

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**SUFI PRACTICES
IN CONTEMPORARY KAZAKHSTAN:
TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

We deemed it necessary to write about the Sufi tradition in Kazakhstan and its unfolding transformation into new practices. Religious revival in Kazakhstan has made Sufism, its teaching and practices very attractive. Its traditions have survived in the Soviet past and were revived in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Pilgrimage to holy places, first and foremost within Kazakhstan, and veneration of saints have gained popularity as prominent features of Sufism. The same process is unfolding in the neighboring states—in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, the Northern and Southern Caucasus, and Turkey.

In Soviet times, in Kazakhstan, however, the Sufi tradition was partly crushed by repressive secularization practiced by Soviet authorities, which explains why Sufism is

sometimes revived in the form of pseudo-Sufi teachings.

Sufism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, therefore, the forms of its revival should be studied in depth to tap its spiritual and moral potential for the purposes of our country's cultural development. No wonder that Sufism and its profound spiritual teaching of Islamic mysticism have stirred up a lot of interest in both Muslim and Christian regions in the country's western part.

The article examines the forms of revival, traditions and transformations of Sufism in our country. In our analysis we relied on scientifically proven information from open academic sources and our field studies carried out using the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews.

KEYWORDS: *Sufism in Kazakhstan, Sufi practices, new Sufis, Sufi innovations, transformations of the Sufi tradition.*

Introduction

The Sufi Tradition in Kazakhstan

An interest in spiritual values became especially obvious in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, which was building up and consolidating its newly acquired independence. Revival proceeded in different forms and spheres: people were interested in the doctrines, moral enjoinders and methods of Sufi brotherhoods, and Sufi teaching and practices.

In Kazakhstan, Sufism is directly connected with the name of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Hazret Sultan) and his spiritual and educational activities. His great role in the Islamization of the peoples living to the north of Syr Darya has been studied by numerous scholars who invariably pointed out that he took into account the cultural heritage and mentality of the Turkic peoples, as well as their highly specific ideas about the world. No wonder that the forms of Islamization of the local peoples created unique national phenomena, among which the culture and ethno-confessional tradition of the Kazakhs has always occupied a special place.¹ Western researcher Bruce G. Privratsky has sufficient reason to write that Sufism as a component part of the Kazakhs' integral experience of Muslim life demonstrates its peculiar cultural dynamics that helped Islam survive the state atheism of the Soviet

¹ See: A. Knysh, *Musulmanskiy mistitsizm: kratkaia istoria*, Dilia Publishers, St. Petersburg, 2004, p. 17.

period: “The esoteric and institutional expression of Sufism was lost, but its experimental basis has been preserved strongly in the Kazakh religion. The experimental basis is a dynamic interaction and, moreover, a symbiosis of the cult of the ancestors of the Kazakh people and the Saints of the Sufi tradition, which is expressed in elementary forms of dreams, visions, experiences, which encourages the religious behavior of people at home, in the mausoleum, in holy places, and in healing practices.”² He defines this symbiosis as the *ayan*-complex. The importance and efficiency of Sufism’s cultural dynamics and the ancestors’ cult are confirmed by its viability and extreme importance for the Kazakhs’ cultural memory embodied in the domestic cult and the fairly popular pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) to holy places. In this context, the *ziyarat* is one of the most important acquisitions of the Kazakhs’ collective memory and Sufi spirituality as one its elements.

Collective memory of the Kazakhs and its religious component help our understanding of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan, of Sufism as its inalienable part and, in a wider context, of religious Kazakh identity.

A quest for identities that is unfolding in the Central Asian post-Soviet countries as an element of their spiritual revival has led to an increased interest in the local spiritual traditions, including Sufism. In Kazakhstan this process is unfolding in a rapidly developing country that, having declared its loyalty to the national and religious traditions, remains a secular state. It is moving towards modernization, on the one hand, and reviving its national identity and spirituality, on the other. As could be expected, ethical values and moral enjoinders of Sufism are essential to the reconstruction of national identity.

The Trajectories of Sufi Revival in Contemporary Kazakhstan

As mentioned above, the forms assumed by Muslim mysticism, or Sufism, in Kazakhstan speak of its inalienable connection with Central Asian history and ethno-cultural and sociopolitical realities. Pilgrimage to holy places is one of such forms rooted in the cult of saints and the ancestor cult. Today, the cult of saints (in the form of veneration) is one of the most expressive features of Islam among the Kazakhs; it is reviving or may have even already reached the peak of its popularity among the majority of Kazakh population. The mausoleums of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Arystan-baba, and Uka-sha-ata, the mosques Beket-ata, Shopan-ata, and Karaman-ata, as well as the saints-founders of the Yrgyzbai-ata, Bayanbai-ata, Domalak-ana, Baidibek-ata, etc. attract crowds of worshippers. The number of holy places is steadily increasing along with the number of worshippers. Today popular holy places are restored, and much is being done to restore the burials of forgotten ancestors (Bayanbai-ata, Yrgyzbai-aulie, etc.) that attract crowds of pilgrims. Practically in all these places pilgrims are instructed to observe ritual purity and fulfil the necessary Muslim rites such as reading namaz, keeping fast, etc.

The sacral landscape of the Kazakh steppe, saints’ burial places and cemeteries revive the collective memory of the Kazakhs. Bruce Privratsky has offered the following comment: “The memory of Muslim saints sacralizes the memory of Kazakh ancestors in a simple semantic field, and the connections of the two provide a conceptual and affective basis for the Kazakh religion.”³

² B.G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan. Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*, Curzon Press, Richmond Surrey, 2001, pp. 187-189.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Sufi Groups in Contemporary Kazakhstan

Sufism was revived at the institutional level and in groups united by charismatic leaders. Contemporary researcher Bakhtiyar Babajanov has pointed out that “Sufism as we know it today in the region is far removed from its earlier forms, even though it is attached to the spiritual tradition, sustained rituals and national culture to a much greater extent than to anything else.”⁴ Such are, for example, Jahriya, a group of Kazakhstani Sufis united around Sheikh Ismatullah. Babajanov associates the revival of the Yasawian/Kadiri rituals in post-Soviet Kazakhstan with his name. He belonged to the Kazakhstani diaspora in Afghanistan, where his ancestors had emigrated after the October Revolution. Before moving to Kazakhstan, he had lived for some time in Pakistan. Today, he has a great number of murids in the cities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Babajanov relies on his own field studies to state that Sheikh Ismatullah’s knowledge of the Yasawian tradition is not deep enough; the same applies to the entire set of dhikrs practiced in the Yasawi brotherhood. This is explained by the fact that he lived in an ethnic isolation of sorts in Afghanistan and inherited the tradition from the older generation that had brought it into exile and preserved in an oral form. Babajanov proceeds from the traditional division of Sufism into “intellectual” (written tradition) and “folk” to relate the emerging groups of Sufis, including Sheikh Ismatullah’s, to “folk” Sufism. The latter pays particular attention to the rituals and their revival.⁵ Sheikh Ismatullah and his followers practice a collective ritual, a combination of 3 or 4 types of dhikr “*jahr*” (loud dhikr). The same author relies on his field studies to describe the group’s social composition: regular people (workers, taxi drivers, unemployed, retirees, minor civil servants) for whom their membership is highly important as a form of social communication and a source of support and encouragement. Students from small provincial towns who feel lonely in big cities have found understanding and support to consciously assert their national identities in Sufi groups. The third group of followers consists of small and medium businessmen who confirm their national identity as Kazakhs and Muslims through their involvement in the life of their Sufi group and acquire a better understanding of Kazakh customs and culture. Another group consists of religious intellectuals and scholars. They are mostly young or middle-aged journalists, scientists, post-graduate students, employees of private firms and lecturers at higher educational institutions. They consider Sufism a layer of national culture untouched by the Soviet or any other influence, the revival of which will help save the national identity challenged by globalization and spiritual degradation.

People join Sufi groups for different psychological and social reasons. Girls and women constitute a special group: isolated from the male members, they take part in all rites and meetings. Some girls join Sufi groups for better self-awareness and deeper knowledge of ancient Kazakh culture, they want to overcome isolation in a big city by joining a like-minded circle. Others rely on Sheikh Ismatullah’s repeated assertions that recovery is possible through Sufi rituals and repeated requests to Allah. This explains the huge popularity of Islamized quackery. The *baxs* and *kazy* rely on the Koranic ayats, *aulie* spirits, etc. as their healing instruments. Some of the Sufi practices, first and foremost, the dhikr in the form of meditation, have become extremely popular in other countries. Transformed into meditation, they have gained popularity in Western Europe and the United States.

Reviving Sufism and the Sufi groups of Sheikh Ismatullah stir up very different feelings in Kazakhstan. While Privratsky has discerned no negative effects of revived Sufism in Kazakhstan, Babajanov has taken this view even further. He has positively assessed the Sufi groups of the Yas-

⁴ B.M. Babajanov, “Vvedenie k izdaniuu,” in: *Sobranie fetw po obosnovaniuu dhikra jahr i sama*, comp. by B.M. Babajanov, S.A. Mukhammadinov, ed. by A.K. Muminov, Dayk-Press, Almaty, 2008, p. 34.

⁵ See: B.M. Babajanov, “Dhikr jahr u bratstv Tsentralnoy Azii: diskussii, tipologii, vozrozhdenie,” *Pax Islamika*, No. 1 (2), 2009, p. 115.

awian tradition as far removed from politics, yet loyal to the ruler and close to the Kazakh culture. Asylbek Izbairov, on the other hand, points out that the Pir Ismatullah groups are pseudo-Sufi. Having pointed out the transformation of Naqshbandiya into a neo-Wahhabi ideology, he warned of possible negative repercussions of Sufi revival in Kazakhstan: “Today, we are watching how sham-Sufi organizations are consolidating their positions in our country: the sustained trends of activation of their destructive elements can be discerned.”⁶ A series of scandals connected with these Sufi groups shook the country in 2005 and later. In 2005, Sheikh Ismatullah published a book *Azbuka koranicheskikh nauk* (The ABC of Koranic Sciences) that forced the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) to issue a fatwa that assessed his teaching as harmful to Muslims. Activities of the public movement Senim.Bilim.Omir (through which Pir Ismatullah realized his activities) were carefully investigated. Sheikh Ismatullah, head of the Jahrist Brotherhood, and some of his followers were sentenced to different terms in prison, but not forgotten by the media. Ismatullah was liberated in 2019; the following spring the Internet was inundated by positive posts published by common people, public figures and academics about Ismatullah, his mission, his holy ancestors, the difficult life of the oralman (repatriate), videos of concerts of the instrumental folk music group Yasawi, etc. In late March 2020, he published his video addresses to the presidents of Kazakhstan, Turkey, Russia and the United States, in which he called to the reading of dhikr all over the world.

While he remained in prison, his active followers continued to attract new adepts using certain methods based on Viktor Frankl psychology. The most active of them went abroad to receive a better education, others published books to encourage the widest social circles to preserve traditions and family values; they were actively using social networks to consolidate the authority of their organization and establish new contacts. Not all sources, on which the published books relied, can be verified by experts. Despite this fact, they echoed far and wide among stars of show-business, scientists and common people. So far, Sheikh Ismatullah has not yet assessed his followers’ novelties.

The gradually emerging Sufi Naqshbandiya communities in Kazakhstan demonstrate more political activism than the groups of the Yasawian tradition. It should be said that in the past the Yasawian order opposed political biases in any faith. The Naqshbandiya school is especially prominent in the country’s south, where Uzbeks (citizens of Kazakhstan and guest workers) live in compact communities. Its center is found in Uzbekistan, in the mausoleum of Bahauddin Naqshband. As could be expected, the group of about 1,500 followers is headed by an ethnic Uzbek, its members prefer loud dhikrs. The group uses their leader’s officially registered YouTube channel to propagate its teachings. Its events are attended by members of the academic community of Kazakhstan, and it is generally open to officials and researchers.

The followers of the Kadiriya tariqa, in particular, a community of the Kadiriya tradition (Vis-Khoja line) functions in the Atbasar District, Akmolinsk Region. It is widespread among the local Chechens and Ingushes. Ruziya Kamarova, a scholar from Kazakhstan, who carried out field studies among the district residents (in the Krasnaya Polyana village) discovered that those deported from their Caucasian homeland had organized their own dhikr, which is carried out during religious and secular holidays, weddings and burials. The community is small, therefore its male members rely on certain Koranic surahs to allow women to be present at the ceremonies, the novelty with which Chechens from Russia and members of the traditional Islam disagree. In fact, this group has accepted their own interpretations of the Koran, its members follow Islam and are guided by their own rules. Their integration remains a problem: their rules are too rigid, their knowledge of their native and foreign tongues is inadequate, there is no access to the Internet, etc.⁷

⁶ A.K. Izbairov, “Ideyno-religioznye ustanovki v psevdosufiyskikh tarikatakh,” *Slygys*, No. 2, 2008, p. 22.

⁷ See: R.I. Kamarova, “Religia v zhiznedeiatelnosti etnokulturnykh tse ntrov i biograficheskikh narrativakh,” in: *Religia i etnichnost v svetskom gosudarstve: materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii*, Master Po, Astana, 2016, p. 110.

The spiritual and intellectual Sufi trend Sukhba, one of the latest in Kazakhstan. was organized in 2015 by Murat Hakim, its current leader. Educated at the prestigious Egyptian Al-Azhar University and experienced in civil service, he is convinced that the Russian language will open the doors to Islam: the knowledge of the native tongue among Kazakhstan intellectuals and the younger generation leaves much to be desired. This Sufi group relies on the latest technologies to attract civil servants and members of the academic community to promote its teaching with their help. The order is well-organized and gives women a chance to demonstrate their activity. Having studied the group in detail, Ruziya Kamarova detected certain destructive elements in its ideology. In 2020, however, Murat Hakim, was appointed invited theologian to the Center for the Studies of Religious Problems of the Nur-Sultan akimat. On the whole, this group deserves further academic research.

The Kenesary sarbazdary Sufi group operates in the north of Kazakhstan. Its leader Ergali Kopeev identifies himself with the Shaliliya tariqa, which has a long history in the Northern Caucasus (probably due to his marriage to a Chechen woman) and with Egyptian Sheikh Yusri Rushdi. To consolidate his positions and legitimacy, he speaks of himself as a descendant of the fifth saint (*aulia*) of northern Kazakhstan and an *Ishan* (one of the titles of the leaders of the Sufi tariqas). In 2016, he registered the Kenesary sarbazdary channel on the YouTube platform, where he regularly publishes videos in which he assesses (mainly in Russian) much of what is going on in Kazakhstan and outside it and displays financial requisites for donations to the channel. The group is working towards the unification of all Turkic peoples and revival of the Turan army (which has a pan-Turkic nature). According to expert Oleg Siniakov, Christians constitute a greater part of the region's population.⁸ In his videos Kopeev states that he is open to discussion and invites all interested people to write to him a personal message. We invited him to a WhatsApp interview, but received no answer, which means that this Sufi group is not easy to reach or study.

Turkish Sufi groups—topbashjilar, suleimanjilar, nurjular, yhlasjilar, mahmudchular—that belong to Sunni Islam are widely represented in Kazakhstan. During the initial stage of the country's independence, they were spreading extensively through the Kazakhstan-Turkish lyceums (boarding schools) and labor migrants (mostly businessmen). In Russia and Uzbekistan these groups are banned. In Europe and America there are other well-structured Turkish tariqas. Non-members are not allowed to visit the meetings of the tariqa, whose members are obliged to attend and obey their leaders. On the whole, their activities in Kazakhstan should be studied in greater detail.

The SAMK is of a negative opinion about Sufi groups. In 2016, the YouTube Dinisham channel published a video "About Ismatullah and Kurbanali," in which Arman Kuanyshbaev, who represented the SAMK explained how the Sufi groups contradicted official Islam. Inside the SAMK there are disagreements between the imams educated in Turkey and those who received education in the Arab countries.⁹

Conclusion

As a comprehensive and multi-sided phenomenon, Sufism and the forms of its revival in Kazakhstan are discussed at different levels and demand more profound scholarly studies. So far, all experts

⁸ See: O.V. Siniakov, "Ob informatsionno-raziasnitelnoy rabote v sfere religii v Severo-Kazakhstanskoy oblasti," in: *Materialy online kruglogo stola*, 29 October, 2020, available at [<http://religions-congress.org/ru/news/novosti/567>], 4 November 2020.

⁹ See: A. Kuanyshbaev, "About Ismatullah and Kurbanali", Meeting with students of the Yessenov Caspian State University of Technology and Engineering, Aktau, 4 May, 2016, available at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcm9zX-bSKQ>], 13 April, 2020.

have agreed that it is a fairly significant component of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Central Asian peoples, while many of its values were and remain highly important.¹⁰

The revived Sufi tradition in Kazakhstan was transformed into new syncretic religious practices. Its adepts are expanding the range of means and methods by which they attract new followers and have mastered the educational instruments of Sufi practices to lure children and young people into their groups. Latest technologies and presentation methods help Sufi organizations move further towards new discussions, new religious constructs and new criteria of accession to dhikr sessions. This means that the academic community should pay more attention to self-identification and self-reflection of the Sufi groups in Kazakhstan.

The best known of them is the Jahrist Brotherhood of Ismatullah. Over four years (from fall 2016 to May 2019) the authors carried out field studies using the participant observation method in Kayseri, Turkey, where brotherhood members study at the local university. It was established that collective dhikrs are practiced very similarly to the past (every week, on Thursdays and Fridays) by small groups of trusted people (the members are very cautious) in their residences. There are no problems with neighbors: common Turks and officials are tolerant to the collective loud dhikr as one of their historical traditions. Newcomers (students and guest workers from Kazakhstan) who seek contacts with compatriots are carefully tested before they are allowed to attend.

In Kazakhstan, the Naqshbandiya Brotherhood, likewise, is rooted in historical tradition; it is present mainly in the country's south with its predominantly ethnic Uzbek population. They demonstrated a lot of political activism at all times, which may cause religious conflicts in the future.

Despite economic and social problems, the Kadiriyah Brotherhood created its own tradition which is still alive among its members, the Chechens and Ingushes. Field studies among its members who live in the Krasnaya Polyana village in the north of Kazakhstan, were conducted in the form of an interview with the village head. Chechens and Ingushes, divided into clans each with its own traditions, are scattered across Kazakhstan. In this article we have concentrated on the Vis-Khoja tradition of the Krasnaya Polyana village.

These three tariqas (Jahriyah, Nakshbandiya and Kadiriyah) are united by the loud dhikr. In the Turkish tariqas, the types of dhikr vary. As of now, we do not know much about the types of dhikr of the Sukhba tariqa, except the fact that it is conducted through social media or by radio. We have identified a new trend: tariqas prefer to attract the elite (intellectuals and well-educated people with average income). The leaders of the Kenesary sarbazdary group carefully avoid all contacts with experts and researchers, which makes it practically impossible to study this group in greater detail. Today, Sufi leaders are somewhat different from their predecessors: they have a tendency towards self-perfection, they study abroad, they learn foreign languages to get access to foreign publications and add innovations to the Sufi teaching, they create new religious constructs, introduce cardinal changes in the Sufi gender tradition and develop the educational aspects of Sufi practices.

Prior to the Soviet Union, Sufism had been developed by the Central Asian institution of khujas (practically destroyed by seventy years of Soviet power) and interaction with neighboring countries. In independent Kazakhstan, Islam and Sufism as a Central Asian tradition are being revived in different forms and practices partly due to the negative impact of Soviet secularism, some of them pseudo-Sufi organizations. Practically all the above-mentioned Sufi groups have violated at least some of the republic's laws. Perhaps the patterns of development of religious organizations are such that at the beginning of their activity they are more than useful for their followers, but having accumulated authority and power, these structures begin to gradually reveal their negative sides. Official Islam and its representatives are of a very negative opinion of the Sufi groups. On the other hand,

¹⁰ See: A.K. Muminov, "From the Editor," in: *Sobranie fetw po obosnovaniuu dhikr jahr i sama*, Compiled by B.M. Babajanov, S.A. Muhamaddinova, Dyke-Press, Almaty, 2008, p. 16.

imams do not ban the dhikr practice in mosques; everybody knows in which mosques dhikr sessions are held. The state remains undecided.

Today, at the outset of new discourses, Sufis are creating new religious constructs and readjusting the fundamental criteria of accession to dhikr. Self-identification and self-reflection of the Sufi groups in Kazakhstan should be further studied in greater detail. Those who study Sufism insist that it is an important component of the spiritual and cultural heritage of Central Asia and, specifically, of Kazakhstan. Our contemporaries treat the humanitarian, educational and other Sufi traditional values as absolutely relevant to our time.
