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RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION IN KAZAKH SOCIETY UNDER IMPERIAL MODERNIZATION

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Abstract. Introduction. This article presents a historical and cultural analysis of religious transformation in Kazakh society during the period of imperial modernization in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The pre-revolutionary period is chosen deliberately, as it marks the beginning of systematic and targeted interference by the Russian Empire in the religious life of Turkic-Muslim peoples. Seeking to consolidate its control over colonized territories, the tsarist administration implemented a series of reforms aimed at the institutionalization of Islam, regulation of pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, restriction of the Jadidist movement, and the subordination of Muslim clergy to state structures. The topic is relevant due to the need to rethink the mechanisms of Islamic adaptation under colonial pressure and its coexistence with pre-Islamic elements of traditional culture. Goals and Objectives. The goal of the study is to identify the specific features of the transformation of Muslim traditions in Kazakh society within the context of imperial religious policy. Objectives include analyzing the mechanisms of integrating Islamic norms into the nomadic way of life; interpreting traditional Islam as a form of localized religiosity; exploring the role of ethnoreligious institutions (Sufis, khojas, aulie) and sacred geography in preserving Islamic practices; and assessing the impact of administrative measures on Kazakh religious identity. The research is based on archival documents, works by pre-revolutionary and Soviet scholars, ethnographic observations, and materials from Russian, Kazakh, and Uzbek archives. The methodology includes historical and cultural analysis, elements of postcolonial theory, and a comparative approach to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. *Results*. The study shows that despite strict religious regulation by the imperial authorities, Islam persisted and transformed through the resilience of Sufi networks, the authority of local saints (aulie), the institutional role of khojas, and the functioning of sacred spaces as centers of spiritual resistance. Conclusion. Religious transformation in Kazakh society in the 19th and early 20th centuries reflected both the adaptation of Islamic institutions to colonial realities and a hidden resistance to imperial intrusion into the sacred realm.

Keywords: Kazakh society, Islam, religious transformation, imperial modernization, colonial policy, Sufism, sacred spaces, Jadidism, pilgrimage

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ИМПЕРИЯЛЫҚ МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЯ ЖАҒДАЙЫНДАҒЫ ҚАЗАҚ ҚОҒАМЫНДАҒЫ ДІНИ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ

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Андатпа. Кіріспе. Мақалада XIX-XX ғасырдың басындағы империялық модернизация жағдайында қазақ қоғамындағы діни трансформация тарихи-мәдени тұрғыдан талданады. Зерттеу кезеңі ретінде революцияға дейінгі уақыттың таңдалуы кездейсоқ емес. Себебі, дәл осы кезеңде Ресей империясы түркі-мұсылман халықтарының діни саласына жүйелі әрі мақсатты түрде араласа бастады. Патшалық әкімшілік отарланған аймақтардағы бақылауды кушейту мақсатында исламды институционализациялауға, Мекке мен Мединеге жасалатын қажылықты реттеуге, жәдидтік қозғалысқа шектеу қоюға және мұсылман діни элитасын мемлекеттік құрылымдарға бағындыруға бағытталған бірқатар реформаларды іске асырды. Зерттеу өзектілігі исламның отарлық қысым жағдайындағы бейімделу механизмдерін және дәстүрлі мәдениеттегі исламға дейінгі элементтермен қатар өмір сүру үдерістерін қайта ойластыру қажеттілігімен айқындалады. Мақсаты мен міндеттері. Зерттеудің басты мақсаты – империялық діни саясат аясында қазақ қоғамындағы мұсылмандық дәстүрлер трансформациясының ерекшеліктерін айқындау. Осы мақсатты жүзеге асыру үшін келесі міндеттер койылды: исламдық нормалар мен тәжірибелердің көшпелі өмір салтына енгізілу тетіктерін талдау; дәстүрлі исламды жергілікті діндарлықты бір түрі ретінде қарастыру; этнодіни институттардың (сопылар, қожалар, әулиелер) және сакралды географияның исламдық тәжірибелерді сақтаудағы рөлін зерттеу; сондай-ақ әкімшілік шаралардың қазақтардың діни болмысына тигізген әсерін анықтау. Материалдар мен әдістер. Зерттеу көзі ретінде архивтік құжаттар, революцияға дейінгі және кеңестік кезеңдегі зерттеушілердің еңбектері, этнографиялық зерттеулер, Ресей, Қазақстан және Өзбекстан мұрағаттарының материалдары пайдаланылды. Методологиялық тұрғыдан зерттеу тарихи-мәдени талдауға, постколониалдық теория элементтеріне және исламдық пен исламға дейінгі дәстүрлерге салыстырмалы тәсілге сүйенеді. Нәтижелер. Зерттеу нәтижесі көрсеткендей, империялық биліктің діни реттеулеріне қарамастан, ислам өзінің өміршеңдігін сақтап, бейімделе білді. Бұл урдіс сопылық желілердің орнықтылығына, жергілікті әулиелердің беделіне, қожалардың институционалдық қызметіне және рухани қарсылық орталықтарына айналған сакралды кеңістіктердің қызметіне байланысты жүзеге асты. Қажылық, діни білім беру, серт жүйесі және сенімнің ауызша берілу формалары шектеулерге қарамастан, ислам дәстүрінің сабақтастығын қамтамасыз етті. Қорытынды. XIX-XX ғасырдың басындағы қазақ

қоғамындағы діни трансформация – ислам институттарының отарлық саясатқа бейімделу үдерісі ғана емес, сонымен қатар сакралды кеңістікке империялық араласуға жасырын қарсылық формасы түрі іспетті еді. Әкімшілік реформалар мен діни тәжірибелер арасындағы өзара байланыс этноконфессиялық бірегейліктің ерекше формаларын қалыптастырды. Бұл жағдайда ислам бір мезгілде бақылау нысаны және мәдени мобилизация құралы ретінде өзін көрсете білді.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақ қоғамы, ислам, діни трансформация, империялық модернизация, отарлық саясат, суфизм, сакралды кеңістік, жәдидшілдік, қажылық

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РЕЛИГИОЗНАЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ В КАЗАХСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ В УСЛОВИЯХ ИМПЕРСКОЙ МОДЕРНИЗАЦИИ

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Аннотация. Введение. Статья посвящена историко-культурному анализу религиозной трансформации в казахском обществе в условиях имперской модернизации в XIX – начале ХХ века. Выбор дореволюционного периода обусловлен тем, что именно в это время Российская империя начала системное и целенаправленное вмешательство в религиозную сферу тюрко-мусульманских народов. Царская администрация, стремясь укрепить контроль над колонизированными территориями, реализовала ряд реформ, направленных на институционализацию ислама, регулирование паломничества в Мекку и Медину, ограничение деятельности джадидского движения, а также подчинение мусульманского духовенства государственным структурам. Актуальность темы определяется необходимостью глубокого переосмысления механизмов адаптации ислама в условиях колониального давления и его сосуществования с доисламскими элементами традиционной культуры. Цель и задачи. Цель исследования – выявить особенности трансформации мусульманских традиций в казахском обществе на фоне имперской религиозной политики. Задачи включают: анализ механизмов внедрения исламских норм в кочевой уклад; рассмотрение традиционного ислама как формы локальной религиозности; изучение роли этнорелигиозных институтов (суфии, кожа, аулие) и сакральной географии в сохранении исламских практик; а также определение степени воздействия административных мер на религиозную идентичность казахов. Источниковую базу составляют архивные документы, труды дореволюционных и советских исследователей, этнографические наблюдения, материалы российских, казахстанских и узбекских архивов. Методологически работа опирается на историко-культурный анализ, элементы постколониальной теории и сравнительный подход к исламским и доисламским традициям. Результаты. Исследование демонстрирует, что несмотря на жёсткую религиозную

со стороны имперской власти, ислам продолжал сохраняться регламентацию И трансформироваться благодаря устойчивости суфийских сетей, авторитету местных святых (аулие), институциональной роли кожа и функционированию сакральных пространств, выступавших очагами духовного сопротивления. Паломничество, религиозное образование, система обетов, а также устные формы передачи веры обеспечивали непрерывность исламской традиции даже в условиях ограничения. Заключение. Религиозная трансформация казахского общества в XIX – начале XX века представляла собой не только адаптацию исламских институтов к колониальной реальности, но и скрытое сопротивление имперскому вмешательству в сакральную сферу. Взаимодействие между административными реформами определило уникальные формы религиозной практикой этноконфессиональной идентичности, в которых ислам выступал одновременно как объект контроля и как средство культурной мобилизации.

Ключевые слова: Казахское общество, ислам, религиозная трансформация, имперская модернизация, колониальная политика, суфизм, сакральные пространства, джадидизм, паломничество

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Introduction

Islam in the Kazakh steppes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries underwent a complex process of transformation, shaped by both internal cultural dynamics and external political pressure. During this period, the religious life of Kazakh society increasingly came under the scrutiny of the Russian Empire, which sought to strengthen its control over the Muslim population. In the context of colonial modernization, Islam adapted to the traditional way of life and became the object of systematic regulation by the imperial administration, especially after the reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century (Valikhanov, 1985: 71). As administrative intervention intensified, the authorities more frequently regarded Islamic religious figures was perceived as a threat, while in the south and southeast, the spread of influence by Uzbek theologians raised alarm. Particular concern was caused by transregional connections: in the western and northeastern regions of Kazakhstan, the religious activity of Tatar religious figures was perceived as a threat, while in the south and southeast, the spread of influence by Uzbek theologians raised alarm. Particular concern was caused by transregional connections: in the western and northeastern regions of Kazakhstan, the religious activity of Tatar mullahs, and in the south and southeast in the religious activity of Tatar mullahs, and in the south and southeast in the expansion of the influence of Uzbek theologians.

The spread of Jadidism, a religious and educational reform movement, significantly influenced the spiritual atmosphere of the region. Although Jadidism was initially shaped by the ideas of I. Gasprinskiy, it quickly went beyond the Crimean context and spread throughout the territory of the Russian Empire as a form of cultural and spiritual resistance to the Russification and Christianization of Turkic Muslim peoples, as well as an attempt to modernize the traditional education system (Alektorov, 1879: 59). After I. Gasprinskiy's meeting with the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, Jadidist ideas acquired a new resonance and political significance. As a result, in the Turkestan region and the Kazakh steppes, the religious and educational activity of the so called *"Turkish emissaries"* intensified, which caused additional concern among the tsarist administration (Atkinson, 1999: 150). These emissaries not only disseminated ideas of educational and religious reform but also contributed to the formation of a sense of unity among the Turkic Muslim peoples of the empire, which was seen by the authorities as a potential threat to stability. In response, imperial policy sought to limit such contacts: control over religious institutions was strengthened, pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina became strictly regulated, and the activities of local religious leaders were closely monitored by administrative structures (Orlov, 2016: 62).

In parallel with administrative measures targeting the Muslim clergy, the forms of Islamic practice were undergoing transformation. Despite efforts by the authorities to restrict religious freedom, Islam was preserved and continued to develop within stable social and cultural structures. Sufi brotherhoods, the cult of saints (*aulie*), the authority of the *qozha*, and the significance of sacred sites all contributed to the preservation of Islamic tradition, which functioned as an element of collective identity and spiritual self awareness of the Kazakh people (Herschel, 2004: 125).

Historical and cultural analysis of Islamic practices during this period reveals the specific features of their integration into the everyday life of nomadic society. The spread of Islam in the steppes occurred through tariqats and systems of religious education, forming a stable model in which religious norms were interpreted within the context of local customs and social ties. On the one hand, imperial reforms shaped a new administrative reality. On the other hand, they stimulated a rethinking of religious roles and authorities (Danilevsky, 2002: 97).

The relevance of this study is defined by the need for a thorough reconsideration of the mechanisms of religious transformation under conditions of colonial pressure and imperial modernization, especially in the context of interaction between Islam and the administrative policy of the Russian Empire toward Turkic Muslim peoples. The second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries represent a distinct stage in the history of Kazakhstan, when the imperial authorities began systematic and purposeful intervention into the spiritual sphere of peoples who practiced Islam and possessed a Turkic cultural and linguistic code (Gavrilov, 2005: 210).

The choice of the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries as the focus of the present study is explained by the nature of the transformational processes that occurred in Kazakh society under the influence of systemic imperial modernization. This period is characterized by a sharp intensification of Russian intervention in the religious sphere in the territory of the Kazakh steppes, which had previously enjoyed considerable autonomy. The strengthening of control over Islamic institutions, the administrative reorganization of the region, the restriction of religious mobility (including pilgrimage), as well as attempts to create a loyal structure of the Muslim clergy, all indicate a shift in the approach to governing Turkic Muslim regions (Semenov Tian Shansky, 1879: 145).

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of religious changes in Kazakh society in the context of administrative reforms that increased the influence of centralized authority on the regional confessional structure. Particular attention is paid to how Islamic institutions, rituals, and authoritative figures such as the *qozha*, *aulie*, *and regional bearers* of religious knowledge adapted to imperial policy or entered into latent conflict with it. Among the objectives of the study are the reconstruction of mechanisms for regulating religious life, identifying the degree of Islam's integration into the everyday practice of the Kazakhs, analyzing cross border influences including the role of intellectuals from Crimea, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as examining local forms of religious enlightenment and mobilization. The theoretical framework is based on approaches from historical anthropology, studies of imperial governance practices, and the analysis of ethnographic field data, which makes it possible to identify hidden forms of religious resilience and adaptation (Levshin, 2002: 205).

The scholarly novelty of this work lies in clarifying the nature of Islamic transformation in the Kazakh steppes not as a one dimensional consequence of colonial pressure, but as a complex process in which internal religious agents demonstrated institutional flexibility and cultural reorientation. The study proposes to consider Kazakh society as a space of active reinterpretation and testing of Islamic reforms, while maintaining connection to the autochthonous cultural environment. The proposed hypothesis is based on the assumption that Islam in the Kazakh steppe during the specified period developed under dual pressure from centralized imperial policy and simultaneously through transnational Muslim intellectual currents, which contributed to the formation of a distinct form of religious identity.

Materials and methods

The study of Islamic practices and religious institutions in the Kazakh steppes in the 19th and early 20th centuries requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account both the transformation of the Islamic tradition under the colonial policy of the Russian Empire and the adaptive mechanisms of local Muslim communities. Methodologically, the research relies on an interdisciplinary synthesis of historical anthropology, postcolonial theories, and the social history of religion (Geertz, 1968: 43–47). The focus is on the institutional and symbolic control over Islam by the tsarist administration, which sought to restrict religious autonomy and redirect the Turko-Muslim infrastructure – in particular, the network of madrasas, the clergy, and the hajj system – toward the logic of imperial modernization. The use of the historical-critical method allows for a reconstruction of the strategy of regulating religious life based on archival materials from the offices of the Orenburg and Turkestan governor-generalships, reports from the Border Administration, as well as ethnographic expeditions and records of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (ZIRGO, 1869: 112–115).

The theoretical framework of the study is shaped by concepts of power and everyday resistance, enabling the identification of forms of symbolic and cultural opposition to the colonial discourse. Particular attention is paid to the sacred geography of the steppes, represented by the phenomenon of aulie – venerated Islamic saints – and the associated mausoleums and pilgrimage sites, which functioned as alternative centers of religious legitimacy in opposition to official religious structures controlled by the state (Radlov, 1884: 221–225). Sufi brotherhoods, which maintained influence in the Kazakh steppe, acted as religious and sociocultural associations involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and practices (Kun, 1870: 83–87). The visual and spatial aspects of sacredness are analyzed through the lens of the anthropology of religious space, allowing *ziyarat* to be interpreted as a form of collective mobilization and the reproduction of historical memory under conditions of colonial pressure (Rychkov, 1762: 49–51).

Jadidism, which emerged within the intellectual milieu of the Turko-Muslim elite of the Russian Empire, took the form of educational reform and ideological challenge to the imperial order in the Kazakh context (Aristov, 1896: 256). Based on an analysis of prerevolutionary texts, letters, and periodicals – such as the works of I. Gasprinskiy and Kazakh enlighteners – the influence of reformist thought on the formation of a new model of Muslim identity can be traced (Lewis, 2003: 120–137). The Jadidists advocated for the modernization of Islamic education, the use of the native language in instruction, and the inclusion of secular subjects in the curriculum. At the same time, their activities raised concerns among the authorities, as they went beyond purely religious reform and touched on the foundations of the cultural and political autonomy of Turko-Muslim peoples (Frank, 2001: 92–110). It is in this context that the tsarist administration intensified its surveillance of the reformers, restricted the circulation of books and correspondence, and sought to isolate Central Asia from contacts with the Ottoman Empire (Montgomery, 2017: 65–89).

From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, the study of Islam in the Kazakh steppes requires a rejection of outdated paradigms of prerevolutionary and Soviet historiography, which portrayed Islam as a superficial and non-autonomous phenomenon allegedly not rooted in the culture of the nomads. In the framework of official scholarship of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the dominant concept was that of the *"under-Islamization"* of the Kazakhs, reducing religious life to remnants of shamanism and Tengrianism. Meanwhile, archaeological, epigraphic, and written sources indicate that Islam began spreading among the Turkic tribes of the region as early as the mid-8th century, and with its official establishment under the Karakhanid dynasty in the second half of the 10th century, it became the dominant religion (Barthold, 1927: 310). A key role in the rooting of Islam among the Kazakh population was played by Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, the founder of Turkic-language Sufism, whose teachings laid the spiritual and ethical foundations for a popular form of Islam that has persisted to the present day. His disciples, followers, members of the khoja class, and other religious figures became key agents in transmitting Islamic knowledge, integrating Sufi practices (*ziyārat, dhikr, veneration of aulie*) and structuring the sacred space of the steppe (Bonner,

2014: 112–128). This study undertakes a methodological attempt to analyze Islam not as a residual phenomenon but as a complex system adapted to the sociocultural conditions of nomadic civilization, and considers its role in the context of imperial modernization of the religious sphere carried out by the tsarist administration as part of its colonial policy of governing non-Orthodox peoples.

The source base of this study consists of materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, drawing on the collections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Department for Non-Orthodox Affairs, and the Spiritual Administrations, as well as data from ethnographic research of the prerevolutionary and Soviet periods. Of particular value are descriptions of pilgrimages, reports on religious activity, police memoranda, and inspection reports on madrasas stored in the Russian State Historical Archive and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In addition, the comparative historical method is used to compare the Kazakh experience with similar processes in the Volga region and Crimea, allowing the identification of specific features of the steppe Islamic landscape under the conditions of imperial modernization. Thus, the study demonstrates that Islam in the Kazakh steppes was not a passive object of imperial control, but developed as a complex and active system mobilizing sacred, educational, and cultural resources in response to the challenges of colonialism.

Analysis

The analysis of Kazakh religious practices in the 19th and early 20th centuries requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach based on archival documents, pre-revolutionary scholarly works, folklore sources, as well as materials related to the sacred geography and cultic spaces of Kazakhstan. Under the conditions of colonial domination by the Russian Empire, religion was regarded as one of the tools for governance and control over the indigenous population. In this context, archival materials and reports by imperial officials indicate that Islam among the Kazakhs was often perceived not as an institutionalized system of norms and rituals but as an element of cultural tradition. This perception complicated the colonial administration's efforts to regulate and standardize Islamic practice. A statement from the Minister of Public Enlightenment in a report from 1877, which emphasized that "the Kirghiz... in their private lives, both in religious and civil matters, are guided neither by the Quran nor by the Sharia" serves as a vivid example of how the colonial administration shaped a discourse on the "low level of religiosity" among the Kazakh population (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 543, P. 126). Such assertions were not only observations but also part of a broader ideological and administrative strategy aimed at discrediting traditional Islam and pushing it to the periphery of public life. The Russian Empire sought to portray Kazakh society as "undeveloped" in terms of Islamic orthodoxy, thereby justifying state intervention in the religious sphere. The emphasis on the Kazakhs' "indifference" to Sharia norms was aimed less at an objective analysis of religious practices and more at establishing the image of the Kazakhs as a pliable, "not fully Islamized" population in need of "enlightenment" and regulation. In other words, through the narrative of weak Sharia practice among the Kazakhs, the tsarist administration pursued the systematic weakening of traditional forms of Islamic authority, seeking to replace them with a convenient and controllable religious infrastructure. This was part of a broader colonial policy aimed at the institutional subjugation and cultural transformation of the steppe population.

For example, the statement by F. Usov that "all their [the Kazakhs'] notions of divinity and religion boil down to various superstitions... more pagan than Muslim" reflects a characteristic feature of the 19th-century orientalist and colonial discourse, which tended to interpret the religious practices of indigenous peoples as primitive, imperfect, or deviating from the "normative" model. Such evaluations are generalized and reductive, failing to account for the diversity of forms of Islamic religiosity that developed in the Kazakh steppe under conditions of nomadic life and the absence of rigid institutionalization (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 2., C. 238., P. 32). Contemporary studies, such as those by N.D. Nurtazina, E. Kartabayeva and M. Dauytbekova, based on a broad corpus of archival documents, folklore materials, and testimonies of Muslim theologians and travelers, demonstrate that Islam in Kazakh society was deeply rooted in social and cultural life. Its functioning was manifested in stable forms of ritual practice, the veneration of saints (*aulie*), adherence to basic religious ethics,

the authority of ishan, qari, and mullahs, as well as the sacralization of certain spaces (*mazars, ziarat*) (Nurtazina, Kartabayeva, Dauytbekova 2024: 541–557).

The ethnographic studies of N. Zeland, which examined the adaptation of Islamic rituals in the Kazakh steppes, inadequately reflect the actual state of affairs. He claimed that the Kazakhs performed the main Islamic rites with deviations from canonical norms and that there were few literate mullahs in the steppe (Zeland, 1885: 67). However, such statements are not based on a thorough analysis of Islamic practice, but rather perceive Islam as a cultural element rather than a strict religious doctrine. The author did not take into account the specific features of local adaptation of Islam and its role in the social and spiritual life of the Kazakhs, which distorts the picture of Kazakh religious identity.

The assertions of K. Gubarev that mullahs and akhuns did not possess the same sacred significance among the Kazakhs as among the Tatars require critical reconsideration (Gubarev, 1894: 34). First, this statement underestimates the role of Islamic spiritual authorities, such as *mullahs and akhuns*, in Kazakh society. Although they may have competed with traditional leaders such as *biys and aksakals*, this does not mean that their authority was weak or insignificant. On the contrary, mullahs and akhuns in the steppe played an important role in regulating religious and social life, helping to integrate Islamic practices into local traditions. Moreover, the role of biys and aksakals in the spiritual life of the Kazakhs did not exclude religious figures, but rather coexisted with them, forming hybrid forms of power and spirituality. Kazakh Islam did not compete with traditional structures but adapted to them, preserving important elements of Islamic doctrine, such as reverence for spiritual leaders and the cult of sacred sites, as confirmed by many sources and practices of that time.

The use of the comparative-historical method in the context of the transformation of religious norms under the influence of external factors, such as interaction with Tatar religious centers and the Russian colonial administration, cannot fully explain the religious dynamics of the Kazakh steppes. Claims that Islam in the steppes served solely as a tool for the formation of Muslim identity and was simultaneously subjected to localization, which allegedly led to the preservation of shamanistic practices, greatly simplify and distort the real picture. First, the religious practice of the Kazakhs was complex and multilayered, but Islam was not subjected to "syncretism" with shamanism in the direct sense of the term. The assertions of N.A. Aristov about the "formal adherence to Islam" ignore the depth and resilience of religious practices in the steppe, which included elements of the Sufi tradition as well as adapted forms of Islamic rituals (Aristov, 1897: 189). The Kazakhs did not reject Islam in favor of shamanism; on the contrary, Islam manifested itself through integration with traditional norms and social organization, including the veneration of saints and participation in religious rituals, which was an important part of their spiritual life. Second, the thesis of a "mixture of religious systems" according to the model of syncretism proposed by G. Obermeyer oversimplifies the process of Islam's adaptation in Kazakh society. In reality, Islam was adapted and transformed, but this transformation was neither chaotic nor devoid of system. It was a process of localization, in which Islamic practices and values were synthesized with existing social structures, maintaining their religious identity and norms.

The claim that Islam among the Kazakhs was merely an integrative and non-dominant religion and that its adaptation to the nomadic way of life was limited to syncretism oversimplifies the complexity of religious practice. Theories of S. Abashin, which emphasize the role of religion as an important element of social and political structure, show that Islam not only performed the function of identity formation but also served as the foundation of social organization and spiritual authority in Kazakh society (Abashin 2019: 146–165). Religious norms and rituals, despite their adaptation to the conditions of nomadic life, retained internal coherence and had a significant influence on social stability, which refutes the notion of superficiality in the religious practices of the Kazakh steppes. The claim that the lack of systematic Quranic study among the Kazakhs indicates the formality of Islam oversimplifies the perception of religious life in the context of both local practice and imperial policy. In fact, the limited study of the Quran and the role of mullahs with limited knowledge were largely the result of Russian imperial policies aimed at weakening Islam's influence and preventing its institutionalization. The Russian administration actively obstructed the creation of stable religious institutions (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 452., P. 88). The role of Islam in the social structure of the steppes persisted and developed despite the obstacles imposed by the colonial administration. Mullahs, playing an important role in transmitting religious practices, acted as mediators between Islam and local culture, and their limited knowledge can be explained not only by local traditions but also by the political situation, in which education and religious practice were under strict Russian control. Religious rites could adapt to the nomadic lifestyle, but Islamic norms continued to influence public life, confirming the significance of Islam as an element of spiritual identity, despite the intervention of the colonial administration.

Despite the judgments of pre-revolutionary ethnographers such as G. Spassky and A. Kharuzin, the perception of Islam among the Kazakhs was not reduced to formal ethnic identity. Such statements, for example, the opinion about the "vague understanding of Sharia" (Spassky, 1823: 109) or the view of "Islamic symbols as mere shells" (Kharuzin, 1888: 154), reflect an external observation devoid of access to the internal structures of steppe religiosity. In reality, Islam among the Kazakhs retained ritual and symbolic richness and adapted to cultural specificities through the mediation of *khojas and aulie*. Their authority ensured not the formalization but the flexible integration of Islamic concepts into a complex system of sacred practices rooted in steppe life. Regarding the limited influence of Tatar and Bukhara centers, as claimed by E. Shmurlow (Shmurlow, 1899: 213), it is important to understand that the difficulties faced by visiting mentors do not indicate the isolation of steppe Islam, but rather confirm the strength of local forms of religious knowledge. The nomadic society developed its own channels for the transmission of spiritual meaning: through oral tradition, saint veneration, and the charismatic leadership of local sheikhs. This did not negate Islamic content but rather facilitated its reinterpretation within the conditions of space and mobility.

Discussions about shamanistic survivals in the religious configuration of the 19th and early 20th centuries underestimate the transformative power of Islam itself. The integration of Islamic norms was not a superficial adaptation but proceeded through internal mechanisms of sacralization of space and time. Phenomena such as mazars, the cult of aulie, and the dynasties of khojas demonstrate not a simplification of belief, but its complex multilayered embodiment. These forms of religiosity cannot be reduced to relics; they were part of a conscious theological and practical synthesis rooted in the community and served as a counterbalance to colonial unification. The studies of A. T. Toleubayev (Toleubayev, 1972: 82-87) undoubtedly provide important insights into the role of traditional elements in the structure of religious culture. However, it is mistaken to perceive them as evidence of an underdeveloped Islamic discourse. On the contrary, the systematic inclusion of elements of local ritual in Islamic practice was not the result of passive reception but an active act of religious interpretation under colonial pressure. Russian administrative policy and judicial reforms of the second half of the 19th century demanded that the Kazakhs redefine the legitimacy of power, law, and sacred authority. It was precisely under these conditions that khojas, aulie, and sacred spaces became key structures ensuring cultural and spiritual resilience. These were not "residues" but evidence of the capacity of the Islamic tradition in the steppe for critical reproduction and resistance through synthesis.

Research results

In scholarly literature, it has been repeatedly emphasized that Islam in the Kazakh steppes emerged as a unique phenomenon that developed under conditions of acculturation and transformation shaped by specific historical and social factors. It is particularly important that the development of Islam occurred in the context of increasing colonial pressure from the Russian Empire, which sought institutional and ideological isolation of the Kazakhs from the influence of Muslim centers, primarily Tatar, Bukharan, and Fergana. As DeWeese notes, the phenomenon of *"popular Islam"* in the region represents a complex interweaving of Sharia norms and local beliefs, which was largely a consequence of the political fragmentation of Muslim institutions under imperial policy (DeWeese, 1994: 45). The imperial administration actively obstructed the establishment of strong ties between the Kazakhs and Muslim intellectual centers of the Volga region and Central

Asia. This was expressed in the restriction of the activities of Muslim courts, control over madrasas, and the suppression of Muslim religious figures, especially those of Tatar and Bukharan origin.

Of particular significance in this context is the concept of "steppe Islam" a religious tradition adapted to the conditions of nomadic life. As Olcott points out, "Kazakh nomadic Islam preserved elements of shamanistic practices that preceded Islam and were organically woven into Islamic rites" (Olcott, 1987: 129). Such assessments, however, often stem from a colonial notion of the "backwardness" of the steppe population and served as an argument for intervention in the religious sphere. The imperial authorities sought to portray Islam among the Kazakhs as superficial and "distorted" in order to justify their own policy of restricting Muslim institutions and promoting the Orthodox mission. As A.J. Frank demonstrates, Islam under colonial control functioned as a means of social mobilization and cultural defense, especially in the context of growing pressure from the colonial administration (Frank, 2001: 78–80).

Archival materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan indicate a religious revival triggered by the resettlement of Uyghur and Dungan communities in Semirechye at the end of the nineteenth century. These groups, possessing a developed agrarian culture and a strong Islamic tradition, reinforced the region's Islamic infrastructure and became an important factor in the religious consolidation of local Kazakhs (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3216., P. 21). The migration was distinctly religious and ethnoconfessional in nature: the Uyghurs' and Dungans' desire to preserve their Muslim identity under pressure from Chinese authorities was the reason they applied for Russian citizenship (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3298, P. 3). These processes were accompanied by institutional changes an increase in the number of mosques, madrasas, and mektebs. According to the 1912 census, Semirechye Province had 288 functioning mosques, 175 imams, and 84 mektebs (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1284, Pp. 5–6).

Despite formal "tolerance" the imperial administration in practice aimed at ethnic fragmentation and institutional control of Islamic life. Archival documents record that mosques in Almaty were divided along ethnic lines: Uyghur, Tatar, Dungan (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3276, P. 34). Such division was encouraged by the authorities in order to weaken the religious and cultural unity of the Muslim population. Particular suspicion was directed at the influence of the Tatars, whom imperial officials regarded as carriers of "*Pan-Islamic*" and "*Pan-Turkist*" ideas. Despite this, the Turco-Tatar enlightenment tradition played a significant role in spreading Islamic education among the Kazakhs. Archival data confirm that Kazakh youth studied in madrasas in Ufa and Kazan (CSA RK. F. 92, Inv. 1, C.1524, Pp. 14–15). In 1917, the newspaper *Kazakh* reported that over ten years, 154 members of the Kazakh population had received education at the *Galiya* madrasa (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1472, Pp. 2–4).

Colonial policy also manifested itself in the encouragement of Kazakh conversion to Orthodoxy. Archival sources record instances of baptism, often driven by pragmatic considerations: new converts were granted tax and land benefits (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3221, Pp. 17–19). However, the superficial nature of these conversions often led to mass renunciations. A 1907 resolution of the Turkestan episcopate stated that a significant number of baptized Kazakhs had used Orthodoxy as a means of obtaining privileges (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1483, P. 48). There were also recorded cases of Russians converting to Islam, explained by both socio-economic and personal factors. One example is the story of the priest Gornov, who embraced Islam and received support from the Muslim community to engage in trade (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1495, Pp. 19–21).

Islam in nineteenth-century Kazakhstan existed as a fully developed religious system with a sophisticated theological, legal, and educational tradition, functioning under colonial pressure. Despite the imperial administration's attempts to portray Kazakh religious practices as "distorted" or "incomplete" archival sources record the deep-rooted nature of Muslim norms in social life. Thus, the *Proceedings of the Orenburg Scholarly Archival Commission* noted that while local elements persisted in rites and customs, Islam played a leading role in shaping moral norms and social hierarchy (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3218, P. 12). These features were interpreted by Russian officials as arguments for the necessity of a "civilizing mission" but in fact reflected the resilience of the religious tradition.

A pre-revolutionary article titled *The Kirghiz* claimed that Kazakh religion was a mixture of Muslim rituals and local beliefs: "the religion of Muhammad is mixed with various pagan rites" (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1472, P. 23). Such judgments formed the basis for policies of intervention and control over spiritual life. Ethnographer S. Chicherin also noted that a significant part of the population formally professed Islam while continuing to follow traditional beliefs (CSA RK. F. 92, Inv. 1, C. 1524, P. 34). A. Levshin documented the resilience of religious ideas that included belief in good and evil forces, ancestor cults, and ritual practices rooted in local culture (CSA RK. F. 64, Inv. 1, C. 3015, P. 78).

Publications in the *Tobolsk Diocesan Gazette* also emphasized the preservation of certain beliefs and rituals that did not coincide with the orthodox interpretation of Islam (CSA RK. F. 26, Inv. 1, C. 1284, P. 54). However, these practices did not signify a rejection of Islam but rather reflected a strong religious identity formed under conditions of a nomadic lifestyle and imperial control.

Conclusion

The religious transformation in Kazakh society during the 19th and early 20th centuries, occurring in the context of imperial modernization, is a multifaceted and complex process that includes the adaptation of Islamic institutions to changing political and social conditions, as well as the preservation of deeply rooted traditional elements in the spiritual life of the Kazakhs. The Russian Empire, seeking to strengthen its control over Central Asia, actively intervened in the religious sphere, implementing reforms aimed at institutionalizing Islam, creating controlled centers of religious authority, and subordinating the Muslim clergy to the state system. However, despite these efforts, the religious life of the Kazakhs continued to develop along traditional lines, maintaining interaction with pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, which indicates that Islam in the Kazakh steppes was not merely an object of regulation but also a factor of active cultural and social adaptation.

The confrontation between state power and Islam was not reduced merely to the restriction of religious practices. Despite the efforts of the Russian administration, Islamic traditions continued to be preserved in the daily life of the Kazakhs through Sufi brotherhoods, the cult of saints (auliye), the system of religious education, and sacred practices. These institutions remained independent of official structures and served as an important element of resistance to colonial control, allowing Kazakh society to preserve its religious and cultural identity. Sufi teachings and the authority of local spiritual leaders «qoja», «auliye» continued to exert a significant influence on religious practice and collective consciousness, creating space for spiritual resistance to external influences.

An equally important aspect of this process is the interaction of traditional Islam with local culture and religious practices. Since Kazakh society remained nomadic, Islam, like other religious systems, had to adapt to the specifics of life based on mobility and social ties within tribal structures. In this context, Islamic norms were not perceived as dogmatic and absolute, but rather as elements integrating into existing cultural and religious traditions. This interaction was particularly evident in the context of sacred sites and rituals, which combined Islamic elements with pre-Islamic beliefs, creating a unique form of religiosity adapted to the conditions of the Kazakh steppes.

The systematic intervention of the Russian Empire in the religious life of the Kazakhs, including attempts to control pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, strict regulation of Muslim institutions, and restrictions on the activities of local spiritual leaders, failed to completely suppress local religious traditions. On the contrary, such restrictions became catalysts for the emergence of new forms of religious practice aimed at preserving identity. Jadidism, which became an important religious and educational movement, played a key role in shaping a new intellectual and spiritual wave, within which Islamic ideas adapted to new social and political conditions. This movement spread the idea of reforms in the field of education and religious practice, as well as contributing to the formation of a new cultural and religious self-awareness among Turkic-Muslim peoples, including the Kazakhs.

Thus, religious transformation in Kazakh society under the conditions of imperial modernization represents not just a process of submission to external pressure, but also active cultural resistance, manifested in the preservation of local religious traditions and the adaptation of Islam to

local conditions. Despite the intervention of the Russian Empire, Islam in the Kazakh steppes continued to play an important role in the social and cultural life of society, acting as a link between different ethnic and confessional groups, as well as a tool for cultural mobilization and spiritual resistance. The religious identity of the Kazakhs during this period was shaped under the dual pressure: on the one hand, from imperial power, and on the other hand, in the context of interaction with broader Muslim and cultural traditions, which led to the emergence of unique forms of Islamic practice that maintained a connection with the indigenous culture and traditions of the steppe society.

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