

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**SUFI IDEOLOGY, SHAMANIST RITUALS:
HOW RELIGIOUS GROUPS BECAME POPULAR
IN KAZAKHSTAN?****Mukhtar SENGGIRBAY**

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the tactics and strategies of two so-called extremist groups existed in Kazakhstan within the period of the decade between 2000 and 2010. The research examines the role of music, traditional customs, religious or pseudo-religious rites, rituals and values of Kazakh people in providing support to the

extremist organizations. The essay scrutinizes the social and economic factors that favored the development of extremism in Kazakhstan.

Lastly, applying the empirical indicators of extremism, the paper analyzes the level of menace that two organizations constituted to the Kazakhstani society.

KEYWORDS: *Islam, shamanism, Sufism, dhikr, extremism.*

Introduction

On 19 October, 2011 the Almaty City Court of Kazakhstan sentenced nine activists of the *Senim. Bilim. Omir* (Faith. Knowledge. Life) religious organization to various imprisonment terms

up to 14 years. The activists were accused of extremism, organizing a criminal group, depriving of liberty and practicing unlawful medical activities. Months later, in June 2012 the General Prosecutor Office of Kazakhstan has declared *Senim. Bilim. Omir* an extremist organization. The religious sect unofficially referred to as *Zikirshiler* (Dhikr practitioners) or *Sopylar* (Sufists) led by Ismatulla Abdughappar, an ethnic Kazakh repatriated from Pakistan, had become very popular within the decade period, and by the time of the revelation of their wrongdoings had around half a million followers in Kazakhstan.¹ Before that, in February 2009, the Almaty City court closed another popular religious sect *Ata Zholy* (Path of Ancestors) concluding that the activity of this movement negatively affected the social health of citizens and possessed a real threat to the national security of the country.² People were shocked by this news, as both of these movements were declaring that they were reviving the ancient Kazakh traditions and customs forgotten as a result of Soviet oppression. The former has been emerging as a cultural, religious and intellectual enlightener of Kazakhs with strong supporters in the government, media and cultural spheres. The latter mostly targeted the psychologically depressed and addicted people playing a role of spiritual facilitator embracing all the ethnic and religious groups in Kazakhstan.

How did these extremist groups manage to grip the attention of the masses in a relatively short period of time? What kind of historical, social and cultural factors has facilitated their efforts? What kind of tools did they apply in their missionary activities? Do they have real patterns of extremism?

“Folk Islam”—The Mixture of Shamanism and Sufism

Senim. Bilim. Omir was established as an apolitical public association in 2000, gaining a national status in 2001 with branch offices located in 17 cities and towns, as well as in 18 residential areas across Kazakhstan. The aim of the organization was to “bring up the younger generation in the spirit of patriotism through propagating the ideas of the 12th century Sufi scholar of Central Asia Hoja Ahmad Yasawi and Kazakh poets Abay and Shakarim, who lived in 19th and 20th centuries. For this they hold classes, meetings and seminars, travelling throughout the country.”³ The main feature of this group was that it combined the Yasawi ideology and the popular Kazakh poems with the Sufi practice of *zikr* (*dhikr*).⁴ Interestingly, the video footage of the dhikr of the *Senim. Bilim. Omir* members exactly depicts the same kind of rituals hold at the beginning of the 20th century in the neighboring Turkmen tribe. Referring to the archival documents DeWeese thoroughly describes the process: “...the *īshān* begins to utter ‘*hu, hu,*’ and the people sitting around the tent join in ... and it is accompanied by bodily movements, in four beats, in which the head completes a circular movement from the left shoulder to the right and back again, with both inhalations and exhalations occurring with the head over the left shoulder.”⁵

¹ See: G. Shambayeva, “Rukovodstvo sekty ‘Bilim. Senim. Omir’ osuzhdeno po polnoj. “Za gody raboty v Kazakhstane Abdugappar udalos zaverbovat pochni polmilliona chelovek,” *CentralAsia. Ru*, 20 October, 2011, available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1319098920>], 1 February, 2016.

² See: A. Zubov, “Zapreshchennaia v Kazakhstane sekta protsvetayet v Rossii,” *365.info*, 10 August, 2015, available at [<http://365info.kz/2015/08/zapreshchennaya-v-kazaxstane-sekta-procvetaet-v-rossii/>], 10 February, 2016.

³ Khabar TV, “Aqiqat” (Truth) Documentary, 2011, available at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLGzMYpqnxw>], 10 February, 2016.

⁴ See: G. Yemelianova, “Islam, national identity and politics in contemporary Kazakhstan,” *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 286-301.

⁵ D. DeWeese, “Shamanization in Central Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 57, Issue 3, 2014, pp. 332.

Kazakhs were converted to Islam relatively late. Various sources say that this process lasted until the 19th century.⁶ The Russian and Kazakh ethnographers of the late 19th century asserted that Kazakhs “were essentially ‘shamanists’ and were not—or must not be—real Muslims.”⁷ The nomadic lifestyle of Kazakhs did not allow canonical Islam to spread across the steppe. Even after the conversion to Sunni Islam, Kazakhs continued to use their pre-Islamic rites and rituals, combining it with the Muslim traditions.⁸ In some cases they used Arabic words to describe the certain ritual or phenomenon (for example *aruah*—spirit, *aulye*—saint), and ordinary people did not distinguish between them.⁹ Proto-Kazakhs’ traditional beliefs included the worldviews of tengrism, shamanism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. As Yemelianova points out, “they believed in the harmonious unity between humans and the surrounding world, the blue skies and endless steppe, and in particular, the helping power of ancestral spirits and the cult of saints and *batyrs* (military chieftains).”¹⁰

Another historical factor for development of “indigenous” Islam among Kazakhs was the geographical isolation of the Sunni Muslims in the Arab world after the adoption of Shi‘ism by Iran.¹¹ However, ironically, the religious policy of the Soviet Union made the “shamanist” part of the “folk Islam” more salient. Partly banning the institutionalized orthodox Islam, the Soviet authorities facilitated the interpretation of the Islam canons at the communal level in connection with the household-based rituals. Therefore, the “values, traditions, social mores and ethics of the community became ‘Muslim’ in their own right.”¹² The main visible elements of the Kazakh “folk Islam” were visionary experiences and dreaming; healing through pilgrimage to saint places; healing through dhikr and chanting the poetry; asking for help from the spirits of ancestors, etc. While mosques were shadowed as the debris of feudalism, however the government did not try to prevent people from practicing “folk Islam.”¹³ Consequently, most of the population believed in this “local” type of Islam, which developed outside the official Muslim ideology.¹⁴

Finally institutionalizing the official Islam after World War II, Moscow gave a preference to the ethnic Uzbeks in running the Islamic institutions in Kazakhstan. Moreover, both of the only Islamic education centers were located in neighboring Uzbekistan, which restricted Kazakhs from studying the “official” Islam. As the religious identity is considered the inseparable part of ethnic identity, Kazakhs were not satisfied with this dominance of Uzbeks.¹⁵

After gaining independence Kazakhs started to reestablish its own ethnic identity and “turned to historical symbols of Kazakh traditional culture, with which many have not had personal experience, but which still carry considerable emotional power.”¹⁶ The Central Asian countries have experienced a cultural renaissance, which was characterized by the reexamining of the colonial “narrative” of the Soviet propaganda, challenging the superiority of Russian culture, and restoring the “pre-colo-

⁶ See: M. Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization,” *CCAS*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, 2011; G. Yemelianova, op. cit.

⁷ D. DeWeese, op. cit., p. 346.

⁸ M. Omelicheva, op. cit., pp. 243-256.

⁹ See P. Jessa’s article in *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 359-371.

¹⁰ G. Yemelianova, op. cit., p. 287.

¹¹ See: S. Peyrouse, “Islam in Central Asia: National Specificities and Postsoviet Globalisation,” *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, 2007, pp. 245-260.

¹² M. Omelicheva, op. cit., p. 247.

¹³ S. Abashin, “The Logic of Islamic Practice: A Religious Conflict in Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 267-286; K. Lymer, “Rags and Rock Art: The Landscapes of Holy Site Pilgrimage in the Republic of Kazakhstan,” *World Archaeology*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, 2004, pp. 158-172.

¹⁴ See P. Jessa’s article in *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 359-371.

¹⁵ See: G. Yemelianova, op. cit.

¹⁶ M. Rancier, “Resurrecting the Nomads: Historical Nostalgia and Modern Nationalism in Contemporary Kazakh Popular Music Videos,” *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 32, Issue 3, 2009, pp. 388.

nial institutions, symbols and rituals.”¹⁷ Furthermore, “returning to Islam” was the substitute of the struggle for independence that the region never experienced.¹⁸

The *Senim. Bilim. Omir* association had a popular choir *Yasawi*. Eight young men, mostly the graduates of the Kazakh National Conservatory in Almaty, in traditional Kazakh costumes with skullcaps sang songs with the lyrics made from the *hikmets* (philosophical poems) of Khoja Ahmet Yasawi. The vocal group was popular in Kazakhstan and even performed in neighboring countries. The *Info-Tses* media outlet reporting from the concert of the *Yasawi* group in one of the biggest halls in Astana narrates, that “the songs of the group harmonize with the ancient Kazakh melodies of epos and *kuis*.”¹⁹ The group used to perform in all the Muslim holidays and within the short period of time launched three CD albums. Their talents were employed by the *Zikirshiler* group during the mass performance of *dhikr*, and they were part of the cultural activity of the *Senim. Bilim. Omir* association.²⁰ Apparently, the ideologists of the sect relied on the role of folk music in increasing the national self-consciousness of the post-colonial nation, and tried to present the very cultural product which was in a great demand at that period of time. As Sultanova states, “Musical idioms in daily life at a time of crisis ... necessarily reflect the growing sense of nationalism expressed in a society, and lead to music that contains elements immediately recognizable as belonging to the culture concerned.”²¹ Music is a clue that could mobilize masses around the idea of national unity and through the symbols shape and reshape the cultural identity of the people. Moreover, its vocal, visual and lyric elements are able to send messages to the masses on the particular patterns of group identity.²²

The result in this section shows that the groups referred to the historical and cultural roots of the country using the musical nationalism and religious sentiments as the primary tool in reaching the long-term goals.

Socioeconomic Factors for the Development of Extremist Groups

Another element of “folk Islam” that the extremist religious groups have efficiently applied in Kazakhstan is the healing procedures. The purification of the spirits of “devil-affected people” through the pilgrimage tours and other related procedures which include the elements of meditation, hypnosis and different varieties of folk medicine were the primary activities of the *Ata Zholy* group. While *Senim. Bilim. Omir* applied the methods of closed sects, keeping people in private houses for a certain period of time, during which they performed *dhikr* five times a day, and a majority of their visitors were alcohol and drug addicted people, who needed urgent medical and psychological assistance.²³

According to Penkala-Gawęcka the “ordinary” healers (*tawip*) were prevailing in Soviet-time Kazakhstan, and one could be easily found in the Almaty region through the unofficial ties. These representatives of “folk medicine” cured those, who were affected by “evil eye” or witchcraft. In case

¹⁷ S. Akiner, “Melting Pot, Salad Bowl - Cauldron? Manipulation and Mobilization of Ethnic and Religious Identities in Central Asia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, 1997, pp. 363.

¹⁸ See: Ibidem.

¹⁹ “K religii cherez penie,” *Info-Tses*, 11 May, 2007, available at [<http://www.info-tses.kz/news/k-religii-cherez-penie/>], 6 February, 2016. *Kui* is a national instrumental piece of Kazakhs usually played with national musical instruments, such as *domyra* and *qobyz*.

²⁰ Khabar TV, “Aqiqat” (Truth) Documentary, 2011.

²¹ R. Sultanova, “Music and Identity in Central Asia: Introduction,” *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2005, p. 133.

²² See: M. Rancier, op. cit.

²³ Khabar TV, “Aqiqat” (Truth) Documentary, 2011.

of serious illness people looked for *baksys*²⁴ who were skilled to exorcize evils from the souls of the patient using *dhikr* elements, while whip, a knife and the Quran were their main attributes.²⁵

Similarly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, parallel with the “glasnost” and democracy movements, Kazakhs turned to their own traditions and values, and the charismatic spiritual healers, who were welcomed as the embodiment of the revival of ethnic and religious identity of the nation, abandoned their “underground” activities and came out to the public. The healers and *baksys* launched their curing campaigns, and the séances of the popular “saints” were organized in big stadiums and concert halls with thousands of participants.²⁶ In addition to that, the overall economic and social situation in the country was deteriorated, raising the unemployment and poverty, especially in rural areas. Moreover, the healthcare system of Soviet times was destroyed, the hospitals and clinics in the villages were closed, and the doctors left their jobs because of low salaries. Neither the government, nor the official Islamic clergy could alleviate the sufferings of the desperate people, and the “saints,” whose narrative was understandable and grounded in the shamanic and Sufi traditions of the ordinary people, were the only authorities for them. Furthermore, these sects suggested the universal tool, which were capable of solving all the social, economic, medical, spiritual issues of the people.²⁷

Are They Extremists?

None of the researchers, who wrote about “indigenous” religious movements developed in Kazakhstan after the independence, label them as “extremists.” Accordingly, they primarily analyze the positive impact of the religious sects that in some cases played a role of movements for national revival, as well as replaced the medical organizations.

Tucek *et al.* have demonstrated the effectiveness of the medical treatment through *dhikr* exercises in their contemporary experimental research. The *dhikr* and *baksy* dance, which contain breathing and movement rites, are characterized as part of the Traditional Oriental Music Therapy in the medicine.²⁸ During the *dhikr* the participant moves his head from upper right position (“the right cheek almost touches right shoulder”) to down left (“in the direction of the heart”), while reciting the words “*la ilaha illallah*”²⁹ in strict sequences.³⁰ As a result of the experiment, the “participants recite the mantras (beautiful names of God) while sitting, standing or dancing” and this “...improved blood flow in muscles, range of movements, regulatory dynamics of the autonomic nervous system, physical and mental relaxation or activation.”³¹

However, the Kazakhstani Committee of National Security has concluded that together with curing from the illness, the *dhikr* may be used “for neurolinguistic programming of the individual, which is capable to lead the adept to the condition of trance and subjection of him or her to the will of the spiritual leader”³². The main danger of the *Senim. Bilim. Omir* ideology was that the members

²⁴ Baksy is a traditional shamanic healer, who uses elements of dance, shouting, singing during the process of treatment.

²⁵ See: D. Penkala-Gawęcka, “Mentally Ill or Chosen by Spirits? ‘Shamanic Illness’ and the Revival of Kazakh Traditional Medicine in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, 2013, p. 41.

²⁶ See P. Jessa’s article in *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 359-371.

²⁷ See: D. Penkala-Gawęcka, *op. cit.*

²⁸ See: G. Tucek, E. Ferstl, F. Fritz, “A Study of Synchronisation Behaviour in a Group of Test Persons During Baksy and Dhikr Exercises Via Psycho-Physiological Monitoring,” in: *Music that Works*, ed. by R. Haas, V. Brandes, Springer, Vienna, 2009.

²⁹ *Arab.*: “There is no God but Allah.”

³⁰ See: G. Tucek, E. Ferstl, F. Fritz, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

³² Khabar TV, “Aqiqat” (Truth) Documentary, 2011.

of this sect blindly followed the instructions of the spiritual leader, which conflicted with the role and status of the individual in the society. In their interviews with the Khabar TV the former members of the group explained, how the fellow members left their families or married to a stranger only because Ismatulla Adbughappar ordered them.³³ The supporters of his ideology believed in his prophetic nature and referred to him as *Taksyr*.³⁴

As it is clear from the analysis, the *Senim. Bilim. Omir* pursued long-term goals in the social and media spheres, while the *Ata Zholy* was a commercial project aimed at making profit from the pilgrimage tours to the saint places. The Religious Affairs Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan stated that the members of this sect “were exposed to the psychological, spiritual and physical violence, which may lead to the dismal ends. As a result of the following the ideas of this organization people committed suicides, or made other serious damages to the health.”³⁵

Albeit noticing some elements of crime and illegal medical treatment in the activities of these groups so far, the “extremist” part of them still needs to be revealed. Schmid provides Wibtrope’s division of extremism into three types: “extreme by method but not by goal”; “extreme by goal and method”; “extreme by goal but not method”. Labeling the third type as “non-violent extremism” the author, however, reckons that “the absence of violence might be only a temporal tactical consideration with ‘true’ extremist.”³⁶ As it was concluded before, neither of two religious sects made statements against political or social structure of the society, but their methods of work were becoming increasingly confrontational with the government, as they rejected the major principles and values of the society and functioned outside the basic social institutions. As Asanbayev and Umirzakova pointed out, the main destructive pattern of these sects and cults is their confrontation with the mainstream religious views.³⁷ In addition to the immediate damage to the social life and health of the involved members, they could lead to the cleavage and conflict in the society.

Out of 20 indicators for monitoring extremism provided by Schmid only five are visible in the cases of *Senim. Bilim. Omir* and *Ata Zholy* movements. They include: “Reject universal human rights and show a lack of empathy and disregard for the rights of other than their own people”; “Reject democratic principles based on popular sovereignty”; “Reject equal rights for all, especially those of women and minorities”; “Exhibit authoritarian, dictatorial or totalitarian traits”; “Are unwilling to accept criticism and intimidate and threaten dissenters, heretics and critics with death.”³⁸ This conclusion was made based on the observation and analysis of the documentary and open source secondary information published in the mass media.

Conclusion

This study enhanced our understanding of the tactics and strategies of the religious groups in the transitional post-colonial societies, where the government institutions and civil society organizations are still undeveloped. The organizations created under the cover of charismatic individuals could embrace people’s support and obedience if the ideology of the organization is based on the national, religious and cultural values of the society. The religious dogma combined with the traditional rites helps

³³ Khabar TV, “Aqiqat” (Truth) Documentary, 2011.

³⁴ The Kazakh word meaning “Lord” or “Master”, which indicates the submission to him.

³⁵ A. Zubov, op. cit.

³⁶ A. Schmid, “Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?” *ICCT Paper*, May 2014, International Center for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, p. 12.

³⁷ See: M. Asanbayev, L. Umirzakova, “New Form of Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan: Destructive Sects and Cults,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (55), 2009, p. 43.

³⁸ A. Schmid, op. cit., p. 21.

them to manipulate the fellow members and dictate them the instructions, which could force him/her to change the worldview, confronting him/her with mainstream population. As the charismatic leader could gain a strong support in the masses, this could lead to the cleavage in the society.
