al-Akhyar*," in *Studies in Sufism in Central Asia*, ed. Devin DeWeese (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 40.

¹¹⁸ DeWeese, "A Neglected Source on Central Asian History," 45 (italics mine).

primary source document. Instead, in the footnote, they indicated recent research published in Uzbekistan.¹¹⁹

The second point of a possible connection of Maturidits with Yassawi Sufis could have been through al-Maturidi's disciples. Hakim as-Samarqandi was one of the most remarkable students of al-Maturidi. As-Samarqandi was so popular that members of other movements were found among his students. Eshonkhonov Meirojiddin Zainidinovich, in his doctoral dissertation, mentions as-Samarqandi had some Sufi followers as well.¹²⁰

In conclusion, considering the geographical spread of Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism, the likelihood is high that representatives of these two branches of Islam came across each other. There is no reason to resist the possibility that they may have learned from each other and even shared some beliefs. Nevertheless, Zhandarbek and others are overstating when they argue that al-Maturidi and Yassawi preached an identical version of Islam.

Non-Religious Perspective

Alma Sultangalieva describes modern Islam in Qazaqstan as a completely new movement that began after Qazaqstan became an independent country in 1991. She states, "It is demonstrative that this process most vividly manifested within the scope of

¹¹⁹ Fatkhiddin Mansurov and Faudzinaim Hj. Badaruddin, "Hace Yusuf Hemedani: İki Büyük Sufi Tarikatının İlham Kaynağı," *Harran Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 26 (Temmuz-Aralık 2011): 161n5. [Fatkhiddin Mansurov and Faudzinaim Hj. Badaruddin, "Yusuf Hamadani: Inspiration of the Two Great Sufi Paths," *Journal of Harran University Faculty of Theology* 26 (July-December 2011): 161n5.] The original text reads, "Yine bazı kaynaklarda onun isim ve künyesi farklı şekillerde verildiği gibi bazı kaynaklar da onun soyunu Hanefi Mezhebi'nin kurucusu Ebu Hanifeye kadar ulaştırmaktadırlar" ("Again, various sources give his name and genealogy differently; some of them say that he is a descendant of Abu Hanifa, the founder of Hanafi madhab"; translation mine).

¹²⁰ Эшонхонов Меъроҷиддин Зайнидинович, "Философское и Религиозные Воззрения Абул Му'ина Насафи" (PhD diss., Институт Философии, Политологии и Права им. А. Баховадинова, 2019), 27. [Eshonkhonov Meirojiddin Zainidinovich, "Philosophical and Religious Views of Abul Mu'ina Nasafi" (PhD diss., Institution of Philosophy, Political Science, and Law, 2019), 27.]

the official *revitalization of Islamic dogmatism* and cultic practice.”¹²¹ The dogmatic Islam based on the exegesis of the Qur’an, hadith, and other religious scriptures is a new practice in Qazaqstan. She also points out that the official Muslim clerics are loyal to the government.¹²² These clerics are members of the official Islamic association supported by the Qazaqstan government, and they declared that Maturidism/Hanafi *Madhab* is the version of Islam that everybody should absorb.

Adelia M. Dairova points out that Hanafi Madhab in Qazaqstan is tolerant of dissenting thoughts, uses the local law, legal issues, individual reasoning (*ray*) and analogical judgment (*qiyas*).¹²³ Although this description of Maturidism coincides with the Maturidits statements about relying on human reasoning, it contradicts the texts of Nasafi that demand complete submissiveness. But this depiction of official Islam in Qazaqstan is suitable to the political discourse. On the one hand, the Qazaqstan government declares democracy and wants to have a tolerant society. On the other hand, the government understands the growth of Islam is inevitable. Thus, having Hanafi Maturidism is a perfect solution because it is a worldwide recognized, legitimate version of Islam, and it preaches tolerance.

Abu-Hanifa and al-Maturidi are both widely recognized by the broader Islamic world, whereas Yassawi is largely unknown outside of Central Asia. Therefore, the Qazaqstan government chose Hanafi Madhab as an official branch of Islam, which allows it to be part of the universal Muslim community. Second, Hanafi *Madhab* is also known

¹²¹ Алма Султангалиева, *Ислам в Казахстане: История, Этничность, Общество* (Алматы: Казахстанский Институт Стратегических Исследований, 1998), 68 (italics mine). [Alma Sultangalieva, *Islam in Kazakhstan: History, Ethnicity, and Society* (Almaty: Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Researches, 1998), 68.] The original text in Russian reads, “Показательно, что ярче всего этот процесс проявился в сфере официального Ислама, активизации исламской догматики, культовой практики.”

¹²² Султангалиева, *Ислам в Казахстане*, 69. [Sultangalieva, *Islam in Kazkahstan*, 69.]

¹²³ Аделия М. Даирова, *Исламский Фактор в Политических Процессах Казахстана* (Москва: Научная Книга, 2005), 114, 123. [Adelia M. Dairova, *Islamic Factor in Political Processes in Kazakhstan* (Moscow: Nauchnaya Kniga, 2005), 114, 123.]

as the most liberal or mild school of thought within Islam. The Qazaq government's choosing of Hanafi Madhhab works toward preventing the Muslim community's radicalization.

Of course, it does not mean that Maturidism is entirely new to Qazaq society. A report from the sixteenth century states, "The neighbors or Kirgiz, Qazaqs they are 200000 families; they are Muslims, they hold to Abu Hanifa."¹²⁴ This is an outsider's report, which should not be dismissed. Therefore, it is possible that at least some of the Qazaqs were familiar with Hanafi *Madhab*, but by no means was it the dominant branch of Islam among them. The dominant version of Islam at that time was Yassawi Sufism.

Another reason for the recognition of Hanafi Maturidism by the government is connected to the history of QMDB. Qazaqstan did not have its own Islamic entity during the Soviet Union till 1989. In fact, by the end of 1930s all the Mosques and Islamic organizations were shut down by the Soviets. However, in 1943 Central Asian administrative society of the Muslims was established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In 1979, Qazaqstan had twenty-five mosques. But in the 1980s, due to the liberal political tendencies in USSR, Qazaqs were able to start more than 100 mosques in the country. By 1989 Qazaq Muslims wanted to have their own Muslim society independent from the administrative entity in Tashkent. In the same year, QMDB was established. Thus, although Qazaq Muslims were not accountable to Tashkent anymore, QMDB retained Hanafi Maturidism as the core theological adherence. Early in this chapter, I examined that Abu Mansur al-Maturidi was born in Uzbekistan.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ В. Н. Басилов and Д. Х. Кармышева, *Ислам у Казахов до 1917* (Москва: РАН Институт Этнологии и Антропологии Имени Н. Н. Мкхлухо-Маклая, 1997), 7. [V. N. Basilov and J. Kh. Karmisheva, *Islam among Qazaqs before 1917* (Moscow: RAN Institut Entnologii i Antropologii Imeni N. N. Mkhilukho-Malkaya, 1997), 7.]

¹²⁵ А. Верховский, ed., *Ислам и Политическая Борьба в Странах СНГ* (Москва: Панорама, 1992), 15-16. [A. Verkhovskii, ed., *Islam and Political Struggle in the CIS Countries* (Moscow: Panorama, 1992), 15-16.]

The Spread of Maturidism Disproving Qazaqs' Argument

To understand the spread of Maturidism among the Turks, one needs to acknowledge several points. First, Maturidism was a local school established in Samarqand and remained within the borders of Transoxiana.¹²⁶ Second, Maturidism fully affirmed Hanafism and fought on the side of Hanafism in every debate with other Islamic branches such as Shi'ism or Asharism, and Mutazilites.¹²⁷ Third, the acceptance of Maturidism by the Turks does not mean that it was spread geographically to the Turkic lands and nations. Rather it means some of the Turkic leaders accepted it, and they wanted to have an influence in the center of the Islamic world, which was the city of Baghdad. Maturidites were mostly busy fighting other branches of Islam rather than converting non-Muslims to Islam. It is understandable that the followers of Maturidism were inclined to go to the southwest toward Iran and the Middle East instead of going north.

Madelung summarizing it wrote, "The result was a large-scale migration of eastern Hanafites toward the west, where they became the highly respected teachers of the following generations of Hanafite scholars."¹²⁸ The territory of the eastern Hanafites was the modern Central Asia. Madelung adds that the migration was a trend for a period of time, and he added, "This migration lasted well beyond the Seljuq age into the Mongol period, being fed by the high esteem on which the eastern Hanafites could count in the west and by the devastation of their home countries in the political upheavals there."¹²⁹ Therefore, I argue that the presence of Maturidism among the Qazaqs was not strong if it

¹²⁶ For this brief section on the spread of Maturidism, I will rely on Wilferd Madelung, who is a world-renowned historian of Islam. Wilferd Madelung, "The Spread of Maturidism among the Turks," in *Actas do IV Congresso de Estudos árabes e Islâmicos, Coimbra-Lisboa, 1968*, ed. Georgette Cornu (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 117.

¹²⁷ Madelung, "The Spread of Maturidism among the Turks," 123, 126.

¹²⁸ Madelung, "The Spread of Maturidism among the Turks," 141.

¹²⁹ Madelung, "The Spread of Maturidism among the Turks," 141.

was present at all. In other words, Maturidites mostly were migrating to the west, to the centers of the Islamic world, rather than expanding its borders to the north.

Conclusion

Since 1991, in Qazaqstan, Hanafi Maturidism has been recognized as the officially recognized version of Islam. This recognition is endorsed by historical narratives that Hanafi Maturidism is the ancestral faith. The biographies of Abu Hanifa and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi reveal that both were native Arabic speakers. Their books and treatises are all written in Arabic. Therefore, the spread of their teachings among the Turkic-speaking Qazaqs was hardly possible.

Modern Qazaq historians point out similarities between Hanafi Maturidism and traditional Qazaq views. But most of them are mere coincidences since every nation has a teaching on higher morality and fatalism or predestination. Considering the fact that both Abu Hanifa and al-Maturidi were active far away from the modern territories of Qazaqstan, impossible to accept the argument that their teachings were prevalent among Qazaqs.

Yes, al-Maturidi was born in Samarqand, which is geographically close to Qazaqstan. And Uzbek culture is culturally like Qazaq culture. However, during al-Maturidi's lifetime, modern Uzbekistan was under the rule of Arab-speaking Muslims. Also, al-Maturidi himself and his followers tended to move westward to the centers of the Islamic world, which was Baghdad at the time. Therefore, when Qazaqs say that their ancestors were Muslims, meaning the ancestors adhered to Hanafi Maturidism, they are not accurate. The version of Islam that was indeed present among Qazaq tribes was Yassawi Sufism, which will be studied in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

YASSAWI SUFISM

Understanding the history of Islam in Qazaqstan would not be complete without studying Yassawi Sufism. In this chapter, I examine the emergence of Sufism, Qoja Ahmed Yassawi (1093-1166), the founder of Yassawi Sufism, the spread of Yassawi Sufism, and *Diwani Hikmet*, a long poem attributed to him. Overall, I argue that Yassawi Sufism is a new phenomenon in the religious life of Qazaqs, just like Hanafi Maturidism, which I examined in chapter 4. Modern Qazaqs seek to link *Diwani Hikmet* with classical Qazaq literature and oral tradition. But as Bolat Qorganbekov rightly acknowledges, *Diwani Hikmet* is entirely directed to God, whereas the primary audience of Qazaq literature and oral tradition is society.¹

In the previous chapter, I referred to Zikiriya Zhandarbek, who strives to connect Hanafi Maturidism to the modern Qazaq philosophical thought and poetry through Yassawi Sufism. But Yassawi Sufism and Hanafi Maturidism are radically different from each other in their approach and message. The only similarity between the two is that they belong to Islam and can affirm Shahadah. Unlike Hanafi Maturidism, Yassawi Sufism indeed had a presence among Qazaqs before the Russian colonization. The Yassawi shrine is in the modern territory of Qazaqstan, and several familial groups claim to descend from Ahmed Yassawi. Nevertheless, the presence of Yassawi Sufism in the history and territory of the Qazaqs does not necessarily make them historically Muslim since other religions were also present, as I demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3.

¹ Болат Қорғанбеков, “Қожа Ахмет Ясауи Хикметтері мен Қазақ Фольклорындағы Сабақтастық,” *Жұлдыз* 12 (2010): 176-79. [Bolat Qorganbekov, “Cohesion of Qoja Ahmed Yassawi’s Hikmets and Qazaq Folklore,” *Zhuldiz* 12 (2010): 176-79.] However, Bolat Qorganbekov still strives to connect Yassawi Sufism to Qazaq folklore.

In this chapter, I first introduce Sufism as a distinct movement within Islam and highlight positions regarding its origin and meaning. Then, I proceed to examine Yassawi Sufism, which will include the biography of Ahmed Yassawi, his shrine, and his alleged descendants. I then examine the text attributed to him—*Diwani Hikmet*. The study of *Diwani Hikmet* pays particular attention to the Qazaq interpretation and central Islamic terms.

The Emergence of Sufism

The primary concern of this chapter is not a comprehensive history of Sufism, but it is still worth mentioning the leading positions regarding the origin and meaning of the term “Sufism.” Generally, the term “Sufism” corresponds to the idea of Islamic mysticism. But a closer look at the term’s etymology and the movement’s origin reveals that Sufism conveys a more complex implication than mere mysticism. Before I proceed to the historical and etymological examination, it is worth acknowledging Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh’s article “Sufism in Western Historiography,” wherein the authors summarize and outline the works of European orientalist who viewed Sufism as something with an origin alien to Islam.²

Debates over Sufism’s Origin

The definition of Sufism based on the Arabic term “tasawwuf” do not clarify the origin of the movement. The oft-proposed explanation in modern literature on Sufism says that the term refers to the root “suf,” which means “wool.” Advocates of this position argue that the early Sufis wore rough wool clothes to demonstrate their denial of comfort and a luxurious lifestyle.³ This position is not without support, and it at least

² Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh, “Sufism in Western Historiography,” *Philosophy East & West* 66, no. 1 (2016): 194-217.

³ J. O. Hunwick, “Tasawuf,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 10, *Tā’-U*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 313. Hunwick rejects all of the other explanations by saying, “Other etymological derivations which have been put forward in Western and, especially, Islamic sources, are untenable.” James

immediately calls to mind early Christian asceticism. Reynold A. Nicholson saw Christian mysticism as the original source for Sufism since it promoted ascetic abstinence. He also substantiated his argument by pointing out that early Sufi biographies borrowed the sayings of Jesus from the Gospels and apocryphal writings. Nicholson viewed Christianity, in conjunction with Neoplatonism, as an external influence on Sufism. The way Sufis worship the prophet Muhammad supports his argument.⁴

Since Nicholson belonged to the Western orientalist school, his skepticism regarding the origin of Sufism is dismissed by modern Islamic scholars. For instance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Martin Lings contend that Sufism emerged within the Islamic context.⁵ Of course, Nasr and Lings are not the first to reject the argument that Sufism emerged due to influences outside of Islam. Nicholson's contemporaries Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Louis Massignon (1883-1962) disagreed with skeptical orientalist's thesis about Sufism's origin.⁶

None of these arguments is convincing, neither Nicholson's skepticism nor Nasr and Lings's traditionalism. Each of these parties appears to be too biased toward the subject under consideration. Therefore, I am inclined to accept the position of Arthur J. Arberry, who articulated a more balanced and plausible argument regarding Sufism's origin. He argued that no religion emerges and develops in a vacuum. Any religious faith, including Islam and Sufism, arises in contact with already existing beliefs, which will inevitably influence the new religion.⁷ Consequently, it is incorrect to say that the visual

Fadiman and Robert Frager hold the same definition, but for them, the "wool" definition is one among many. James Fadiman and Robert Frager, *Essential Sufism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 3.

⁴ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 10.

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 12; Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 15.

⁶ Khalil and Sheikh, "Sufism in Western Historiography," 199, 203.

⁷ A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 11.

elements of other faiths (e.g., Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Gnosticism) in Sufism deprive Sufism of its uniqueness. Sufism, however, remains a distinct tradition within Islam.

Sufism in Its Own Terms

Nahid Anga, the co-founder and co-director of the International Association of Sufism, makes two points regarding the origin of the term “Sufism” (“tasawwuf”). First, she argues that none of the words “Suf,” “Sufe,” “Sufatch,” or “Sophia” works well as a root from which the term “Sufism” could be derived. Although she admits that these words are related to Sufism, none of them covers all of the aspects of Sufism. Therefore, she says, “No one knows the origin of the word Tasawouf—and, it might be added, the full reality of Sufism as well. Just as Sufism cannot be explained in terms of earlier Gnostic schools, so it appears that Sufism is not a word derived from a preexisting root word; the school of Sufism is not an explanation of a practice.”⁸ However, she suggests an explanation from the Sufist perspective, which is the second point. Instead of being thought of as based on “Suf,” “tasawwuf” must be understood as the abbreviation TSVF, which stands for twelve principles of Sufism:

T, the first letter, stands for the three practices of Tark (abandonment), Tubeh (repentance), and Tugha (virtue).

S, the second letter, stands for another three qualities to be perfected by a salek: Sabr (patience), Sedgh (truthfulness and honesty), and Safa (purity).

V, the third letter, stands for Vud (love), Verd (Zekr and remembrance), and Vafa’a (faithfulness).

F, the final letter, represents another three qualifications: Fard (solitude), Faghr (poverty), and Fana (annihilation).⁹

⁸ Nahid Anga, “An Introduction to Sufism,” International Association of Sufism, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://ias.org/sufism/>.

⁹ Anga, “An Introduction to Sufism.”

Interestingly, Anga's proposal of TSVF does not mention anything about the prophet Muhammad. The above-given explanation emphasizes the meaning of being a Sufi and the teaching of Sufism. A similar emphasis can be observed in early Sufis' statements. For instance, they say that being a Sufi is more vital than being a prophet. As an example, one may recall Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), a well-known Sufi of the Middle Ages, who said, "Sainthood is greater than prophethood because it is eternal, whereas prophethood is a function which has a beginning and an end, but that the sainthood of a Prophet is greater than that of other Saints."¹⁰ At first glance, these two explanations of Sufism may make it seem that Sufis do not venerate the prophet Muhammad as traditional Muslims do. Presenting Sufism in that way would be entirely misleading.

Ibn Arabi, in fact, developed the Sufi doctrine of preexistence. In his *The Bezels of Wisdom*, the section dedicated to the prophet Muhammad includes the statement "He was a prophet when Adam was still between the water and the clay."¹¹ In other words, Muhammad's existence predates Adam's. Moreover, for Ibn Arabi, the prophet Muhammad was the light through which God created everything.¹² Al-Hallaj (d. 922), a Sufi who lived earlier than Ibn Arabi, wrote about the prophet, "His ambition preceded all other ambitions, his existence preceded nothingness, and his name preceded the Pen, because he existed before all nations and customs."¹³ Thus, historically, the Sufis were the most fervent worshipers of the prophet Muhammad in the Islamic world. This feature

¹⁰ Lings, *What Is Sufism?*, 101.

¹¹ Ibn al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, ed. Richard J. Payne (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 272. An almost identical view was held by the early Shi'as. Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi'a *Tafsir*," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2013), 183.

¹² J. Spence Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 161.

¹³ Al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, "The TS of the Lamp," in *Teachings of Sufism*, ed. and trans. Carl W. Ernst (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 18.

of Sufism is one of the main attributes of Qoja Ahmed Yassawi's biography that I examine in the next section.

Qoja Ahmed Yassawi

The significance of Qoja Ahmed Yassawi for the spread of Sufism in particular and Islam in general is often overlooked in English-speaking academic circles. His name is briefly mentioned in works that are either related to Sufism or the history of Central Asia. Only a few research works in English, often translations from other languages, comprehensively study Yassawi.

Among scarce works entirely dedicated to Ahmed Yassawi is *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition: Ahmad Yassawi and the Diwan-I Hikmat* by Ismail Tas, Tahir Uluc, and Kemar Argon.¹⁴ Another book that extensively discusses Yassawi is Mehmed Fuad Köprülü's *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, edited and translated by Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff, which was initially written in Turkish (*Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*) and first published in 1918.¹⁵ These two works are the most thorough studies of *Diwani Hikmet* in English. Tas, Uluc, and Argon considered Yassawi's *Diwani Hikmet* from a religious/theological perspective, whereas Köprülü viewed *Diwani Hikmet* as literary art. Lastly, I must acknowledge Devin DeWeese, who wrote several works on Yassawi Sufism and the history of Islam in Central Asia.

Not much is known regarding the biography of Yassawi. The only thing that can be said with some confidence is that he lived around the second half of the twelfth century in the city of Sayram (modern Qazaqstan). When he was seven years old, his

¹⁴ Ismail Tas, Tahir Uluc, and Kemar Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition: Ahmad Yassawi and the Diwan-I Hikmat* (Konya: Palet Yayinlari, Aralık 2016).

¹⁵ Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, ed. and trans. Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff (New York: Routledge, 2006).

father died, and he came under the guardianship of his older sister. He then moved to the city of Yasi, from which his name—Yassawi—is derived.¹⁶

Leiser and Dankoff dedicate two sections of *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature* to the biography of Yassawi; one is historical, the other legendary. For the purpose of this research, I am primarily interested in the legendary biography because it vividly portrays Yassawi's significance in Central Asian imagination.¹⁷ In other words, legends demonstrate what people believe about him, which matters more than his actual biography.

The first legend aims to attach Yassawi to the prophet Muhammad. Tas-Uluc-Argon and Köprülü-Leiser-Dankoff mention Arslan Baba, a mythical figure, who appears in the role of mediator between the prophet and Yassawi. The legend says,

The Prophet uttered a prayer and {the angel} Gabriel brought a dish of dates from paradise. One of the dates fell on the ground, whereupon Gabriel said, "This date is the portion of a member of your religious community named Ahmad Yasawi. Because anything held in trust was naturally to be given to its owner" {cf. Koran IV:58}, the Prophet proposed to his Companions that one of them undertake this duty. But none of them responded except for Arslan Baba who said that by apostolic favor he would be able to undertake this task.¹⁸

Sources in English give details on how Arslan Bab gave the date from the prophet to Ahmad Yassawi. However, oral traditions in Turkic languages, particularly in Qazaq, continue the legend as follows: The prophet Muhammad said to Arslan Baba that he has to give dish of dates too the one who asks him to give it. Five hundred years later, Arslan Baba (who must be seven hundred years old by then) met Ahmad Yassawi, an eleven-year-old boy, and little Yassawi said to Arslan Baba, "give me what belongs to me."¹⁹ Thus, Arslan Baba became the first teacher of Ahmad Yassawi.

¹⁶ Tas, Uluc, and Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition*, 14-15.

¹⁷ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 20, 57.

¹⁸ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 21.

¹⁹ Айтбай Кәріпбеков, *Ислам және Қожалар: Шежірелер Кітабы* (Алматы: Айдана, 2009), 159. [Aitbay Karipbekov, *Islam and Qojas: The Book of Genealogies* (Almaty: Aidana, 2009) 159.]

The purpose of this legend is evident. The Central Asian (Turkic) Sufis needed a narrative to sanction their teachings as directly succeeded from the prophet Muhammad. Tas, Uluc, and Argon highlight the name “Arslan Bab(a),” which itself aims to attach Yassawi to the prophet’s family. “Arslan” in Turkish means “lion,” whereas “Bab” in Arabic denotes “door.” And both words refer to the prophet’s cousin and the fourth Rashudin caliph Ali ibn Talib. “Arslan” is the Turkish equivalent of the Arabic expression *Asadul’l-lah* (أَسَدُ اللَّهِ) by which Ali’s heroism was praised. The term “Bab” or “door” is reminiscent of Ali’s other title, the “door of knowledge.”²⁰

According to another legend, Yassawi fed 99,000 people with a piece of bread—just like Jesus fed 5,000. When everybody wondered about this miracle, a rainstorm started, bringing flooding everywhere, but Yassawi stopped the storm. Then, by his power, a mountain disappeared that was blocking the way of those 99,000 people. He performed these miracles as a child.²¹ Ironically, this miracle legend again coincides with a Christian narrative rather than elevates Sufi Yassawi. In Matthew 17:20-21, Jesus said, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” It is difficult to trace the details of how the author of the legend borrowed the idea of “mountain-moving faith” from the Gospel, but somehow Yassawi Sufis were familiar with the original (biblical) stories.

Other legendary stories and miracles ascribed to Yassawi underscore him as a distinctively Islamic figure. One example is Yassawi’s burial. When he turned 63, the

²⁰ Tas, Uluc, and Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition*, 21-22. See also the following hadith: “that the Messenger of Allah said: ‘I am the house of wisdom, and ‘Ali is its door’” (أَنَا دَارُ الْحِكْمَةِ وَعَلِيٌّ بَابُهَا). Jami at-Tirmidhi, vol. 1, book 46, no. 3723, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/urn/636030>. Muslim scholars debate the authenticity of this hadith. The consensus seems to be the following: “Hafiz Ibn Hajar Al ‘Asqalani (rahimahullah) when asked regarding the authenticity of the hadith, stated that the hadith is not authentic (*sahih*) nor is it fabricated (*mawdu‘*), rather it is sound (*hasan*).” Hadith Answers, “Meaning and Authenticity of the Hadith: ‘I Am the City of Knowledge and ‘Ali Is Its Gate,’” accessed May 3, 2021, <https://hadithanswers.com/meaning-and-authenticity-of-the-hadith-i-am-the-city-of-knowledge-and-ali-is-its-gate/>.

²¹ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 21.

legend says, Yassawi dug a hole and lived the rest of his life in it because the prophet Muhammad died at 63, and Yassawi could not allow himself to walk on the surface of the earth longer than the prophet did. He lived in that hole for 63 or 70 years.²² Thus, eclectically assembled legends make up Ahmed Yassawi's portrait.

As a preliminary conclusion, Ahmed Yassawi was a crucial figure for Central Asian Sufism. Of course, Yassawi had historical teachers, but these people were Sufis who had a loose connection to orthodox or scriptural Islam. Tas, Uluc, and Argon name Yusuf Hamadani as the principal teacher of Yassawi and describe him (Hamadani) as a "scholar of hadith with great erudition in Islamic sciences, held the Qur'an and the Sunnah above anything else."²³ Although Hamadani became a hadith and *fiqh* scholar, he later switched from formal studies to Sufism.²⁴

One must remember that orthodox Muslims often look at Sufis with suspicion. The historical teachers of Yassawi were no exception in this regard. Therefore, the legends stress his connection to the prophet Muhammad in order to establish him as a Muslim. The miracle stories serve to maintain his greatness and fame. In the following sections, I discuss the significance of the Yassawi mausoleum built by Tamerlane and its meaning as the second Mecca for Central Asian Muslims.

The Yassawi Mausoleum

This section examines the significance of the Ahmed Yassawi shrine that Tamerlane built around 1397-1399 for his son Jahangir. It is located in the city of

²² Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 26.

²³ Tas, Uluc, and Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition*, 25.

²⁴ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141-42.

Turkestan, in modern Qazaqstan.²⁵ Unlike other constructions of Tamerlane that collapsed soon after being built, the Yassawi shrine stands firm to this day.²⁶

Today, Qazaqs and other Central Asian Muslims consider the mausoleum the second Mecca. In the nineteenth century, the first American scholar ever to visit Turkestan, Eugene Schuyler, noted different inscriptions on the mausoleum's walls. Some of the inscriptions were from the Qur'an, whereas others praised Tamerlane and Yassawi. For instance, one inscription said, "This water-vessel was made for the tomb of the Sheikh-ul-Islam, chief of all Sheikhs in the world, the Sheikh Akhmed of Yassy."²⁷ Bruce Privratsky, another American scholar visiting Turkestan a hundred years after Schuyler, observes the same sentiments—locals were praising Yassawi. Privratsky provides a long list of beliefs that are popular among Qazaqs in the Turkestan area. However, the most significant sentence in Privratsky's book pertinent to this research is this: "It is not Sufism, but tombs of Sufis, that Qazaq value."²⁸

Thus, both Americans have noted that Yassawi himself—rather than his teachings—became central to the local people's faith. Reading these scholars' works, one learns that today Central Asians are no longer creating myths and legends about Yassawi. Instead, they are worshiping him through pilgrimages to his tomb.

Although Schuyler and Privratsky have accurately identified the Yassawi shrine as the most important in the area, one should not ignore the importance of Yassawi's followers for the spread of Islam, which is the historical backdrop for the

²⁵ Andrew Petersen, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 310.

²⁶ Maria Subtelny states, "The hurriedly built Aq Saray palace and Bibi Khanum mosque in Samarqand collapsed soon after erection." Maria E. Subtelny, "Tamerlane and His Descendants: From Paladins to Patrons," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3, *The Eastern Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 197.

²⁷ Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Khokand, Bukhara, and Kuldja* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1876), 72.

²⁸ Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (2001; repr., New York: Routledge, 2014), 57.

emergence of this shrine and legends about Yassawi. Ira Lapidus and Thierry Zarcone point out that Yassawi missionaries were the main force promoting Islam among Qazaq and other Central Asian nomadic tribes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁹ The following section examines the claims of alleged descendants of Ahmed Yassawi and their controversies over the shrine.

Alleged Descendants of Ahmed Yassawi

Several familial groups in the Turkestan area claim descent either from Ahmed Yassawi or his brother. These groups are known as the Qojas.³⁰ It is pertinent to recall the tribal structure of the Qazaq people studied in chapter 2. Qazaqs consist of three *zhuz* (senior, middle, and junior), and each *zhuz* consists of numerous tribes. For Qazaq people, knowing one's personal genealogy and ancestral lineage is quite important. A common practice among Qazaqs is to ask a person's *zhuz* and tribe when meeting someone new. Two groups among Qazaqs often boast that they do not belong to any of the *zhuz*—the Qojas and the Tores. People belonging to Tore claim descent from Jochy, the oldest son of Genghis Khans, whereas the Qojas insist that their genealogy is traced back to the prophet Muhammad's family and to the great teachers of Yassawi Sufism.

Periodically, familial groups within the Qojas present an old document as a recent discovery supporting their claims. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alleged discoveries of such documents peaked. Usually, these are *nasab-nama*, which is a genealogical tree going back to the prophet Muhammad. Since the Qojas claim they are

²⁹ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 419; Thierry Zarcone, "Yassawiya," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 11, V-Z, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 295.

³⁰ Devin DeWeese spells it as *Khojas*. By doing this, he must be following Russian rendition, which would be Ходжа, but in Qazaq, we say Қожа (*Qoja*). Devin DeWeese, "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia: Descent Groups Linked to Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi in Shrine Documents and Genealogical Charters," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 4 (1999): 507.

the prophet Muhammad’s descendants, they have familial *nasab-namas*.³¹ But presenting these *nasab-namas* aimed to prove a slightly different goal than proving a familial link to Muhammad. Devin DeWeese writes in this regard, “As noted, many of these texts focus on natural lineages traced back to a brother of Ahmad Yasavi named Sadr Shaykh, as in the *waqfiyya* ascribed to Timur.”³²

The stumbling block that caused many conflicts was a document (*waqf*) issued by Tamerlane, in which he orders that neighboring villages must provide for and financially support the shrine’s needs, such as maintenance and clerics. The document specifies the group that should take care of the shrine. Thus, whoever successfully proved to belong to that particular group was entitled to financial support. It should come as no surprise, then, that everyone—before the Soviets took power and abolished all religions—wanted to prove that their family is the one indicated in Tamerlane’s *waqf*.³³ If *waqf* was issued by Tamerlane himself, then it would have been the earliest document associated with the Yassawi shrine and Yassawi’s descendants. However, the *waqf* itself has proven to be a fake document.³⁴

Putting aside the issues about the claimants on the administrative rights at the Yassawi shrine, is there any substantial evidence that any Qoja group in Qazaqstan could be traced back to Ahmed Yassawi’s family? The alleged genealogies usually claim descentance from either Ahmed Yassawi’s daughter or his brother. Unfortunately, no

³¹ For detailed treatment of this topic, see Devin DeWeese and Ashirbek Muminov, eds., *Islamization and Sacred lineages in Central Asia: The Legacy of Ishaq Bab in Narrative and Genealogical Traditions* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2008). For the most recent discovery of a Qoja *nasab-nama*, see Kozhalar, “Насаб – нама нұсқалары не дейді?,” last modified October 19, 2022, <https://kozhal.kz/202210700-nasab-nama-nusqalary-ne-dejdi>. [Kozhalar, “What Do nasab – nama Variants Say?”]

³² DeWeese, “The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia,” 510.

³³ DeWeese, “The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia,” 508, 511.

³⁴ DeWeese, “The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia,” 515. For the earlier research, see Владимир А. Гордлевский, *Избранные Сочинения*, том 3 (Москва, 1962), 363. [Vladimir A. Gordlevskii, *Select Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1962), 363.] Gordlevskii was a Russian Turkologist. He visited Turkestan for the first time in 1929. That is when he gained his first insights into the Yassawi shrine based on conversation with locals, *nasab-namas*, and the *waqf*.

written document exists from the time of Ahmed Yassawi. The earliest written genealogy is dated to the fourteenth century, which says a man named Ibrahim had two sons, Ahmed (Yassawi) and Sadr (Shaykh). A document from the sixteenth century gives contradicting material and says that Ahmed Yassawi had a sister instead of a brother. But both documents agree that Yassawi had two children, a girl and a boy, but his son was murdered at a very young age. Therefore, all the later genealogies go back to Sadr Shaykh, Yassawi's brother, instead of directly back to Yassawi himself.³⁵

In researching Yassawi's genealogy, I had to rely mostly on Devin DeWeese's analysis instead of Qazaq and Turkish writers because they are often biased and do not critically assess the textual material. A common feature of all such works is that if a manuscript claims to belong to an early age, researchers tend to take it as a true report. DeWeese laments about those types of inaccuracies of Qazaq, Uzbek, and Turkish researchers concerning *nasab-namas*.³⁶

The reason for such inaccuracies taking place by Central Asian researchers is not their scholarly incompetence. Zikiriya Zhandarbek, Ashirbek Muminov, and others are outspoken promoters of Islam. The only difference between them and families arguing to belong to Qojas is that latter do it outside of academia. But on everything else, their agendas coincide; both groups want to convince Qazaqs that Islam is their ancestral faith.

³⁵ DeWeese, "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia," 513.

³⁶ DeWeese does not comment much on the body text but provides a critical assessment of such works in the endnotes (see nn. 13, 14, 15). DeWeese, "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in 19th-Century Central Asia," 525. For instance, Zikiriya Zhandarbek considers *nasab-namas* as reliable sources of the history of Islam in Qazaqstan. Zikiriya Zhandarbek, *Versions of "Nasab-Nama" and Turkis History* (Almaty: Institute of Oriental Studies, 2002). See also the following article on the new discovery of Yassawi's writing: Жанар Есенбекова, "Яссауидің Еш Жерде Жарияланбаған Тың Қолжазбасы Табылды," Отырап, last modified January 25, 2018, <https://kz.otyrar.kz/2018/01/yassauidi%d2%a3-esh-zherde-zhariyalanba%d2%93an-ty%d2%a3-%d2%9bolzhazbasy-tabyldy/>. [Janar Eßenbekova, "A Never Published Manuscript of Yassawi was Discovered," Otyrar.]

The Spread of Yassawi Sufism

The next subject that needs attention is the spread of Yassawi Sufism. If Ahmed Yassawi himself propagated Yassawi Sufism, then the traces of his activity must be found as early as the twelfth century, which would be prior to the Mongol invasions. As mentioned earlier, a host of hagiographic writings depict him and his followers performing various miracles while preaching Islam. Whereas those writings aid in understanding the imagined past and created portraits of Yassawi by his followers, they are of little help in reconstructing the actual historical facts.

Nevertheless, based on the literature produced by Yassawi writers, we can see how the surrounding context influenced Yassawi Sufism's teachings. Köprülü admitted that Yassawi's teachings contained extra Islamic features yet added a caveat:

We do find, however, some traces of the ancient primitive religion—not, to be sure, in the fundamental Yasawī teachings propagated by Ahmad Yasawī and his khalifas, but in a number of Yasawī legends that became current among the people. This is a natural phenomenon that commonly occurs in the history of the religious development of mankind.³⁷

If Vladimir. A. Gordlevskii noted that Yassawi Sufism contains pre-Islamic Iranian beliefs, then Cholpan Dyikanova stated that it had more Shamanistic elements than any other Sufi order.³⁸ I discuss the shamanistic elements in *Diwani Hikmet* in the section when I examine the text. For now, based on Dyikanova's and Gordlevskii's observations, it is important to note that Yassawi Sufism's geographic spread must include Persia and traditionally Turkic-Mongol territories.

In this regard, DeWeese points out that *Diwani Hikmet* is the only work written in the Turkic language by the followers of Yassawi Sufism:

The Yasawī Order of this period, which must be distinguished from the broader range of manifestations of the Yasawī tradition known from the thirteenth century to the twentieth centuries, was not only centered in traditionally Persophone regions of

³⁷ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 106.

³⁸ Гордлевский, *Избранные Сочинения*, 3:362; [Gordlevskii, *Select Works*, 3:362;] Cholpan K. Dyikanova, *The Sacred Sites of Kyrgyzstan* (Bishkek: Community and Business Forum, 2004), 8.

Central Asia (especially in the urban and agricultural regions of central Mawrannahr from Samarqand to Bukhara, and in Balkh) but left its most substantial literary legacy almost entirely in Persian.³⁹

DeWeese also provides an extensive list of works produced by Yassawi Sufis, and all of them were written in Persian.⁴⁰ Of course, this is not to say that Yassawi Sufis were not present in the modern territories of Qazaqstan. The above-mentioned mausoleum and supposed descendants of Yassawi in Qazaqstan leave no doubts in this regard. In addition, the copies of *Diwani Hikmet* found in Kokshetau, Qazaqstan, which I discuss in the next section, speak in support of Yassawi Sufism's presence among early Qazaqs. Nevertheless, the fact that *Diwani Hikmet* is the only work written in a Turkic language—but not in the Qazaq language—suggests that Yassawi Sufism's presence among early Qazaqs was not deep. The fact that Qazaqs traditionally practiced shamanism and worshipped Tengri increases the chances that those two practices influenced Yassawi Sufism, causing it to be highly syncretic.⁴¹

Diwani Hikmet

The words *Diwani Hikmet* mean “divine wisdom.” The overall content of *Diwani Hikmet* conforms to the teachings of Islam. Of course, nowhere does *Diwani Hikmet* explicitly teach the five pillars of Islam or give in-depth discussions on any specific doctrine. Instead, the author turns his attention to discourses on asceticism, mysticism, morality, love, praising the prophet Muhammad, and believing in Allah. The text itself contains 149 Hikmets. One of the earliest Western researchers of Islam among Turkic nations commented that the present copy of *Diwani Hikmet* must be the second

³⁹ Devin DeWeese, “The Yasavi Order and Persian Hagiography,” in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 3, *Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750), The Safavid and Mughal Period*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 391.

⁴⁰ DeWeese, “The Yasavi Order and Persian Hagiography,” 391-405. Especially in the footnotes, DeWeese provides detailed bibliographic and catalogue information on each copy and facsimile.

⁴¹ For instance, Julian Baldick writes that Russian ethnographers visiting Qazaqstan in the nineteenth century witnessed Qazaqs practicing shamanism instead of Islam. Julian Baldick, *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 68-70.

volume since the first volume has been lost. He wrote, “Judging from a statement at the beginning of the first poem, the *Diwán* in our hands is the second volume of the author’s works; the first seems to have disappeared. The book which we have consists of a collection of short poems wholly on mystic subjects.”⁴² Since Gibb did not state which copy he had in his hands, it is difficult to assess his statement based on that text. But the first poem does not indicate that *Diwani Hikmet* is the second or a continuation of the previous composition. Most likely, Gibb was referring to the same copy that Köprülü had access to; if that was the case, then it is still hard to call it a second volume, as Gibb noted. Köprülü wrote, “Indeed, in the manuscripts presently in our possession, it is stated in several places that this work is the *Daftar-I thānī* {the Second Notebook}.”⁴³ Köprülü added, “Perhaps the Yasawī poet who compiled this Diwan considered the work of Khwaja Ahmad Yasawī to be the ‘first daftar,’ and because his own work was composed of Hikmats in the same form and style and was given the same name, i.e. *Diwani-i Hikmat*, he regarded it as the ‘second daftar.’”

Thus, *Diwani Hikmet* is a collective work (one composition) written by at least two authors over time. Gibb’s statement that the book is entirely on “mystic subjects” appears to be an exaggeration. Even though *Diwani Hikmet* is primarily a mystic or Sufi poem, it contains poems that address issues of morality and religiosity, and it also features philosophical thoughts. For instance, Hikmet 44 ponders the meaning of life, suffering, and the ultimate truth. Truth is the main topic that the authors of *Diwani Hikmet* entertain the most.

As often is the case with ancient documents, none of the original manuscripts of *Diwani Hikmet* has survived. The earliest copies of the poems date to the seventeenth

⁴² E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry*, vol. 1, 1300-1450 (1900; repr., Cambridge: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1984), 72.

⁴³ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 129.

century.⁴⁴ However, even those copies were not transcribed from authentic Yassawi autographs. Literary criticism demonstrates that multiple people at different times wrote *Diwani Hikmet*. Köprülü was skeptical regarding *Diwani Hikmet*'s authorship. He believed every author either belonged to the *Yassawiya* brotherhood or, by some other means, followed Yassawi's teachings and sought to imitate him.⁴⁵ Köprülü based his criticism on the occurrence of the people's names who lived two or three centuries later than Ahmed Yassawi. The argument is simple: if *Diwani Hikmet* was written by Ahmed Yassawi, then it would have been impossible for him to describe the situations and conversations that took place centuries after his death (see, e.g., Hikmets 47, 77, 88, and 131).⁴⁶

The fact that *Diwani Hikmet* was written in the Turkic language matters more than its actual authorship. Vladimir Vladimirovich Bartold, the famous Russian Empire and later Soviet Union Turkologist, pointed out that the writings ascribed to Yassawi aimed to spread Islam among the Turkic-speaking nations in Central Asia.⁴⁷ The Turkic-speaking people were more receptive to the message in their native tongue than when it was preached in Arabic.⁴⁸ Before *Diwani Hikmet*, Arabic remained a liturgical language, which prevented the masses from understanding its message. In other words, *Diwani Hikmet* indigenized Islam by utilizing the local language.

⁴⁴ Tas, Uluc, and Argon, *The First Turkish Voice in Sufi Tradition*, 31.

⁴⁵ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 129.

⁴⁶ Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, 128. On the other hand, the names mentioned in those Hikmets are common names and titles. The titles Baba and Ata essentially can be attached to any name and are not unique to anyone. Therefore, I do not find this particular argument by Köprülü convincing.

⁴⁷ Владимир В. Бартольд, *История Культурной Жизни Туркестана* (Ленинград: Издательство Академии Наук СССР, 1927), 83. [Vladimir V. Bartold, *The History of Cultural life of Turkestan* (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1927), 83.]

⁴⁸ In chapters 3 and 4, I discussed that from the earliest arrival of Islam in Central Asia to the Mongol invasions, the Muslim community primarily spoke Arabic. However, the nations conquered by the Muslims did not include the modern territories of Qazaqstan. In other words, perhaps Qazaq tribes heard the Islamic message from their Arabic-speaking neighbors, but Islam did not penetrate the Qazaq communities.

Two philologists, Ali Aqar (Turkey) and Sembek Otebekov (Qazaqstan), argue that the Kokshetau manuscript's language of *Diwani Hikmet* is Chaghatay-Oghuz written in Arabic script. They also point out that *Diwani Hikmet* must have been written centuries after its alleged author Ahmed Yassawi died. The grammatical and terminological features of the manuscript indicate that the document was composed around the sixteenth century.⁴⁹

Qazaq Interpretations of *Diwani Hikmet*

In chapter 4, I dealt with Zikiriya Zhandarbek's attempts to marry Hanafi Maturidism with Yassawi Sufism and connect it to Qazaq literature and philosophy. By doing this, Zhandarbek wanted to present the currently broadcasted form of Maturidism as Qazaqs' historical heritage. In a similar manner, Sarsenbi Daituli endeavors to link recent Qazaq literature to Yassawi Sufism. Unlike Zhandarbek, however, Daituli does not argue for the continuity between Hanafi Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism. In addition, Daituli is careful to not overstate the reliance of Qazaq literature and folk wisdom on *Diwani Hikmet*. Rather, he argues that Qazaq writers completely coincide with Yassawi's thoughts. He highlights how Qazaq literature parallels *Diwani Hikmet* and explains it as natural due to both Qazaq authors' and Ahmed Yassawi's sharing a common ethnicity, culture, worldview, and religion.

Daituli's starting point aids him in three crucial ways. First, it eases noting parallels since *Diwani Hikmet* is a long poem that covers many aspects of life. Therefore, it is easy to choose the same topics, problems, and solutions proposed in the poem and in Qazaq literature. For instance, he refers to the practice of waking up early. Qazaqs have a saying, "The man who gets up early will have extra/more" (Ерте тұрған еркектің

⁴⁹ Али Ақар and Сембек Өтебеков, "Диуани Хикметтің Мофонологиялық Сипаты (Көкшетау Нұсқасының Негізінде)," *Хабаршы, Шығыстану Сериясы* 2, no. 93 (2020): 108. [Ali Aqar and Sambek Otebekov, "*Diwani Hikmet's* Phonological Description (Based on the Kokshetau Copy)," *Khabarshi, Shighistanu Seriyasi* 2, no. 93 (2020): 108.]

ырысы артық). Daituli cautiously remarks that it is unknown if Qazaqs based their wisdom about getting up early on Ahmed Yassawi's wisdom, but he emphasizes the agreement between the two.⁵⁰

Second, Daituli accentuates pragmatism over theologizing or religiosity. He brings up Ismail Gasprinsky's hypothetical statement about the relevance of Ahmed Yassawi to contemporary life. Daituli says that if Ahmed Yassawi rose from the dead and walked into modern Qazaq society, then he would not be preaching religion; instead, he would say that since Qazaqs are already Muslims, everyone should focus on building cities, reaping the harvest, and enhancing the overall quality of their lives.⁵¹ Through this hypothetical thought experiment, Daituli makes Islam relevant to the current needs of the nation. His book was published in 2001, when many Qazaqs were struggling with economic hardships. And by promoting Islam by addressing the topic that concerns the whole nation, Daituli demonstrates cunning missiological wisdom. He presented Islam as a solution to people's immediate needs. In other words, Daituli emphasizes that if a person practices the basic tenets of Islam, then there is no need to delve into the theological intricacies; instead, one should focus on life's practical/economic issues.

Third, throughout his book, Daituli praises the virtues of patriotism, honesty, integrity, bravery, compassion, and hard work. He listed a vast amount of Qazaq Khans, sultans, Jirau, and other national heroes and posed that all of them celebrated the same virtues that were praised by Ahmed Yassawi. In sum, religious faith and human efforts to achieve spiritual benefit and earthly goods should come together. He does not preach that a prayer, sincere faith, or spirituality leads to prosperity. Rather, he argues that a person first needs to believe in Allah and remember him, then he must put effort into achieving

⁵⁰ Сәрсенбі Дәуітұлы, *Диуани Хикмет және Қазақ Поэзиясы* (Алматы: Экономика, 2001), 6. [Sarsenbi Daituli, *Diwani Hikmet and Qazaq Poetry* (Almaty: Economica, 2001), 6.]

⁵¹ Дәуітұлы, *Диуани Хикмет және Қазақ Поэзиясы*, 19. [Daituli, *Diwani Hikmet and Qazaq Poetry*, 19.]

the good of this life. In Dautuli's words, "First pray to Allah and ask his blessing. Second, work hard."⁵² Only Allah is responsible for every good and evil that occurs to people. Nevertheless, this point does not call for an irresponsible life. Dautuli urges readers to endure hardship and faithfully keep pursuing hard work and wisdom. In his words, everyone is obligated to work and learn regardless of outcomes.⁵³

Summarizing Dautuli's arguments, I agree that most Qazaq writers were Muslims. Moreover, I would not find it surprising if most of them were Yassawi Sufis. Nevertheless, it is highly questionable if any of them were familiar with *Diwani Hikmet* since it became available to the public only after the 1990s, whereas the vast majority of the authors that Dautuli refers to lived long before it.

Bolat Qorganbekov, another modern interpreter of *Diwani Hikmet*, also attempts to connect the poem with Qazaq folklore. In his introductory notes, he makes a crucial observation on why nomadic Turkic people could not be Muslims. He says that the nomadic lifestyle did not allow Turks to focus on Islam because a scripture-based religion requires a sedentary lifestyle.⁵⁴ Islamic routines—such as reading the Qur'an, praying five times a day, examining the hadith literature, being attached to a mosque, and studying at a madrasa—are practices that are incompatible with a nomadic lifestyle.

Qorganbekov notes that the language and style of *Diwani Hikmet* are simple and easily understandable to the general audience. *Diwani Hikmet*'s poetic lines resonate with Turkic poetry—that is, the two have similar features. Qorganbekov provides an extensive list of phraseological expressions that are used in *Diwani Hikmet* and are

⁵² Дәуітұлы, *Диуани Хикмет және Қазақ Поэзиясы*, 228. [Dautuli, *Diwani Hikmet and Qazaq Poetry*, 228.]

⁵³ Дәуітұлы, *Диуани Хикмет және Қазақ Поэзиясы*, 229. [Dautuli, *Diwani Hikmet and Qazaq Poetry*, 229.]

⁵⁴ Қорғанбеков, "Қожа Ахмет Ясауи Хикметтері мен Қазақ Фольклорындағы Сабақтастық," 176 [Qorganbekov, "Cohesion of Qoja Ahmed Yassawi's Hikmets and Qazaq Folklore," 176].

supposedly widespread among Qazaqs.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, in my estimation, most of them are not necessarily phraseologies but mere translations of random expressions from the original language of *Diwani Hikmet* into modern Qazaq. I agree with Qorganbekov's overall argument that Qazaqs historically practiced Sufism, but I disagree with his statement that Qazaq poetry and *Diwani Hikmet* share common literary features. Another point of agreement with Qorganbekov is his observation of the simplicity of Yassawi Sufism compared to Hanafi Maturidism. In chapter 4, I examined Maturidism, which is the officially accepted and promoted version of Islam today in Qazaqstan. Promoters of both Yassawi Sufism and Hanafi Maturidism argue that their version of Islam is rooted in Qazaq history. But given the complexity of Maturidism and the simplicity of Yassawi Sufism, it is highly likely that Sufism was more dominant than Maturidism.

Unlike Qorganbekov and Dautuli, Mekemtas Mirzakhmetuli acknowledges that *Diwani Hikmet* and Yassawi's teachings were revitalized only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He laments that antireligious atheist propaganda lasted long enough so that Qazaq forgot their own religious heritage. Before the USSR, Qazaqs wrote in Arabic script, the same script in which *Diwani Hikmet* was originally written. Thus, Mirzakhmetuli explains that Qazaq authors and poets who wrote during the Soviet Union produced literature dissimilar to *Diwani Hikmet* because they were forcefully disconnected from their cultural heritage.⁵⁶ Mirzakhmetuli makes an accurate historical observation regarding the USSR's malevolent policy of distorting the cultural identity of ethnic groups other than Russians. However, his argument that *Diwani Hikmet* was widely cited by pre-Soviet Qazaqs seems to be an overstatement. We do not possess

⁵⁵ Қорғанбеков, “Қожа Ахмет Ясауи Хикметтері мен Қазақ Фольклорындағы Сабақтастық,” 177 [Qorganbekov, “Cohesion of Qoja Ahmed Yassawi's Hikmets and Qazaq Folklore,” 177].

⁵⁶ Мекемтас Мырзахметұлы, *Қазақ Әдебиетіндегі Сопылық Таным* (Алматы: ГИСпринт, 2012), 20-21. [Mekemtas Mirzakhmetuli, *Sufism in Qazaq Literature* (Almaty: GISprint, 2012), 20-21.]

references to *Diwani Hikmet* among Qazaq poets prior to the Soviet Union. In the next section, I examine the text of *Diwani Hikmet* and provide a brief commentary on it.

Text and Commentary

In this work, I use the Qazaq translation made by Abibula Mukhammedzhanov, whose source text was an 1897 Kazan copy in the Tatar language.⁵⁷ Before examining the text, I must briefly acknowledge the other five translations. Thus, at least six translations of *Diwani Hikmet* have been circulated among the Qazaqs since 1900. The first translation was conducted by Asqar Toqmagambetov (1905-1983). The second translation was made by the professors of Mukhtar Auezov Institute and was published in 2007. Occasionally, I compare this translation to Mukhammedzhanov's since these two are widely accepted and respected by modern scholars in Qazaqstan. The third and fourth translations were made by two Qazaq poets, Jarasqan Abdrashov and Esenbay Duisenbaev, and—unfortunately—their works are not available to me. The fifth translation was made by Abirash Jamishov. However, the editors of Mukhammedzhanov's translation criticize Jamishov's translation for being influenced by Soviet ideology.⁵⁸ A common feature for the translations mentioned here and others is that most of them were published after 1991—except for Toqmagambetov's translation. Consequently, the Qazaq people's understanding of *Diwani Hikmet* is relatively fresh and often retrospective.

A general observation on *Diwani Hikmet* reveals that the central terms “Islam,” “Qur'an,” and “Allah” occur surprisingly infrequently—particularly, in the Qazaq

⁵⁷ Қожа Ахмет Яссауи, *Диуани Хикмет*, ауд. Абибула Мұхаммеджанов (Алматы: Фолиант, 2007). [Qoja Ahmed Yassawi, *Diwani Hikmet*, trans. Abibula Mukhammedzhanov (Almaty: Foliand, 2007).]

⁵⁸ Қожа Ахмед Яссауи, *Диуани Хикмет*, trans. Abibula Mukhammedzhanov (Astana: Foliand, 2007), 6-7. See also Асылбек Байтанұлы, “Қожа Ахмет Яссауидің «Диуани хикметі» және оның аудармалық ерекшелігі жөнінде,” *Adebiet Portal*, last modified December 12, 2016, https://adebiportal.kz/kz/news/view/asylbek-baitanuly-qoza-axmet-iassauidin-diuan-i-xikmeti-zane-onyn-audarmalyq-ereksheligi-zoninde__18506. [Asilbek Baytanuli, “‘*Diwani Hikmet*’ of Qoja Akhmed Yassawi and about Its Translation Characteristics.”]

translation, which belongs to the Turkic language group like Chaghatay-Oghuz the original language of *Diwani Hikmet*. But in Russian and English translations, these terms appear frequently.⁵⁹ Since the Qazaq language is closer to Chaghatay-Oghuz than English and Russian, the Qazaq translation is more representative of the original.⁶⁰ Therefore, the rare occurrence of the main Islamic terms indicates that the Islamic theology that Yassawi Sufi missionaries spread among the early Qazaqs and other Turkic-speaking people did not coincide with the classical teachings of Islam based on the Qur'an and hadith. As mentioned earlier, throughout this work, I refer to the Qazaq translation. Whenever necessary, I note the differences between the Qazaq, Russian, and English translations.

Allah and Theology

Regarding the references to God in *Diwani Hikmet*, I must mention that three main Qazaq terms for God occur in the text: Алла (“Allah”), Тәңірі (“Tangir”), and Құдай (“Quday”). “Allah” is used more frequently than the other two. But none of these terms, including “Allah,” is the primary designator of God in *Diwani Hikmet*. The primary descriptor of God in is Хақ (“Haq”), which stands for “truth.” The prioritization of “Haq” over “Allah” blurs the Islamic god’s identity and makes him less personal. The difference between understanding god as an abstract truth and personified Allah is critical for several reasons.

⁵⁹ For the Russian translation, see Ахмед Яссауи, *Хикметы*, пер. Н. Ж. Сагындыкова (Алматы: Дайк Пресс, 2004) [Ahmad Yassawi, *Hikmets*, trans. N. Zh. Saghidikova (Almaty: Daik Press, 2004).] For the English translation, see Ahmad Yassawi, *Divine Wisdom (Diwani Hikmet)*, trans. Jonathan Trampman and Virve Trapman (Glastonbury, UK: Living Zen Books, 2013).

⁶⁰ Stephen A. Bahry, “Language Ecology: Understanding Central Asian Multilingualism,” in *Language Change in Central Asia*, ed. Elise S. Ahn and Juldyz Smagulova (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 17. For a detailed comparative analysis of the Turkic languages’ grammars, see Lars Johanson, “Turkic Indirectives,” in *Evidentials: Turkic, Iranian, and Neighbouring Languages*, ed. Lars Johanson and Bo Utas (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 73-76. For the classification of Turkic languages, see Karl H. Menges, *The Turkic Languages and Peoples: An Introduction to Turkic Studies*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995), 60-61. Interestingly, the author uses “Qazaq” instead of the Russianized “Kazakh.”

First, Allah demands undisputed submission, and only he must be worshipped. The well-known idea of *Tawhid*—or the oneness of God—in Islam puts a strong emphasis on Allah’s uniqueness and matchless characteristics. Allah is the highest, and nobody else can be as wise, just, omnipotent, omniscient, merciful, forgiving, and powerful as him. But when Allah’s description is reduced to an abstract truth, he loses his personal qualities, and he is not the highest being anymore.

Second, the depersonalization of Allah leads to a less structured religious system. Thus, for daily behavior, the roles of Shari’a, Sunnah, and Islamic jurisprudence, in general, are less prioritized compared to personal or mystic spirituality. For instance, as early as Hikmet 2, Yassawi says he was performing *dhikr* day and night with joy from the age of five to the day of his self-burial. Accordingly, Yassawi Sufism emphasizes emptying or clearing the mind to yield space at an emotional level for truth instead of filling it with intellectual explanations.

Dhikr, unlike *salah* and *dua*, can lead a person to an intense ecstatic condition. (*Salah* is the ritual prayer performed five times a day at certain hours, while *dua* is a voluntary prayer where a man can ask for Allah’s aid for a need, thank him, or express wishes.) Usually, the Sufi *dhikr* means chanting Qur’anic verses repeatedly with a certain rhythm and rhythmic breathing, running in a circle, or bending to left and right like dancing, which drives a person in an emotionally ecstatic mood. Yassawi’s attitude toward *dhikr* in Hikmet 2 indicates that it was the primary spiritual discipline he observed regularly to reach the truth. In other Hikmets (e.g., 3, 4, 16, 28, 30, 32, 40, 44, 45) throughout the *Diwani Hikmet*, there is a heavy emphasis on *dhikr*.

Third, unlike classical schools of thought (four Sunni Madhhabs), mysticism moves away from intellectual theology. Islamic doctrines ultimately seek to explain the relationship between Allah and human beings. But *Diwani Hikmet* does not address the most pressing issues of hermeneutics in Islam, which is the primary vehicle in revealing Allah’s will in daily life. Christians deal mostly with the interpretation of the Bible,

which is much more cohesive and comprehensible than the Qur'an and the countless, often contradictory, hadith literature. Maturidism, a branch within Hanafi Madhhab, strives to explain Islam rationally,⁶¹ whereas Yassawi Sufism, like other branches of Sufism, promotes emotional and spiritual experience. For instance, Ahmed Yassawi repeatedly states that at the age of 63, he buried himself underground to imitate the prophet Muhammad's example (see, e.g., Hikmets 4, 15, 40, 42). Yet it is hard to conceive of Yassawi's decision as something theologically pragmatic. But it is easy to imagine that if the prophet Muhammad had a choice, then he would have preferred to live longer than die at age 63. Clearly, Yassawi's self-burial was a symbolic, emotional, and individual decision to venerate the prophet. It would be dramatic and impractical if such a practice was imperative for all and everyone replicated Yassawi's self-burial example at age 63.

Fourth, the terms "Allah" and "truth" are used interchangeably, and occasionally truth does not necessarily mean Allah. In those instances, the author(s) of *Diwani Hikmet* praise or treat the truth as an equal or even higher virtue than Allah. In the Qazaq translation, Hikmet 12 omits the term Allah entirely and talks exclusively about the truth, whereas Hikmet 31 has an interesting line equating the truth to Allah but treats them as two different parties. It says, "Жан тәніңмен Алланы айтып Хаққа налып," which means, "with all of my soul I spoke about Allah and moaned to the Truth." Of course, this is not to say that Ahmed Yassawi, or a later writer of *Diwani Hikmet*, was not a Muslim or did not believe in Allah. For example, Hikmet 7 is illustrative in this regard. The prayer in the opening line of the Hikmet in Qazaq is directed to Tengri, whereas English and Russian translations say, "to the highest power." Thus, all three translations

⁶¹ In chapter 4, I examined Maturidism. Maturidism offers several interpretative methods, such as *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning), *Ijtihad* (personal reasoning), and *Ijma* (consensus). For discussions of Maturidism's intellectual reasoning of Islam, see Mohammad H. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society), 444-45. For a more recent study on Maturidism's theology, see Gibril Fouad Haddad, *The Maturidi School: From Abu Hanifa to Al-Kawthari* (Oldham, UK: Beacon Books, 2021).

retain the absence of Allah. The author says he found the truth by doing *dhikr*, in the second verse of the same Hikmet, and later, he states that the truth created human beings, which clarifies that the truth and Allah are the same entity. Through this tension between the truth and Allah in *Diwani Hikmet*, readers gain the insufficiency of Allah without the truth. Allah is the creator of everything, the highest of all, and the most powerful, but he still needs the truth. Unfortunately, *Diwani Hikmet* never defines what the truth is.

Fifth and finally, the prophet Muhammad's name in *Diwani Hikmet* occurs more frequently than the term "Allah." The fact that Allah is referred to fewer times than the prophet Muhammad does not, however, preclude Allah from being the central topic of *Diwani Hikmet*. The term "Haq" and the words derivative from it in various forms appear a lot more than Muhammad's name. I already mentioned that "Allah" as "Haq" (or "truth") is less personal.⁶²

Muhammad

Another major Islamic term to consider is the name of the prophet Muhammad. Hikmets 23-25 are entirely dedicated to praising him. In these Hikmets, Muhammad helps the needy, spends a whole night in prayer, responds to evil with good, and never gives in to temptations. The author(s) of these Hikmets went beyond describing Muhammad as a mere highly moral and religiously pious man. For instance, the opening line of Hikmet 25 says that 18,000 universes brought allegiance to Muhammad. Another line says that Muhammad makes brighter the way of Shari'a, which is followed by two statements that he directs the way of Sufi and leads to the truth ("Haq"). The context does not clarify if "Haq" here is Allah or abstract truth. The last line of Hikmet 25 states that Muhammad was an example to human beings and angels.⁶³

⁶² In English translation, the translators replaced "Haq" with "Allah." Therefore, "Allah" is the dominant term used to describe God in the English translation.

⁶³ The Russian translation entirely omitted the last line of Hikmet 25, whereas the English translation says that Muhammad gave happiness to people and angels.

Thus, according to Hikmet 25, the prophet Muhammad is more than a mere messenger of Allah. His figure goes beyond religious leadership on earth and acquires the features of the cosmic and spiritual realms. Regardless of whether the prophet Muhammad was an example to angels or brought happiness to them, the point is that he was able to interfere with the supernatural world. The statement that 18,000 universes brought him allegiance again elevates the gravity of his significance in the cosmic and spiritual realms. The words “Muhammad makes Shari’a brighter” suggest that Muhammad and Shari’a must be inseparable.

The question that needs an answer this: Did the author(s) of *Diwani Hikmet* viewed Muhammad as someone higher than human beings and angels yet lower than Allah, or did they have another reason to elevate Muhammad? The most plausible explanation seems to be the portraits of Ahmed Yassawi. The miracles ascribed to Yassawi, such as moving a mountain, could have overshadowed the prophet Muhammad’s portrait. Therefore, to avoid competition between Yassawi and Muhammad, the latter needed to be elevated to an unparalleled level of veneration. And the elevation could not be quantitative. For instance, the statement “Yassawi moved one mountain, but the prophet Muhammad moved ten mountains” would not work. Instead, Muhammad must be in an entirely different league. Therefore, Muhammad’s higher status over angels and the fact that 18,000 universes submit to him serve the goal of making him different and higher than Ahmed Yassawi.

Moreover, it seems that Hikmets 23-25 bring the prophet Muhammad to fit within the broader tradition of Sufism and the Muslim narratives in general. In other Hikmets, instead of “Muhammad,” the author(s) used “Mustafa,” which means “chosen.” Again, just as in the case of Allah, the central figure’s proper name is replaced by his title or designation, which erases his personal identity. Interestingly, the literary forms of Hikmets 23-26 resemble exclamatory vows rather than poems like the rest of the *Diwani Hikmet*. Hikmet 26 puts the names back to back and calls the prophet “Mustafa

Muhammed.” Thus, Hikmet 26 unites Muhammad and Mustafa under one identity. In other Hikmets, the expression “Haq Mustafa” is more prevalent than any other designation of the prophet.

We know from the historical accounts that Muhammad did not respond with love to evil, as Hikmet 25 states. According to the traditional Islamic narrative, Muhammad’s prophetic activity started in Mecca (610), but the Meccans viciously rejected his message, and he had to migrate to Medina (Yathrib) to escape (622). This migration is known as Hijra. Unlike in Mecca, the citizens of Medina accepted Muhammad’s message, and there he gained enough power to conquer Mecca later (629-630). Countless other military expeditions and raids launched by Muhammad make it hard to call him a peaceful man.⁶⁴

Sin and Salvation

I examine sin and salvation together because the latter is mentioned only two times (in Hikmets 12 and 82), whereas sin is referred to many times. The imbalanced use of the terms indicates that Ahmed Yassawi (or later authors of *Diwani Hikmet*) had a strong notion of sin and almost no hope of salvation. The world is full of sin because Satan makes everyone sin (Hikmet 1). In the last verse of Hikmet 3, Yassawi laments that his sins are heavier than mountains, and he expects suffering on the day of judgment. Similar sentiments are observed in Hikmet 5, where the author states the multiplicity of sins and acknowledges helplessness in front of the too many sins he has. In Hikmet 6, Yassawi repents of his sins, but repentance is not followed by salvation. Interestingly, in the same Hikmet, he calls sin a disease instead of saying that it is an active commitment against Allah’s will. Moreover, toward the end of the Hikmet 6, Yassawi prays to the

⁶⁴ I acknowledge that Muslims justify Muhammad’s wars and acts of revenge as either self-defense or direct command of Allah. For the justification of revenges, see Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 4, book 56, no. 720, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_4_56.php.

truth (“Haq”) to forgive sins. In other words, *Diwani Hikmet* acknowledges that truth and sin are incompatible.

When Yassawi asks Allah to forgive sins (Hikmet 28), he first states that Allah is wrathful. Allah’s wrath is the reason for the fear of sins, yet Yassawi hopes for Allah’s other name Rahman (“merciful”) and pleads for forgiveness. The author understands that Allah is the source of punishment and forgiveness of sins, yet it is never clear what a person should expect once his sins are forgiven. At the same time, Yassawi acknowledges that the consequence of sin is death (Hikmet 31), and he describes death as “Haq.” Death for sins is as true as the existence of Allah. But what about salvation?

Salvation is the most neglected topic in *Diwani Hikmet*. One would expect salvation if there were sin, death, repentance, and forgiveness. Nevertheless, salvation is the least occurring term in *Diwani Hikmet*. In English translation, the term “salvation” appears in Hikmets 12 and 82, yet the term is not used in the Qazaq version. The English version says,

I observe my sins and become impatient,

Repenting, I run to you in the *hope of salvation*.⁶⁵

The Qazaq version, on the other hand, says, “I came under your care.” Even if one takes coming under care as meaning salvation, salvation is not something certainly granted but only hoped for.

Nevertheless, in Hikmet 82 (in Qazaq, Hikmet 83), salvation is attainable through the prophet Muhammad’s interference. The plot in Hikmet 83 is about the day of judgment when everyone descending from Adam is standing in front of Allah. They all see the fires of hell and hear the exclamation that there is no salvation. People ask Adam if he can help them, but he says he cannot and they should ask Abraham (Ibrahim in the original). Abraham says he cannot help and needs to ask Moses. Moses also declares that

⁶⁵ Italics mine.

he cannot help and they should ask the prophet Muhammad. And only Muhammad can talk to Allah on behalf of the people.

The conversation between Allah and Muhammad ends with Allah's decision to forgive everyone and grant them access to paradise. Interestingly, Allah allows even the sinners and wicked to be in paradise if their sins are carried by Muhammad. Hikmet 82 in the English version reads,

“Even the sinful and prodigal are worthy,” the Merciful replies.

“They are all my children in heaven,

The greatest sins I hand to you.”

In joy Rasul returns.

The Qazaq and Russian versions convey the same meaning that Muhammad carries people's sins. Hikmet 26 repeats the same idea that Muhammad saves people from hell. Above, I mentioned that Muhammad's other name in *Diwani Hikmet* is Mustafa (“chosen”) and that Hikmet 26 puts Mustafa and Muhammed together. Thus, Muhammad as the chosen one saves people, but he does not pay any price to save people. Unlike Jesus Christ, Muhammad did not have to die himself and take the place of sinners. He did not have to do anything at all except ask Allah to forgive people.

Allah forgives sins at no cost, which suggests that ultimate justice is suppressed. Allah's granting of salvation based on merely following Muhammad raises questions regarding religious rituals that Muslims are required to perform. Why would someone observe four out of five pillars of Islam if Shahadah alone suffices for one's eternal destiny? (By pronouncing Shahadah, a person becomes a follower of Muhammad.) What was the point of Yassawi's doing *dhikr* day and night if it ultimately does not affect his salvation? In conclusion, it should be reiterated that out of 148 Hikmets, only 2 speak about salvation; in the other 146 Hikmets, salvation is not mentioned at all.

Conclusion

The case of Ahmed Yassawi demonstrates that the spread of Islam among the nomadic Central Asian tribes had success when it was preached in their language (Turkic) and oral tradition. The legends surrounding Yassawi's biography must be understood as literary tools instead of historical accounts. However, problems arose when the local historians and lay people took the legendary narratives as actual historical events. Therefore, the historical portrait of Yassawi became indiscernible from his legendary image.

It does not seem possible to establish Ahmed Yassawi's historicity and verify his existence by the sources contemporary to his time. Based on available historical data, by the time of Tamerlane, a Sufi named Ahmed was known to live in the city of Yasi in the twelfth century. Tamerlane ordered a shrine built (1389-1405) to commemorate Yassawi's name. Two centuries later, the first pieces of literature attributed to Yassawi appeared in Persian and Turkic languages, with *Diwani Hikmet*'s being the only work in the Turkic language. *Diwani Hikmet* became the primary tool for converting nomadic Turkic people to Islam. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the language of *Diwani Hikmet* was Chaghatay-Oghuz, which belongs to the same Turkic language group as Qazaq and is very similar to it, although Chaghatay-Oghuz and Qazaq are two different languages. The first translations of *Diwani Hikmet* in the Qazaq language were published relatively recently, only after 1991. Therefore, Qazaq Muslims' claims that Yassawi Sufism was popular before the Russian colonization needs revision.

Even if Yassawi's teachings were as popular as Qazaqs' claim, Yassawi's legendary biography, his shrine, and the work (*Diwani Hikmet*) attributed to him do not elaborate on the Islamic doctrines. Yassawi Sufism, with its practice of and heavy emphasis on *dhikr*, was rather comparable to shamanistic chanting. In addition, *Diwani Hikmet* depersonalized, most likely unintentionally, Allah's identity by reducing him to an abstract truth.

In conclusion, modern Qazaqs rightly identify similarities between *Diwani Hikmet* and national poetry. But the similarity seems to be only linguistic rather than in content. No substantial evidence exists to support that Qazaq poets were nurtured by *Diwani Hikmet*. We do not have a single reference to Ahmed Yassawi's poem by Qazaq poets before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yassawi Sufism, like Hanafi Maturidism, has been revived only since 1991, but unlike Maturidism, Yassawi Sufism has undeniable evidence for its historical presence among Qazaqs. *Diwani Hikmet* was written in a Turkic language, and its main shrine is located within the modern territory of Qazaqstan.

Overall, I argued that Yassawi Sufism is a new phenomenon in the religious life of Qazaqs when it is promoted based on *Diwani Hikmet* and attached to the national identity. Although Yassawi Sufism was present among Qazaqs, it did not define Qazaqness. Historically, Yassawi Sufism was merely one of many religions that Qazaq tribes practiced. Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that Yassawi Sufism was *the* ancestral faith of the Qazaq people. Whether Yassawi Sufism or Hanafi Maturidism were ancestral faiths of Qazaqs, Qazaqs need Christ. In the next chapter, I discuss missiological implications in light of Qazaq people's argument that Islam is their ancestral faith.

CHAPTER 6

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In previous chapters, I described the most significant barrier between Qazaqs and the gospel—the socio-religious stronghold that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim. This stronghold was erected by the historical narrative that Qazaqs were Muslims until Christian Russians conquered them. Muslims argue that Hanafi Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism are the historical and religious heritage of Qazaqs. Therefore, today, as an independent nation, Qazaqstan must restore and maintain its historical faith—Islam.

The attachment of Qazaqness to Islam, according to Qazaqs, creates a strong association between Christianity and the Qazaqs' former colonizer, Russia. In other words, if being a Qazaq means being a Muslim, then being a Russian means being a Christian. Qazaqs gained political independence from Russia in 1991, and according to Qazaqs, expressing emotional and psychological freedom from their Soviet past entails distancing themselves from everything associated with Russia as well as from Christianity—since it was a significant marker of Russianness. Modern Qazaqs mistakenly believe that true Qazaqness is necessarily opposed to Christianity and dependent upon Islam. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of this dissertation's research for the church and Christian missions in Qazaqstan.

The Church in Qazaqstan

As mentioned earlier, Qazaqstan was part of the former USSR. Evangelical missionaries from the United States, Europe, and South Korea arrived in the country after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. However, Christians were not the only missionaries

entering the country. At the same time, many other religions launched their own missions efforts, including Muslims; the latter proved to be the most successful in reaching the Qazaq people. According to various census data, nearly seventy percent of the population claims to profess Islam, whereas only 0.5 percent are evangelical Christians.¹ A post-colonial syndrome likely explains the success of Islam because Qazaqs seek to revive and strengthen the cultural, ethnic, and religious identity that existed before Russian colonization.²

Therefore, for ethnic Qazaqs, it is harder to publicly declare their Christian faith than for ethnic Russians because Qazaqs are expected to be Muslims, whereas Russians are expected to be Christians. Most of the Qazaq churches function underground, and by God's grace, the first complete translation of the Bible in Qazaq was published in 2010. The Qazaq church does not engage in Christian-Muslim dialogues in the country, it tries to stay "below the radar," and it never participates in public discussions of political and social issues. Overall, the church in Qazaqstan is still in its infancy.³

Unsurprisingly, Christian missions in Qazaqstan is entirely dependent upon foreign resources such as finances, church-planting workers, evangelism methods, literature, and the like. Foreigners directly or indirectly oversee most of the churches and mission agencies ministering in the country. Even if foreign workers do not physically

¹ Joshua Project, "Kazakhstan," accessed May 20, 2019, <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/KZ>; Operation World, "Kazakhstan," accessed May 20, 2019, <https://operationworld.org/locations/kazakhstan/>. The CIA World Factbook states that about 70 percent of Qazaqs are Muslim. CIA World Factbook, "Kazakhstan," last updated January 11, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kazakhstan/>.

² Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (June 2011): 243-56; Alma Sultangalieva, *Return of Islam to Kazakhstan* (Almaty: Altinbek Sarsenbayuli Fund, 2012), 47.

³ The translation project was led by a missionary who heavily relied on Eugene Nida's "dynamic equivalence" approach. As a result, the translation team went as far as introducing non-biblical concepts such as that humans were created in the spiritual image of God and that Jesus Christ is the spiritual Son of God.

reside in Qazaqstan, local ministers are still accountable to a person or council abroad. On the one hand, local believers are hesitant to take the initiative, and on the other, foreigners are not keen to hand over leadership. Locals are accustomed to being in the position of the receiver, employee, and consumer. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that if these resources cease coming to Qazaqstan and missionaries step down from their positions, then mission activity will dramatically decline.⁴

Christian Missions in Qazaqstan

The eschatological goal of Christian missions in Qazaqstan is to make the Qazaq language heard and for every Qazaq tribe to be found among all of the nations standing before the throne and the Lamb and crying out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9). The goal of Christian missions on earth is to establish a self-supported, self-governed, and self-propagated Qazaq church. By showing the gospel message’s compatibility with Qazaqness to Qazaqs, Christians may have a greater chance for missions success than by doing missions while ignoring the socio-religious stronghold. I believe that the gospel message contributes to true Qazaqness more than Islam does. Qazaq believers and the ex-pat community must cooperate to accomplish the goal of the Christian missions but each group will have a unique role in this endeavor.

Over time, Qazaqs will take over missions in Qazaqstan; perhaps, it is too early now, but the missional task of Qazaqs can never be done just by foreigners. The burden of demonstrating true Qazaqness while being a devout, Bible-believing Christian is on Qazaqs. Foreign missionaries must convey the unaltered teachings of the Bible to local Qazaq churches and minimize the export of their own culture. For instance, one-on-one

⁴ I have to note that this paragraph exclusively reflects my personal opinion. I cannot refer to any academic sources to support my view. I have made these observations based on the things I am witnessing here, mostly from the personal conversations with local pastors and church leaders. In addition, I am aware of a situation where an American pastor left the country and then a lot of people left the church. The number of members from about four hundred to forty.

discipleship meetings are biblically sound, but while meeting at a coffee shop early in the morning is perhaps normative in the US, meeting at someone's home and drinking tea in the evening would be culturally appropriate in Qazaqstan.

In four sections, I address the opportunities and needs for the Christian missions in Qazaqstan. The first section establishes the biblical foundation for Christian missions, considering the socio-religious context in Qazaqstan. The second section highlights the pressing needs of the Qazaq church. The third and fourth sections discuss the roles of Qazaq believers and the missionary community, respectively, in the promotion of the gospel of Jesus Christ among Qazaqs.

Before I proceed further, a few comments are worth making. First, no mission strategy or method can replace prayer and reliance upon the Holy Spirit's guidance because we are on a spiritual battlefield. As the apostle Paul wrote, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Ultimately, Christian missions is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we are merely tools in God's hands. Second, I appreciate the labor of Christian brothers and sisters in Qazaqstan, and I suggest my findings as supplementary to—and by no means substitutionary of—their ongoing work. Third, in what follows, I focus on practical steps rather than theoretical issues.

Biblical Foundations

The biblical concept of Christ's incarnation must be employed as the primary missiological tool to share the gospel among Qazaqs. Biblical and theological studies demonstrate that Jesus Christ was fully man, and the historical-cultural background of his ministry indicates that he was fully a Jew. Christ, the incarnate Son, lived in a particular time, space, and society. He ate, drank, slept, and acted in accordance with first-century Palestinian culture. It is well said that "the activity of Jesus can be adequately understood

only within the Judaism of his time.”⁵ Jesus preached and taught in an understandable manner to his audience. However, being thoroughly Jew did not hinder him from disagreeing with his Jewish fellows whenever the truth was at stake. Jesus openly criticized Pharisees, Sadducees, and others every time it was needed (Matt 23:1-39; Luke 11:37-54). At the same time, he easily could take one of the debating parties’ side, such as in the debate concerning the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:23-33; cf. Acts 23:8).

Two historical documents have served as landmarks for subsequent Christological inquiries in the church’s history. The Chalcedonian Creed (451) underscored Christ’s divine and human natures in the statement “true God and true man.” Centuries later, Anselm of Canterbury, in his *Cur Deus Homo* (c. 1099), laid out a theological, logical, and philosophical explanation of Jesus Christ’s incarnation. Christ is God because only God may forgive sin against God. Jesus is also a man (i.e., human); therefore, he is a legitimate substitute for human beings. Contemporary theological studies reaffirm Christ’s divine and human natures. As Daniel J. Treier summarizes, “The incarnation reveals but does not change the essence of what it means to be God or human.”⁶

In a similar manner, Christians should demonstrate that being a Christian does not necessarily abolish one’s Qazaqness. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that contextualization should never go as far as compromising the truth. The acceptance of sinful, biblically contradictory cultural features in the name of contextualization is still in practice. For instance, the Insider Movement promotes unhealthy and deceitful contextualization and argues for the retention of one’s previous religious identity.⁷

⁵ Jens Schröter, Wayne Coppins, and S. Brian Pounds, *Jesus of Jew from Galilee, Savior of the World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 65.

⁶ Daniel J. Treier, “Jesus Christ, Doctrine of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 367.

⁷ For a critical evaluation of the Insider Movement from a sound evangelical perspective, see Ayman S. Ibrahim and Ant B. Greenham, eds., *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts* (New York: Peter Lang 2018).

Unfortunately, some Qazaq church leaders have fallen into this misleading teaching and have promoted it among believers as a biblically sound practice of faith. From my conversations with them, I know that they believe the Qur'an can be regarded as equally authoritative as the Bible. They encourage Christians to go to the mosque, exercise Islamic practices like fasting during Ramadan, and employ Arabic/Islamic terms to preach the gospel.

However, the Bible says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Therefore, a missionary must exhibit faithfulness and loyalty to his Christian identity. However, *proper* assimilation and adoption of the local cultural (*not* religious) system may create fertile ground for mission work.

Findings in modern scholarship suggest the effectiveness of assimilating among locals for the work of missions. Cultural anthropologists and missiologists agree that people communicate effectively through familiar and mutually shared signs. For instance, one anthropological perspective says, "Anthropology in mission work focuses largely on cross-cultural communication and the translation of the gospel."⁸ A similar sentiment can be drawn from the missiological point of view of Donald McGavran, who wrote, "To understand the psychology of the innumerable sub-societies which make up the non-Christian nations, it is essential that the leaders of the churches and missions strive to see life from the point of view of a people, to whom individual action is treachery."⁹ Evangelization means communicating the good news of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard it yet. Further discipleship presumes continuously interacting with a new believer, which demands effective communication.

⁸ Brian M. Howell and Jenell Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 230.

⁹ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1955), 11.

Another crucial aspect necessary for the Christian missions in Qazaqstan is the element of sacrifice. Jesus Christ paid the highest possible price for our salvation—his own life. Therefore, as the body of Christ, the church must seriously consider how much she is ready to sacrifice to make Christ’s name known among unreached people groups like Qazaqs.

The Needs of the Qazaq Church

The needs of the Qazaq church can be grouped into three categories: (1) spiritual, (2) mental, and (3) physical or material. Concerning the first need, for seven decades, the USSR forced Qazaqs to live under atheistic propaganda. Those who agreed with the propaganda firmly believed that God did not exist. Others who disagreed developed a spiritual thirst, one that was later satisfied primarily by Islam and animistic beliefs. Thus, both the Soviet and subsequent anti-Soviet propaganda established a strong foundation of anti-Christian sentiments. Hence, all people have a desperate spiritual need, whether they believe in Islam, declare that God does not exist, or believe in any other spiritual powers. The only adequate answer to this spiritual need is Jesus Christ. Thankfully, the Qazaq church understands the need for Christ, and she strives to deliver this message to society.

The second need of the Qazaq church is a change of mindset regarding Christian missions. Unfortunately, Qazaq believers’ participation in missions is passive. Qazaq Christians have not developed a strong sense of ownership for missions. With very few exceptions, Qazaqs rarely initiate mission activity because they still think that it is foreigners’ duty to launch, fund, and lead. I do not know of a single mission work that was started, funded, and led entirely by Qazaq believers. Short-term mission trips, social work, charity, evangelism, and other activities are often accomplished at a missionary’s initiative, and Qazaq people’s participation is to help in such projects.

The issue with the lack of ownership for missions among Qazaq Christians seems to spring from their acceptance of the narrative that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim and that being a Christian is wrong for Qazaqs. Qazaq Christians are undergoing a deep identity crisis. Therefore, they are not ready to take responsibility for missions and often act out of the belief that the mission work is the duty of missionaries. To change Qazaqs' attitude toward missions, they first must denounce the narrative that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim at a psychological, emotional, and spiritual level. This change cannot be imposed externally; it is something that Qazaq Christians need to attain internally. They genuinely must echo the apostle Paul's sentiment—"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16)—with a strong emphasis that *they* are not ashamed of their Christian faith. Unfortunately, the truth is that many Qazaq Christians are ashamed of their faith and Christian identity.

Nevertheless, the Qazaq church already exists, and it also has physical needs. The most expensive need is usually the church building, which serves two purposes. First, the building is more than a physical space to accommodate the worship service; it is a visible and symbolic statement. By saying that the church is not a building but a people, Christians may unintentionally neglect the visible attribute of faith. Although we profoundly disagree with Muslims, Roman Catholics, Buddhists, and others, we acknowledge that their visible shrines often serve as consolidating and commemorating factors of their faith. Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims, St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican for Roman Catholics, and the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya (India) for Buddhists are globally recognized shrines of these religions, respectively. Adherents of each of these religions in every corner of the world feel an association with those symbolic places as a sign of their faith.

Similarly, local temples of each religion play the same role for the congregation in its vicinity. As discussed in chapter 5, the Ahmed Yassawi shrine in Qazaqstan has served as the visible Sufi artifact of faith for the last six centuries. Today,

every mosque is a sacred place for Muslims. Therefore, there must be at least two to three symbolic church buildings for Christianity to thrive in Qazaqstan. A government-approved church building would also serve as a socio-political statement or message that evangelical Christians exist and must be recognized as members of Qazaq society. When Qazaq society acknowledges the evangelical church as a full member of society and not as something marginal and underground, then the church will have greater chances to grow.

Second, the church building is the only safe place where Christians can legally gather for corporate worship. The church building as a public place also serves as a great opportunity to testify to the Christian faith. For instance, the church can host charity events such as distributing food, clothes, or first aid supplies. Of course, all of these types of events should be done for evangelization purposes and to genuinely serve the community.

Finally, the church in Qazaqstan desperately needs quality biblical-theological literature. To prepare a sermon, Qazaq pastors rely exclusively on the Bible, which is not a bad practice. Those who know Russian in-depth can use some scarce literature available in Russian. A few pastors have access to tools in English. Most importantly, we need properly trained church leaders in Qazaqstan. Of course, regardless of his ethnicity and nationality, a pastor must meet the biblical qualifications to be a pastor (1 Tim 3; Titus 1). Those requirements include an accurate understanding and ability to teach the Bible. Whereas Muslims have numerous educational centers and schools to train preachers of Islam, no fully functioning theological seminary exists in Qazaqstan to train pastors. As a result, Qazaq Christians are forced to travel abroad for an extended period to study, which is not affordable for everyone. The lack of trained and ordained pastors is so

severe that sometimes it is hard to find someone to lead a wedding ceremony.¹⁰ The most expensive church building and the best literature are useless if there is nobody to preach and teach the Bible faithfully. In the following two sections, I propose how the church body consisting of locals and foreigners can serve in Qazaqstan.

Qazaq Believers

In chapters 4 and 5, I showed that Qazaq Muslims seek to connect Hanafi Maturidism and Yassawi Sufism to Qazaq poetry and philosophy in order to argue that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim. They want to convince society that Islam is expressed through Qazaq culture and to invalidate the presence of other religions, including Christianity. In this situation, Qazaq Christians must demonstrate that being a Christian does not distort one's Qazaqness and that the teachings of the Bible can be conveyed through the Qazaq language and cultural values. To achieve this goal, Qazaq believers should employ incarnational ministry and exhibit more Qazaqness than their non-Christian countrymen.

Gailyn Van Rheenen, in his *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, writes about the incarnational ministry of a missionary: "Incarnation is much more than a method or strategy. It defines the missionary's existence in the world."¹¹ Van Rheenen writes these words to describe missionaries going to foreign countries. But I argue that incarnational ministry also has a place when people from the same people group encounter other members of their people group with the gospel message. Since 0.5 percent of Qazaqs are missionaries to the 95.5 percent of unreached Qazaqs, these words are directly applicable to Christian Qazaqs. Van Rheenen also notes, "Missionaries strive,

¹⁰ I personally witnessed several situations of this happening. One of them was when my cousin was getting married.

¹¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 217.

through the power of the Holy Spirit, to display many facets of the character of God.”¹² Accordingly, Qazaq believers are duty-bound to witness to their countrymen by living out a Christ-like character and godly life.

The words of the Lord serve as the basis for this obligation. Jesus said to his followers, “For I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). The Qazaq church will not be attractive to the Qazaq people if Qazaq Christians’ manifestation of true Qazaqness is not authentic. Therefore, the church in Qazaqstan must pay particular attention to biblical hermeneutics and behavioral patterns. In other words, the church’s growth depends on how Qazaqs understand the Bible and apply it with a local reference.

Biblical Hermeneutics

In the case of Qazaqs, the prerequisite for biblical hermeneutics is having a sense of ownership of the Christian mission. Qazaqs need to develop a sense of ownership and a deep understanding that it is their responsibility to preach the gospel to other Qazaqs. A sense of ownership for Qazaq Christians naturally involves the transition of duties to teach the Bible from missionaries to local believers. Obviously, locals are supposed to hear the gospel from someone. As Paul wrote, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14-15). These obvious questions posed by Paul presume missionary labor—someone must preach.¹³

¹² Van Rheezen, *Missions*, 217.

¹³ New Testament commentators note that there are four logical steps apparent in Rom 10:14-15, with an emphasis on the last step. Richard N. Longenecker writes, “. . . reverse chronological order, evidently in order to lay particular emphasis on the last one.” Longenecker N. Richard, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 855. See also Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 663.

Therefore, for a period of time, missionaries acted in the roles of the preacher and teacher, whereas Qazaqs took the roles of hearer and student. But now, after more than thirty years of missionary labor, Qazaq Christians need to start taking on the roles of the preachers and teachers vis-à-vis other Qazaqs. Thus, the transition of duties implies that Qazaqs themselves have understood the gospel properly and are ready to advance it further. Paul, in the same passage, wrote, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The immediate connection between faith, hearing, and the word of Christ sets preaching the gospel in its most pristine condition without any alteration.

Qazaq preachers of the word of Christ need to act as a channel transporting the gospel message, and the good news of Jesus Christ must be preached in an understandable manner to hearers—other Qazaqs. In practice, Sunday sermons should employ familiar narratives to the congregation, such as illustrations from Qazaqs’ everyday lives, literature, and cultural legacy, rather than referring to foreign examples. Even providing illustrations from church history may not have a strong appeal to Qazaq listeners in the pew. For instance, if a Qazaq preacher brings up Augustine, Martin Luther, or William Carey in a sermon, these names will make little sense to the congregation because they are not familiar with these historic people. Once, I heard a sermon where a Qazaq preacher who had graduated from a seminary in US said that Christian missions today are the result of Carey’s activity. Perhaps, the preacher’s argument was historically accurate, and Carey’s name perfectly fit his sermon, but it is highly questionable if anyone except a few people familiar with Christian missions’ history understood the point.

Qazaq preachers often teach the Bible in the same manner they learned from missionaries without paying attention to the local context. Hence, locals keep replicating the message that they heard from missionaries. I was once saddened to hear from a mission agency’s leader (a Qazaq person) that he does not see any need for

contextualization except in translation. Another pastor made the same statement that translation—of a course developed in the US—would suffice for his ministry. These and other cases indicate that Qazaq church leaders hope to explain the truth of the Bible through systemic theology courses and other aiding tools developed in the West, primarily in the US. But the truth is that the Bible was under scrutiny before the publication of the first Western systematic theology book and other theological textbooks. All of this literature in the West came to us as a result of thorough study of the Bible. In the same way, Qazaq theology needs to be rooted in an in-depth study of the Bible instead of importing theological articulations from elsewhere.

These examples also reveal that locals have accepted everything from missionaries, which has caused them to be contextualized into the missionary's culture instead of contextualizing the gospel message that they heard from foreigners for Qazaq culture. Local leaders who are contextualized into the missionary's culture have become an obstacle to the spread of the gospel. For non-believers, these locals appear as strange Qazaqs. It is already uncommon for Qazaqs to be Christians, and when Qazaq Christians acts like Americans or Koreans, they become even stranger in the eyes of other Qazaqs.

Paul Hiebert stressed the importance of self-theologizing since theological expressions developed in the West may not be relevant to the challenges facing churches in Africa, India, Latin America, and in other places.¹⁴ The church in Qazaqstan has its own challenge, where society dictates that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim. To respond to this challenge, indigenous ministers in Qazaqstan must relearn their own culture and start practicing it. They need to research their audience and develop a course or training program that strongly appeals to their listeners. They should research and find connections between biblical narratives and Qazaq cultural values. For instance, a course

¹⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 196.

on 1-2 Kings in connection with Qazaq Khans could be a great initiative. The history of Israelite kings and Qazaq Khans have common features as both are about Eastern rulers and how they acted in certain situations. Yet there is a difference between those narratives. The history of Israelite kings has a spiritual dimension, whereas the history of Qazaq Khans remains in the historical, political, and geographical realms. Illustrations bridging the similarities between the Qazaq Jiraus and the biblical prophets can also serve as an opportunity to teach the Bible in a Qazaq way. Both the Qazaq Jiraus and the prophets spoke the truth and, when needed, could disagree with a ruler, be it a king or Khan.

Qazaqs may bear much fruit if they find solid connections between their culture and the Bible. We must build bridges between the Christian faith and our culture. Today, Qazaq Christians understand the truth through foreign cultural structures and mindsets. Missionaries, or other foreign Christians, explain the Christian faith from the perspective of their own culture, which is natural. The responsibility of Qazaq Christians is to interpret the gospel message to other Qazaqs in their own cultural language. For this to occur, Qazaq pastors and teachers need to have a decent grasp of the biblical narrative and some competence to read the Bible in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). Connecting the gospel with the local culture will eventually create a biblically sound and culturally acceptable Qazaq Christian identity. On the one hand, the truth of the Bible cannot be compromised; on the other hand, indigenous Christians must communicate the truth of the Bible to their countrymen people in an understandable way.¹⁵

Of course, even the most properly preached gospel may be rejected. As Paul wrote, “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed

¹⁵ The goal of contextualization is to communicate the gospel. An overly contextualized gospel will lead to syncretism and heresy. See Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 269.

what he has heard from us?” (Rom 10:16). Therefore, preachers are not ultimately responsible for their hearers’ response. However, preachers significantly impact the way their audience hears the gospel message; therefore, they ought to eliminate confusion.

It is worth looking at a New Testament passage and seeing how it can be delivered in a Qazaq context, making an immediate connection between the Bible and Qazaq folklore. Here, I briefly examine the parable of the wise and faithful servant in Matthew 24:45-51. The literary context of this passage conveys that Jesus is in Jerusalem, and soon he will be judged and crucified (chaps. 26-27). In the context of the overarching message of the Bible, Jesus is nearing the ultimate battle where he offers his life to pay for and save his people from eternal death for sin (John 3:16; 15:13). God’s love is the reason he gives his only Son and the Son gives his life. To deliver this message to the Qazaqs, a preacher can refer to the images of father and son and their love in Qazaq folklore. These images often occur in a context when a father is leaving for a battle and entrusting the rest of the family to his son. The son is now obligated to take care of his mother and other siblings. A good son will take care of his family because it was the last thing his father asked before he went to war. The love of the son for his father will lead him to fulfill the father’s final request. This son can be compared to a wise servant in Matthew 24:45-51. If the son was bad and hurt his family while the father was gone, it would dramatically elevate the gravity of the son’s crime and prepare him for the highest punishment. There will be reward or punishment because the father returned from the war with a victory, just like Jesus rose from the dead.

Practical Application

Qazaq Christians, particularly church leaders, must decontextualize themselves from missionaries’ cultures. Spending more time with Qazaqs than with foreigners would contribute to their decontextualization. A Qazaq needs to remain a Qazaq even after his conversion; as the apostle Paul wrote, “So, brothers, in whatever condition each was

called, there let him remain with God” (1 Cor 7:24). When a Qazaq accepts Christ, he needs to remain relevant to his culture and traditional values as long as they do not lead to sin or contradict the Bible. I acknowledge the fact that Qazaq churches came into existence as the result of missionaries’ personal evangelism efforts. Qazaq pastors and church leaders grew up under the mentorship of these missionaries, and it is natural for mentees to imitate their mentors in every aspect of life. However, Qazaq Christians ought to intentionally emphasize their Qazaqness in order to disrupt the narrative that only Islam supports the national identity.

The simplest yet most important way to stress Qazaqness is the use of the Qazaq language. Qazaq Christians should start producing theological literature and interpretations of the Bible by taking into account the local context. In the same way, Qazaq believers must write their own worship songs instead of translating songs from English, Korean, and Russian. If the style of music imitates Chris Tomlin or Hillsong hits, for example, then those songs will not reach the Qazaq heart. But if worship songs resemble traditional Qazaq folklore and modern music, then they will be easy to accept and learn. Tom Avery notes regarding the role of worship music in indigenous languages, “No matter how much a hymn, Gospel song, or praise song means to me, it will not mean the same thing to a person raised in another musical culture. It may sound sad to that person; it may sound like noise. But even if it is pleasing to their ears, it remains foreign.”¹⁶ Avery’s notion is classified as ethnodoxology. Dave Hall introduced the term “ethnodoxology,” which he defined as “the theological and practical study of how and why people of diverse cultures praise and glorify the true and living God as revealed in the Bible.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Tom Avery, “Music of the Heart,” Mission Frontiers, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/music-of-the-heart>.

¹⁷ Global Ethnodoxology Network, “What Is Ethnodoxology?,” accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.worldofworship.org/what-is-ethnodoxology/#WhatIsEthnodoxology>. For an overview of the ethnodoxology movement’s history, key figures, and arguments, see Scott Aniol et al., “Worship from the

At the daily routine level, Qazaqs should not ignore their traditional customs and preferences regarding food and beverages. For instance, Qazaq Christians should refrain from eating pork even though the Bible permits it. As Christians, we have the freedom to consume any food, including pork. But abstaining from consuming pork would serve as a profound testimony that Christianity does not destroy a believer's Qazaqness. Pork is disgusting for Muslim Qazaqs, and even non-Muslim Qazaqs view it as something unclean and dirty. Often, Qazaqs associate eating pork with Russians and, consequently, with Christianity. Therefore, if Christian Qazaqs refrain from eating pork, it would demonstrate that being a Christian does not necessarily mean being Russian.

The goal of assimilating one's daily routine and faith to the local culture is to reach the masses and portray Qazaq Christian identity in such a way that society would recognize it as a legitimate expression of Qazaqness. Missiologist Donald McGavran once wrote, "The one by one out of my ancestral community into a new low community was a sure recipe for slow growth. Conversely, where men and women could become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ while remaining in their own segment of society, there the gospel was sometimes accepted with great pleasure by great numbers."¹⁸ In previous chapters, I discussed how Muslims are indigenizing Islam by heavily employing Qazaq culture and creating a historical narrative. By doing so, Muslims are making Islam appealing to the masses. Their example shows that McGavran's observation was correct, although it is highly questionable if any Qazaq Muslims have read his above-cited statement. We must make Christianity acceptable in Qazaq society.

Nations': A Survey and Preliminary Analysis of the Ethnodoxology Movement," *Artistic Theologian* 3 (2015): 2-22.

¹⁸ Donald McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," quoted in Gary L. McIntosh, "Donald A. McGavran: Life, Influence and Legacy in Mission," in *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness*, ed. Charles E. Van Engen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 27.

Qazaqs should move from being connected to missionaries to being able to state their faith confidently to other Qazaqs. Otherwise, as Robby Butler, McGavran's disciple, rightly noted regarding the attachment of locals to missionaries,

Such extraction evangelism typically draws the marginalized from several peoples and segments of society—the elderly, youth, orphans, mission helpers, and ardent seekers. The result is often a foreign, conglomerate church alienated from the local peoples. Locals observe, “You are no longer part of us,” and they are right. This is a new social unit which, if it survives at all, becomes a new people group by the second generation.¹⁹

In conclusion, a small number of Qazaqs have heard and accepted the gospel. And now they must evangelize and disciple other Qazaqs for the church to grow in Qazaqstan. Of course, this is not to say that we do not need missionaries anymore. Indeed, the Qazaq church still needs the aid of the missionary community, and local leaders would greatly benefit from ongoing personal discipleship. Hence, in the next section, I will discuss the roles of the missionaries.

The Missionary Community in Qazaqstan

Two types of missionaries are predominant in Qazaqstan: Americans and South Koreans. There are also smaller missionary groups from Europe, Australia, and Asia. Almost all of them came to Qazaqstan through mission agencies such as IMB, Cru, and Pioneers. A few were sent by their churches, and even fewer came as independent missionaries. With deep appreciation and respect for all missionaries, I believe it is worth noting that each group has its merits and room for improvement. I focus on Koreans and Americans because these are the largest groups, and most of my interaction was with them.

Missionaries arrived in Qazaqstan right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After seventy years of spiritual drought in the USSR, people were hungry for a

¹⁹ Robby Butler, “Indigenous Movements: How Peoples are Reached,” *Mission Frontiers*, last modified March 1, 2018, <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/indigenous-movements>.

new message. The presence of Islam was not strong, and the oil money had yet to flood into the country. An average Qazaq was poor economically and had no firm ideological opinion. Qazaqs were looking for something that would give them hope, provide meaning in life, and empower them to move forward. It was hard to fail for missionaries of any religion. With minimum investments, a missionary could start a Bible study group and plant a new church.

But the situation is different today. As discussed throughout earlier chapters, Qazaqs are taught that they must be Muslims to maintain true Qazaqness and that Islam is their historical faith. Thirty years ago, any Christian missionary would be successful and productive. Today, a missionary needs to hold certain qualifications for effective ministry among Qazaqs. Therefore, the primary labor of missionaries should be to train high-quality Qazaq leaders. Here are four recommendations for the missionary community vis-à-vis the Qazaq church.

First, the Qazaq church would greatly benefit from the labor of workers with an in-depth knowledge of biblical languages. A Greek and Hebrew expert should train Qazaq believers to acquire decent knowledge of these languages. A typical scenario today is that when a Qazaq hears the gospel message, he talks about it to his friend, who is a Muslim theologian or knows someone who can read the Qur'an and hadith in Arabic and explain them. Therefore, for Qazaq Christians to declare the gospel to other Qazaqs, it would be helpful to be able to refer to the original (biblical) languages.

Second, the Qazaq church needs missionaries with training in cultural anthropology and ethnography. Hopefully, these foreign Christians, curious about Qazaq culture, can spark the interest of Qazaq Christians in (Qazaq) traditions and customs. Thus, an expert in biblical languages would accurately identify and interpret the message of the Bible, an anthropologist/ethnographer would examine the target culture, and a Qazaq Christian trained by these would be able to effectively communicate the gospel in an understandable way to other Qazaqs.

Third, the Qazaq church can greatly benefit from the example of ordinary lay people in the American church or Korean church who have carried out their faith throughout their lives. As the first generation of Christians, Qazaq believers have not seen elders in the faith. Retired engineers, pilots, policemen, medical doctors, truck drivers, mechanics, university professors, veterinarians, businessmen, and people from other fields would be great examples showing that following Christ is not only for professional ministers and missionaries. These retired professionals could demonstrate that there are sincere believers who preach the Bible even if they are not getting paid for to do so.

Fourth and finally, the portrait of a missionary needs to be enriched by other people groups aside from Americans and Koreans to show that Christianity is for all people. We need missionaries from Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. An Arab Christian serving alongside a Jew or white American and teaming up with an African American to preach the gospel message would be a great example of reconciliation in Christ. In a context where Qazaqs are taught that being a Qazaq means being a Muslim, Christians would witness that, ultimately, we are all sinners and need forgiveness of sins. Through this testimony of reconciliation, Qazaqs would see the invitation to join the great choir of nations singing before the throne of the Lamb.

Conclusion

Christian missionaries and Qazaq believers preach the gospel message in a context where Qazaqs are expected to be Muslims. While missionaries learn the Qazaq language and culture to communicate the gospel effectively, Qazaq believers need to grow in preaching the Bible. Qazaq Christians need to develop a strong sense of ownership for Christian missions and take the initiative in spreading the gospel. Foreign missionaries must focus on training the local leaders and handing the leadership over to Qazaq believers. Both groups must understand that the issue of ethnic identity is very

sensitive for the Qazaqs. Therefore, Christians must demonstrate that for a Qazaq, accepting Christ does not mean that one must cease to be a Qazaq. Qazaq Christians need to realize that they have sufficient historical arguments for resisting the narrative that Islam is their ancestral faith. In chapters 2 and 3, I demonstrated the religious plurality in the life of early Qazaqs, and in chapters 4 and 5, I showed that Islam is not *the* ancestral faith.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The main obstacle to the spread of the gospel in Qazaqstan is the socio-religious narratives about Islam. Qazaq historians and philosophers endorse Islam as the ancestral faith of the Qazaqs. Hanafi Maturidism is the state-supported version of Islam, but Yassawi Sufism had a more substantial historical presence than Hanafi Maturidism. Religions other than Islam could have been designated as the ancestral faiths of the Qazaqs if the argument was made exclusively based on historical and archaeological evidence. The primary force motivating Qazaqs to argue that Islam is the ancestral faith is not historical inquiry and theological reasoning but a nation-building ideology and the quest to rediscover ethnic identity.

From a missiological perspective, these motivating factors mean the church must address the issues of ethnicity and nationality. To reduce Qazaqs' resistance to the gospel message, the church in Qazaqstan must demonstrate that Christianity does not disrupt the Qazaq ethnic identity. Therefore, Christians from the indigenous people should exhibit loyalty to their customs and traditions while professing the faith. In addition, the diversification of the missionary's portrait is necessary. Today, the vast majority of missionaries in Qazaqstan are from the United States of America and South Korea, which creates a stereotype that being a Christian means being an American or Korean. This stereotype is aggravated when local believers imitate missionaries' behavior. The presence of missionaries other than Americans and South Koreans in Qazaqstan would testify that Christianity is for all nations (Matt 28:18-20).

Key Findings

In chapter 2, I summarized Qazaq Muslims' claim about the past and the influence of Islam. However, modern Qazaqs' argument regarding the history of Islam does not hold up to critical scrutiny, which I demonstrated in chapters 3-5. Qazaq tribes practiced Tengrism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity before and after the arrival of Islam. At least two tribes, the Naimans and the Kereis, followed Christianity as their primary faith. Tengrism still has advocates among Qazaqs who view it as the true ancestral faith, while one of Zoroastrianism's ritual feasts, Nauriz, is celebrated as a national holiday today. Buddhist texts in Turkic languages and petroglyphs within the territory of Qazaqstan suggest that the tribes inhabiting those areas once adhered to Buddhism. Thus, a brief overview of the history of other religions disrupts the narrative that Islam is the ancestral faith of Qazaqs. A closer look at history reveals that Islam was merely one of the many religious beliefs of early Qazaq tribes.

Proponents of Islam have also posed that the religion was spread peacefully and did not change Qazaqs' traditional customs and rites. But the texts of Islam refute the arguments about its peaceful spread. The sword verse of the Qur'an (9:5), alongside a hadith encouraging Muslims to fight the Turks, makes it hard to believe that Muslims wanted to introduce their religion peaceably. Qutayba ibn Muslim's (d. 715) conquests of Central Asia only prove that the first arrival of Islam in the region was violent and forceful. Ruthless rulers such as Uzbek Khan and Tamerlane promoted the religion, and it is unimaginable that they were tender in advancing Islam. When some of the subjects of Uzbek Khan refused to accept Islam, he ordered them to be sentenced to death. Thus, the claims of Qazaq Muslims about the alleged peaceful spread of Islam are not convincing.

When Qazaq Muslims argue that Islam did not change the nation's culture and ethnic identity, one should consider the foundational practices of the religion. For instance, the Qur'an needs to be read exclusively in Arabic. Similarly, the ritual prayer performed five times a day must be spoken exclusively in Arabic. During the times of

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Arabic was the state language in the aftermath of Muslim conquests. Therefore, Qazaq Muslims must admit that Islam profoundly changed its new converts' ethnic identity.

Hanafi Maturidism is far from being the ancestral faith of Qazaqs since both Abu Hanifa and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi wrote and spoke in Arabic. None of their works was written in a Turkic language understandable to Qazaqs. Although Maturidism was born in neighboring Uzbekistan, its theologians and teachers were active in Baghdad, and we have no records of their entering the Qazaq steppe. Therefore, the state-recognized and supported Hanafi Maturidism can be deconstructed as never having been the ancestral faith of Qazaqs.

Yassawi Sufism was the only version of Islam historically proven to be present in modern territories of Qazaqstan. The founder of Yassawi Sufism, Ahmed Yassawi, was born in Yasi, a city in the south of Qazaqstan. His mausoleum, erected at the order of Tamerlane, is still standing firm. *Diwani Hikmet*, a poem attributed to Yassawi, was written in a Turkic language, and several translations of it exist in modern Qazaq. Some Qazaq clans claim to be direct descendants from Yassawi's family. Thus, the historicity of Yassawi Sufism in Qazaqstan is undeniable. However, none of the early Qazaq poets ever quoted *Diwani Hikmet* and explicitly referred to Yassawi. Therefore, I cannot accept Zikiriya Zhandarbek's argument that the early Qazaq poets and writers propagated Yassawi's teachings. It was impossible because the first publications of *Diwani Hikmet* in modern Qazaq appeared only after 1991, and Qazaq poets did not have access to it before then.

The portrayals of the prophet Muhammad and Yassawi's miracles are reminiscent of biblical narratives. In *Diwani Hikmet*, the prophet Muhammad acts as an intercessor between his followers and Allah. Allah permits Muhammad's followers to enter heaven even if they have sins and flaws in their observation of Islamic rules. This plot is an apparent imitation of Jesus Christ's intercession (1 John 2:1-2). Yassawi's

feeding 99,000 people and moving the mountain is also an obvious borrowing from the Bible. Lastly, the story of Baba Tukles's remaining untouched by fire when he was thrown into it sought to demonstrate that Islam is the truth; yet, again, Tukles's story is another narrative borrowed from the Bible (Dan 3:8-30) and appropriated to promote Islam.

In conclusion, the religious history of the Qazaq people demonstrates that Islam was one of many faiths that Qazaq tribes practiced throughout the centuries. It is, therefore, unacceptable to declare Islam as the ancestral faith. Yassawi Sufism, which indeed could be argued to be a historical belief of the Qazaqs, has many borrowings from the Bible. Qazaqs promote Islam to strengthen their ethnic identity, not because they are convinced by Islam's message. Consequently, Christians must acknowledge the Qazaq people's actual motivation regarding Islam and act accordingly—namely, make it clear that Christianity is not the Qazaq people's enemy. Moreover, Christians must deliver the good news that God loves Qazaqs and gave his only begotten Son to die so that Qazaqs will be saved from hell (John 3:16).

Limitations and Weaknesses

One of the limitations of this research was that I did not have access to the archival material of Qazaqstan libraries and the Russian Academy of Science due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and the war in Ukraine. Therefore, I had to rely on the scarce sources in Qazaq and Russian available online and some books in the US libraries. Also, due to space and time constraints, I was not able to interview and bring insights from Qazaq Christians and missionaries serving in Qazaqstan. Hearing their observations and experiences could have contributed significantly to chapter 6. And, of course, conducting this research in English, which is not my native or second language, set its own limitations in expressing and articulating my thoughts.

Recommendations for Further Study

What follows are four recommendations for areas of further study related to this research. First, the history of Christianity in Qazaqstan and Central Asia could draw the attention of missiologists, archaeologists, historians, theologians, and linguists—particularly after the discovery of the Nestorian settlement and graveyard in Qazaqstan in 2015. The gravestones had Christian signs and Syriac inscriptions with Turkic names.¹ This discovery suggests that at least one Turkic settlement had Christianity as their primary faith around the fourteenth century. Although Muslims argue that Qazaq tribes abandoned their native religions for Islam as early as the tenth century, the Nestorian settlement and graveyard depict a different historical picture.

Another Christian branch not mentioned in this research is the movement of Russian-speaking Baptists and evangelical Christians that originated in 1867. The Qazaq evangelical Christian poet Sultanmahmut Toraygirov most likely belonged to this branch of Christianity. Thus, evangelical Christians were present before and during the Soviet Union in Qazaqstan. They never evangelized Qazaqs due to the language barrier, the small size of the movement, and persecution. Nevertheless, their fascinating history is an important case to study that can teach crucial lessons for the future of Christianity in Qazaqstan.

The modern history of Christianity is another area that needs to be studied. As mentioned in chapter 6, evangelical churches emerged in Qazaqstan through missionary labor after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Thanks to the rapid information exchange era, anyone interested in the region can watch the church's growth live. The key figures and participants of the main events in the life of the Qazaq church are still around, which allows for documenting all of the facts. A study of the mutual perception of missionaries and indigenous Christians and each camp's assessment of Qazaq society

¹ Department of Nestorian Studies International Institute for Central Asian Studies, "Our Story," accessed January 5, 2023, <https://nestorianstudies.org/index.php/en/about-us/our-story>.

could provide irreplaceable insights for the next generation of mission workers in Qazaqstan.

Also, examining the worship songs written by Qazaq believers is an interesting topic to study with respect to the life of the Qazaq church. Perhaps experts in worship songs and spirituality could compare and contrast the difference between the early songs when the Qazaqs first heard the gospel to those produced after the introduction of Western Christian pop music.

Second, the socio-religious narratives and historical claims regarding Islam and ethnic identity in Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan need to be studied. All these nations, like Qazaqstan, were once part of the Soviet Union. They have embarked on their own journey of reclaiming their authentic ethnic identity and restoring what they believe to be their true ancestral faith—Islam. For the churches in these places, it would be significant to examine what general society believes about the past and what kind of future they want to create.

Third, Christian-Muslim relations and perspectives for Christian missions are where scholars from various fields and backgrounds could come for dialogue. Post-Soviet Central Asia is a relatively new but vast region that joined the Muslim world in 1991. Christian missiologists, theologians, and Islamic studies scholars see Central Asia as a new opportunity for fulfilling the Great Commission. In contrast, Muslim scholars strive to accomplish their agenda of spreading Islam. The representatives of each religion have historical records and archaeological findings speaking in favor of their claims. The evidence needs to be investigated.

Fourth, the promotion of Islam in social media by Qazaq and other Central Asian Muslims is an interesting and much-needed area of research. People today spend more time on social media than reading academic papers and books written by scholars. There are three types of promotion of Islam on social media. The first group is Imams and professors of Islam who preach and teach it. Second, celebrities promote Islam by

talking about their personal story of conversion and life change. Third, popular bloggers occasionally insert an Islamic feature into their content, though they themselves are not devout Muslims. For instance, on Fridays, a blogger wishes that prayers will be accepted by Allah.²

Practical Application

Considering the socio-religious stronghold built on historical narratives, local Christians and missionaries in Qazaqstan should demonstrate that Christianity does not threaten Qazaq ethnic identity. Qazaq Christians must exhibit Qazaqness and loyalty to the national and traditional customs and rites as long as they do not contradict the Bible. Abstaining from the consumption of pork might be a great witness. Preaching the Bible in an understandable manner could be done by connecting the biblical narratives to Qazaq poetry and literature.

Missionaries can embark on any venture for missiological purposes. Qazaqstan is a large country with varying settings, from highly developed urban to underdeveloped rural areas. Business as mission, English club, music studios, sports, and almost anything else can serve as a great way of connecting with people and sharing the gospel. Missionaries should demonstrate that they respect the host culture and commit to observing local customs and behavioral patterns. Elderly missionaries should act like local elders by never allowing younger people to call them by their first name or use informal language. Young people use formal “you”—which is *siz* (ci3) in Qazaq—whenever they are speaking to an older man or woman. This manner of speaking shows respect between people of different ages and between men and women.

In Qazaqstan, most people are bilingual and speak Qazaq and Russian. But if a missionary chooses to learn Qazaq, which is the mother tongue of the majority, it will

² The Qazaq church should explore the opportunities for spreading the gospel message on social media. Perhaps, an account without revealing the person’s identity might be a good way to do so.

gain them much respect and acceptance. Missionaries can show respect even while speaking English. Since the issue of identity is sensitive, perhaps using “Qazaq” instead of “Kazakh” is a better idea. As shown in chapter 2, “Kazakh” is the rendition of Қазақ, which is a Russian word, but “Qazaq” is a Qazaq word, a transliteration of Қазақ.

Final Thoughts

Historical evidence and archaeological findings reveal that Islam was merely one of the many religions professed by Qazaq tribes. Therefore, today, Qazaqs should feel free to choose any religion other than Islam, including Christianity. Qazaq Christians must demonstrate that being a Christian does not mean that one must cease being a Qazaq.

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ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MODERN QAZAQS' HISTORICAL CLAIM THAT ISLAM IS THE ANCESTRAL FAITH

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Qazaq people embarked on the journey of reinstating their authentic ethnic and cultural identity. After a thirty-year quest for true Qazaqness, many came to believe that indigenous Qazaq identity is tightly linked to the Islamic faith. Modern Qazaqs point out that before the Russian colonization, Qazaqs professed Islam. Particularly, Hanafi Maturidism prevailed alongside Sufism. However, a careful examination of historical data and archaeological findings does not coincide with the broadcasted narrative on the significance of Maturidism among Qazaqs before 1991. This research suggests that the role of Maturidism became prominent only after 1991 when it was accepted as an officially recognized branch of Islam in Qazaqstan. The arguments about the Islamic past are the key elements to state post-colonial ethnic identity. As a result, Christianity is viewed as alien or even hostile due to its association with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia, which is a former colonizer.

In seven chapters, I examine the religious history of the Qazaq people and probe implications for modern Christian missions. In chapter 1, I introduce the subject matter and outline the entire work. In chapter 2, I summarize, compare, and contrast the leading arguments posed by modern Qazaqs regarding their religious history. In chapter 3, I critically assess the argument posed in chapter 2 against historical and archaeological evidence, examining the pre-Islamic religious beliefs of Central Asian Turkic and

Mongolian tribes. In chapter 4, I examine the history and theology of Hanafi Maturidism, which is regarded as the branch of Islam to which early Qazaqs adhered. Yet, in chapter 5, I show that historically Yassawi Sufism was more popular among Qazaqs than Hanafi Maturidism, which disproves the narrative that latter was the ancestral faith of the Qazaqs. In chapter 6, I suggest opportunities for Christian missions in light of the historical narratives regarding Islam and its attachment to ethnic identity. Chapter 7 concludes this study.

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