

Traditional Kazakh Culture and Islam

Prof. Dr. Saniya Edelbay
Department of Philosophy
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Almaty, Kazakhstan

Currently, intertwining of cultural processes can be evidenced. Along with globalization influence and penetration of the western culture, traditions of celebrating folk holidays are reappearing. Kazakh traditions also tend to become common. All other peoples living in Kazakhstan celebrate Nauryz and take part in Kazakh ceremonies. Traditions and modernity are closely intertwined in the contemporary culture of Kazakhstan, interaction of traditional culture and Islam is observed, as well.

In contemporary Kazakhstan Islam is an important factor in shaping cultural self-identification and spiritual identity. Being one of the forms of ethnic identity, Islam participates in ethnic consolidation. Islam is the most widely-spread religion among the Kazakh population. Muslims of 24 nationalities constitute 70% of the population of Kazakhstan (11 million people).

At the moment, one can witness the increase in growth of the process of Islamisation and rapid increase of religious feeling in the population of Kazakhstan. One can also notice the expansion in the field of activities of Islam and the complication of the religious factor within the Islamic structures.

We mostly talk about the considerable change in the status of the Muslim community (Ummah) of Kazakhstan. The differences in the varieties of the Kazakhs' perceptions of Islam – in other words the questioning of whether Kazakhstan should adopt a more “traditional” or “non-conventional” type of Islam – carries the threat of intra-ethnic divisions and oppositions. This difference in perception accounts for the increase in conflictual situations within the community between the urban (rejecting traditions) and the rural (orthodox) Muslims.

The question of Kazakh religious identity is a cause for fierce debates. The range of opinions on this issue is extremely broad. Whether the Kazakhs are Muslims or whether it is the ancestral rituals of Tengrianism with elements of Shamanism which are inherent to them, are also questions that are present in the daily lives of the Kazakhs.

The current complexity of the religious situation is characterized not only by the problematic of the growing religiosity of the population or the conflicts between traditional Islam and the fundamental radical trends. The crucial question concerns the growing contradiction between traditional practices of the Kazakh people and the current process of Islamisation or between the general canons of Islam and particular Kazakh traditions. Indeed, the religious situation on the territory of modern Kazakhstan has, at all times, distinguished itself by its complexity. In the first centuries of our era, the most widespread religions were Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, as well as various Christian trends.

Starting in the southern regions, the dissemination of Islam in the territories of modern Kazakhstan dates back to the seventh century and continued for several centuries. Islam did not spread as quickly amongst the nomads as it did amongst the sedentary populations of the Turkic nations.

Tengrianist (Tengri - a sky cult) Shamanism was the traditional religion of the nomadic Turkomen. There also existed worships of the spirit of the earth (Zher-ana) and the spirit of water (Sou-ana), as well as cults of fire and cattle. Islam coexisted well with local religions and continued to spread through the next centuries. We can speak about syncretism of Islamic elements and local pagan religions.

A special role in propagation of Islam among Turkis-nomads was played by the Sufi clergy. The founder of the Sufi order – Khoja Akhmet Yassawy (1103-1166/67) is considered by the Turkis Muslims to be the second sacred leader after Prophet Mohammed, and the city of Turkestan in the south of Kazakhstan where he preached – minor Mecca.

His well known work "Hikmet" ("Knowledge") written in Turkic (Chagatai) language belongs to the common spiritual inheritance of all Turkic nations. The spiritual development of Muslims of the Central Asia that followed was closely connected with the traditions of Sufism.

Islam was well-rooted among the Kazakh nobles – khans and sultans. Common people either continued to profess ancient pre-Islamic beliefs and officiate ancient ceremonies, or took to syncretism of Islamic elements and pre-Islamic traditions.

In the evidence of observers, travelers, scientists, and officials who depicted the everyday life of the Kazakhs, one can find records showing that they were not very religious.

Compared to the sedentary population of Central Asia, for example the Uzbeks, Kazakhs were not as religious throughout their history. In his book "The Description of the Kirghiz-kajsach or the Kirghiz-kajsac hords and steppes" Russian researcher Levshin writes that when questioned about their confession the Kazakhs answer: "I don't know". This gives the author the opportunity to state that "it is difficult to decide what the Kirghiz (*the former name for Kazakhs –E.S.*) are – Mohammedans, maniheyans, or pagans." He writes that Islam for the Kazakhs is intertwined with ancient pagan cults. They do not pray, do not exercise Muslim ceremonies (fasting) and "Islamism" persists only thanks to Central Asian and Tatar mullahs /1/. Kazakh ethnographer of the nineteenth century, Chokan Valihanov, wrote: "Muslimism has not yet become our second nature. It threatens to separate people in the future" /2/.

Climate and geographical conditions (immensity of the territory) created objective difficulties for the expansion of Islam. The specificity of everyday life of the Kazakhs (life in yurts, seasonal migrations) also made it difficult to celebrate religious ceremonies (for example, namaz and other Islamic norms).

Though nomadic life made it difficult for Islam to prosper among the Kazakhs, little by little Islam, with its monotheism and simple ceremonies, substituted polytheistic religions. In the course of Islamisation many customs and traditional Kazakh religious perceptions (worship of the spirits of the ancestors and holy sites) took new Islamic forms.

Moderate Islam of Sunni orientation of Hanafi Mazhab (Muslim school of law) currently prevails in Kazakhstan. Compared to other four schools of Islam it has moderate views, tolerance for dissentients and a rather uncomplicated religious service. A moderate unorthodox trend of Islam – Sufism – is widely spread in the south of Kazakhstan, where it adapted to the nomadic life of local Turkic population.

Islam did not play any important role in the political life of the Kazakh society before the Revolution; it had the form of moderate "household" Islam. During the Soviet period, the religious situation is characterized by a weakening of the position of Islam as a result of the policy of state atheism.

After the break-up of the USSR the situation in Kazakhstan from the religious point of view is exemplified not only by the revival of the religions traditions for Kazakhstan, namely Islam and Christianity, but by the appearance of other numerous religious trends. The first years of independence were marked by the large scale construction of mosques and orthodox churches. Quran was published in Kazakh and Russian translations, the Bible (Injil) became available in Kazakh language. Special shops selling religious literature and calendars opened. Religious periodicals were published. Since 1997 the monthly "Islam Elemi" ("Islam World") and the newspaper "Nur Shapagat" were published.

According to the official figures 70% of the population are Muslims. Religious fervor of the population of Kazakhstan is exaggerated. According to sociologists, some part of the people living in Kazakhstan is indifferent to religion, especially in the cities and in the northern part of the country. The powerful atheist policy of the USSR pursued in the twentieth century was decisive in the fact that today there are atheists and hesitant people.

The process of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan was followed by the process of revitalization of Islam. Growing number of Mosques, Madrasah, Muslim schools and Islamic institutions of higher education, Islamic publications, well educated ministers of religion come as evidence of reactivation of religious life. Now there are 2.5 thousand Mosques in Kazakhstan (compared to 63 during the Soviet period). More and more young and middle-aged people turn to religion. Arab countries invest considerable amounts of money in the Islamic education of the young. Most of religious schools and institutions were also built with the money invested from abroad.

More and more believers go on a Hajj to Mecca. The number of Pilgrims visiting local holy places is growing. Several visits are considered equal to Hajj. The interest in the Quran is growing. As many believers did not study and can't read Arabic, they phonetically transcribed the Quran in Kazakh and learned the texts aurally. This helps the believers to learn the prayers necessary for the Namaz.

The position of Islam in family matters also grows stronger. Celebrations of Islamic traditions become an integral part of everyday life of the Kazakhs. Most Kazakhs consider themselves Muslims and celebrate at least some part of the rites and rituals. That concerns the Friday Namaz in the Mosque, religious holidays (Oraza, Qurban ait), the ritual of circumcision (Sunnat/Sundet), the obituary-obsequies rituals and marriage rituals. Growing importance of the religious holidays is stressed by the fact that children born on those days get names like Aisha, Islam, Ramasan, Medina, Oras.

There is a real Islamisation boom in the society of the country. Besides the traditional Islam there are widely spreading Islamic trends that are not characteristic of the Kazakh practices. Especially in big cities, the number of followers of Islam with specific appearance (bearded, in short trousers), type of behavior and world-view, has grown. Young people having no serious religious education fall under influence of extremist movements and join them.

Moderate Islam of Sunni trend, characterized by tolerance for those of different beliefs, was most broadly present in Kazakhstan. There are different Islamic centers and organizations, sects and trends, religious extremist groups that appear over the country. In Kazakhstan, however, activity of political organizations on a religious basis is legally forbidden. Activity of 15 radical religious organizations is officially forbidden on the territory of Kazakhstan.

A new concept of Kazakh moderate Islam is suggested as a possible solution in the struggle with the radical movements. It is currently in the stage of development.

There exists a variety of approaches to the understanding of Islam in Kazakhstan, as well as ethnic and Islamic understanding. There are different concepts of "the Kazakh Islam": a popular Islam at the level of ceremonies and everyday life, a synthesis of Islam and elements of pre-Islam beliefs and cults, and a Sufi doctrine of Khoja Akhmet Yassawy. There also exists a variant of mild religiosity of Kazakhs. Traditionally Kazakhs belong to the religious trend of Muslim-Sunni influenced by ideas of Sufism. There is an opinion, mostly among intellectuals, that the original religion of Kazakhs is Tengrianism (a sky cult), and efforts should be taken for its revival.

The specificity of Islam in Kazakhstan is determined by its intertwining with national traditions, devotion of Kazakhs to customs and traditions. Islam of Hanafiyah trend prevailing in Kazakhstan was close to the spiritual specificity of Kazakhs. Kazakhs did not belong to orthodox Muslims. Many Kazakhs celebrate rites and ceremonies never thinking about their inherent meanings. For instance, in nineteen nineties it was popular among the young people to carry amulets ("tumar"). Amulets ("Tumar") usually were triangle-shaped. The Kazakhs use a triangle form for protection from devilry and evil spirit, that is why triangle-shaped amulets ("Tumar") are more common. They were made of cloth with a surah of the Quran written on paper. Amulets were blessed by mullahs in mosques. And they were thought to belong to Islamic tradition. Today religiously educated people do not carry amulets as they do not correspond to the Islamic canons.

In other words, religious traditions tightly interlaced with national customs. In this way appeared a synthesis of Islam with ancient Turkic beliefs. Islam in Kazakhstan, together with the main canons of Islam, imbedded national traditions of ancestors. One of the aspects of the solution of the Kazakh Islamic problem is revival of the Kazakh Islamic tradition, taking into account the main religious and cultural concepts of the Kazakh people. Kazakh national traditions are closely connected with religious ones. Islam penetrated the elements of Kazakh nomadic tradition.

The challenge today is to find the optimum balance between traditions and accruing Islamisation process, to settle the difference between the canons of Islam and nomadic traditions. Growing contradiction between Kazakh traditions and people's Islamisation process becomes obvious when the matter concerns the hijab. The question whether women should wear the hijab or not is one of the sensitive issues under discussion in the contemporary Kazakhstan society. At the meeting with intellectuals in the city of Turkestan, the President of Kazakhstan expressed his opinion regarding the wearing of the hijab. He criticized the youth that started to wear the hijab in schools.

In reality, at the Kazakh National University of Almaty where I teach, the number of students wearing the hijab increases. Even at such faculties as philosophy and political science, international relations, and economy, students in Muslim headdresses appeared. Specialists suggest that the young people, especially young women, strive to study and to practice Islam.

There is no straight answer about whether one should be wearing the hijab or not. Some people think that to forbid it will imply the violation of believers' rights. Others are sure that religion should be first of all in the soul of the person. The opinion that it is a fashion opposes the idea that a young woman in a hijab symbolizes cleanliness and purity. The legislation of Kazakhstan does not forbid the wearing of the hijab in educational institutions. According to the Constitution and the law "About freedom of confession and religious associations", the state education system is separated from religious associations and has a secular character /3/.

Ministry of education has recently prepared a special bill forbidding religious clothing and namaz at schools and universities. It has not been passed yet, but has already caused public protest among Muslims of the country. In France a law has come into force forbidding the women to wear clothing that completely covers their faces.

The hijab is a matter of identity as well. In the Western countries, in Germany in particular, people are concerned by the fact of poor spiritual integration of Muslims /4/.

Every nation has its inherent culture, traditions and national costumes. The hijab and the full Islamic veil are women's religious garments in many Muslim countries and of the Middle East in particular. They are most appropriate for life in deserted, hot, sandy climate. The hijab is the Muslim woman's attire consisting of a head scarf and a spacious dress, hiding the figure. The Niqab is a Muslim woman's headdress that covers the face leaving eyes visible. The Burqa consists of a dressing gown with long false sleeves and a hair grid, that covers the face. Lately, in our country, women turned to the hijab, giving up the Burqa.

The hijab is not typical for Kazakh clothes and Kazakh women did not wear it. Even in the Kazakh lexicon there was no word hijab. Earlier, there was no purdah with the Kazakhs, and the women did not cover their faces with a veil. Traditional type of the Kazakh women's costume was shaped according to culture and traditions of their ancestors. There was a number of different sorts of headwear for women in the Kazakh history. When married, a young woman wore a "kimeshek". It was a type of national hijab. They also carried headwear saukele – a national hat.

The hijab belongs to Arab culture. It was brought to Kazakhstan from the Arab countries. But it is impossible to forbid Muslim women to wear clothes, which correspond to Islamic canons only because they bear traces of the Arab culture. A possible solution to this problem must be found without conflict. One of the possible variants is to create clothes that will correspond to Muslim principals and ideals of modesty and national culture. At the same time Muslim clothes of Kazakh cultural style could reflect individuality of the Kazakh Muslim women and this would express their personalities and encourage self-realization.

In order to maintain national traditions and customs of the Kazakh people it is necessary to develop Kazakh culture not only in the field of national costumes and clothes, but in its other elements as well.

Traditions of "popular" Islam maintained alive the ancient Kazakh animistic belief in souls and spirits. The Kazakhs venerated the spirit of earth (Zher-ana), the spirit of water (Su-ana), and the spirit of fire. The cult of fire – guardian of dwellings and fireplaces – coexisted well with Islam. Until now there exists the ancient name of fire – "alas" – which stands for the light of the night, the sacred fire, as well as the ancient rite of purification by fire (alastau). This belief celebrates the purifying strength of fire. This rite was celebrated when migrating from wintering grounds to jaylau. There existed a belief that jaylau is clean and pure, and one should come there having also been purified. For that two big fires were made and people and cattle walked in between them. Horses, however, were considered as pure animals and did not require any purification.

According to ancient beliefs one should not extinguish fire by water, should never step on the fire place, nor step over it. According to a Kazakh tradition it is said that a bride, coming into a new family, should bow to the fire of the house, and bring a sacrifice to it by pouring a spoonful of oil into its flames (otka mai kuiu).

One of the most important contemporary religious traditions is the belief in the spirits of the ancestors (aruahs). The cult of the ancestors is the most important ancient belief of the Turkic peoples and does not belong to Islam. Kazakhs still worship the aruahs and rely on their protection.

One can see the following picture in Kazakhstan Mosques: upon the request of believers mullahs meekly pray in honor of their ancestors. The Muslims give the mullah the names of the deceased ancestors, written on a piece of paper. After the general prayer the mullah reads all the names and prays for them to Allah. From the point of view of Islam this does not belong to the Muslim canons and has no sense in a Muslim context. It is one of the examples of superposition of Islamic traditions with the ancient cult of the ancestors.

Belief in the spirits of ancestors (aruahs) is well seen in the ritual "jeti shelpek". The ancient heathen custom "jeti shelpek" (seven remembrance scones) is preserved by all Kazakhs. This rite constitutes the appeal to the memory of the deceased ancestors. Another name for this rite is "Iis shygaru" ("effuse smell"). According to the ancient Turkic belief spirits live on smells. In the case of this ritual, the spirits feed themselves on the smell of scones and oil. It is better to give the remembrance scones away. It is considered that if people are presented with remembrance scones, the blessing for the souls of the dead is realized. One should eat the scones saying: "Tie bersin" ("Let it reach"). This ancient ceremony is deeply symbolic. Round scones stand for the nomadic symbols of the round Sun and Sky.

And today it is a sacred custom for each Kazakh woman to commemorate with positive feelings the most dear of the deceased. Once, being in training in Germany, I baked the "jeti shelpek" according to the Kazakh custom in the memory of my mother and gave them, as tradition requires, to the neighbors. From Arab students I learned that it was not a Muslim tradition. However, the ancient Kazakh and the Muslim traditions were intertwined in this custom. For example, it is necessary to prepare the remembrance scones after being purified according to the Muslim ritual and with pure thoughts. Then it is necessary to say "Bismillah" – "For the sake of Allah" and mentally ask forgiveness from Allah for the remembered souls. Seven round scones symbolize seven heavens in the Quran. Moreover, the prayer with the request for blessings of Allah for the remembered is read. On days of Muslim holidays during the Friday Muhammad prayer one can see a considerable quantity of "jeti shelpek" piled behind the mullah. Muslims bring them to have them sanctified by a prayer and to then give them to the poor. Observance of this ancient preserved tradition is equivalent for Kazakhs to a prayer for the late relatives. The custom «seven flatcakes» intertwines with Muslim traditions.

The belief of the aruahs has also been reconsidered in Muslim spirit. It is expressed not only in the prayers read in memory of the ancestors but also in the mazars, erected in Muslim-style, on the tombs of the ancestors.

The attempt to create a new concept of the Kazakh Islam is an aspiration to weave together Islam, elements of pre-Islamic points of views and cults, and the institutes of the saints. C. Velihanov considered that Islam in Kazakhstan closely intertwines with numerous vestiges of pre-Muslim beliefs. Interaction of the pre-Islamic Kazakh traditions and Islam is most vivid in the cult of Muslim saints. Kazakhs had many objects of worship: different springs, mountains, mountain tops, trees, etc. **A mountain** is an object of worship in Tengriism. It is a spiritual object of nature. Various religious and ritual ceremonies took place on a mountain or by its root. The holy places connected with honoring of mountains are numerous on the territory of Kazakhstan. Those are Ungurtas, Zhilagan-ata ("The Crying aged man"), for example. An ancient cult of mountains named Aidarly, Ajdahar-ata, Ajman-Shoplan, Kazy-Kurt, still attracts hundreds of pilgrims today.

The pre-Islamic Kazakh cults have found new life in the Islamic sacred cult. Honoring of sacred Kazy-Kurt is connected with a legend about Noah's Ark (Nukhepaigambara) found on this mountain. Worshiping of this mountain is one of the examples of interlacing between the Kazakh ancient cults and the Muslim ideas.

The sacred "Aulie bastau" (Sacred spring) is very well known in Southern Kazakhstan. The key to understanding of Kazakh relationship with this place is located in the ancient animistic perceptions.

A tree in Tengriism is a living object representing a symbol of life and vital force. It also gives power and "protects" from "evil"; for this reason it was forbidden to cut down trees and bushes grown in the places of burials. It was considered that ghosts and divinities of these territories dwelled there. Travelers make a stop here, even for an overnight. It is a sacred ritual to touch such a tree and fasten colored and white ribbons to it.

Mythologically, a tree symbolizes the centre of the Universe. According to the cosmogonical concept, a tree penetrates the "Upperworld", the "Middleworld" and the "Underworld", and connects supernatural and natural phenomena. In a traditional world view a tree is a structural beginning. The whole space-time continuum is organized by the image of a tree.

A family tree is also used in a genealogical scheme (“*Shezhire*”) of Kazakhstan families. It is represented in the contemporary art, as well. An old national instrument – “*Kyl Kobys*” - was made of entire lump of wood.

The tree that has grown at a burial place was considered sacred and testified to the fact that the deceased was sacred himself. The sacred tree was treated in a particular way by Kazakhs. They tied multi-colored strips of fabric (*alam*) to its branches. This was connected to the archaic idea of the tree of life. Now, however, with dispersion of Islam, the praying Kazakhs address Allah as they tie the strips of cloth to the tree, and ask him to fulfill their wishes or to cure them.

A considerable group of local saints consists of warriors (*batyrs*). For the traditional Kazakh culture the unique case of the coexistence of myths and ritual is typical. Amongst the initiation rituals in the Kazakh culture, the ritual “*Schylan kays*” has an essential meaning (“the snake skin»). This ritual shows the indispensable element of the ancient military democracy of the Kazakh people and represents the cosmogonic myths.

The Kazakh epics, as the myths about the creation of the world, have a ritual-magic function.

The Kazakh cult of saints was brought to life under the influence of archaic ideas, connected with pre-Islamic cults. The traditions of respect and worship of the founders of the Kazakh tribes and family-lines provides a basis for the cult of saints. Most respected in Kazakhstan are the mausoleums of Khoja Akhmet Yassawy in Turkestan and of Yassawy's spiritual teacher, saint Aristan-bab, not far from the ancient settlement Otrar.

Many burial and cult places exist in Southern Kazakhstan. For example it is the mausoleum of the founders of the three Kazakh tribes – Domalak-ana and Baidabek-ata. The biggest mazar in the West Kazakhstan region is the one of the saint “*Beket-ata*”.

A special place among Kazakh saints is taken by the saints who are patrons of trades and professions. The well known Kazakh shaman Korkut – patron of the musicians and singers. Patron of agriculture is Dikan-baba, of sheep breeding is Koshkar-ata. There were also patrons of horses Kambar-ata and Jilkishi-ata, of sheep – Shopan-ata, of camels – Oisil-kara, of cattle – Zengi-baba /5/.

Other cults that existed in pre-Islamic time with Kazakhs also got revitalized in the Islamic cult of saints. Having included elements of the local traditions, the cult of saints expresses by its main ideas the spirit of Islam and helps its consolidation. Convergence of Pre-Islamic traditions and Islam creates a syncretic religion that has existed for centuries in the life of the Kazakh society.

The variety of relics worshipped by Kazakhs is still of great value today. Worship of holy sites to which Kazakhs-nomads made sacrifice is revived. Pilgrimage of Kazakhs to the holy sites of worship that have the status of being sacred places has revived in Kazakhstan.

One of the legendary places in the Southern Kazakhstan is Kazigurt. According to the ancient legends, during the great flood, Noah's Arc (*Nukhepaigambara*) stopped on the hill of Ak-Zhudi in Arabia, on the mountain Ararat in the Caucasus, Sinai in Palestine, and the hill of Kazygurt in Kazakhstan. People believe in the sanctity of this mountain and name it “the Kerne Kalgan” (Place of Noah's Ark). The mountain has its particularity – “the local arc” has the same dimensions as described in the holy scripts.

This place is also known for its unusual properties. According to legends the holy Akber-Ata who had prophetic visions, healed people there with herbs. The sacred rock Ata-ana situated there symbolizes Adam and Eve. Two stones 33 meter high are divided by a very narrow passage. According to the beliefs only a righteous person can pass there. Here bones of a dinosaur were found, now kept at the State Museum of History of Kazakhstan. Energy aura of the national park Kazigurt, its healing waters and caves, stone animals, described in holy texts attract numerous pilgrims today.

It is interesting that this site, as many others, becomes a place of pilgrimage not only for the Muslims but for Christians as well. We consider it to be an example of multi-religious cult. Together, members of different religions go on pilgrimage to the holy sites, such as the holy nature sites (Kazigurt, Monahovo ushele (Monks ravine) to celebrate rituals. Ritual practices of different religions consist of the same ritual actions – adoration, purification and enlightenment. For Kazakhs holy adoration places are the burial places of their ancestors. It was considered that such places are protected by God against bad fortune. Caravans in heath stayed for the night near such places. People swore to the loyalty and truth of what they said near the graves.

A prayer said near a grave is a very important Kazakh ritual. Here one can also trace the intertwinement of ancient and Islamic rituals. Kazakhs also rely upon the protection of Muslim saints (*aulije*). Graves of saint Sufi now become objects of mass pilgrimage. "The way of the life" is a pilgrim's journey to the sanctuaries (or the graves of the saints). The mausoleum Kozha Achmeds Jassau in Turkestan and the Arystan-Baba in Otyrar is reputed worldwide as the "second Mecca".

The mausoleum of a religious mystic, who lived in the twelfth century – Aristan-baba, is a memorial of twelfth to twentieth centuries. This man was a preacher of Islam, a teacher and a spiritual leader of K.A. Yassawy. According to a legend, before his death, Muhammad gave an amanat – the prayer beads to the Sufi Aristan-baba. The latter gave them to an eleven-year-old boy who became very well known later as Khoja Akhmet Yassawy.

The tombs of Aristan-baba and Akhmet Yassawy are combined to form one cycle of the pilgrimage (ziyarat). Pilgrims first visit the mausoleum of the teacher Aristan-baba and then the mausoleum of K.A. Yassawy. The importance of the mausoleum of Aristan-baba can be confirmed by a custom according to which the pilgrims had to stay for the night in Otrar near Aristan-baba. There were caravan-serai, a tea-house, an inn and a garden there. During religious holidays big religious festivities took place on the territory of Aristan-baba.

Turkestan became world-known thanks to the preaching activity of the Sufi Khoja Akhmet Yassawy. In the twelfth century the city was known under the name of Yassi. Already in the fourteenth century, by the order of Timur, a mausoleum was erected at the Sufi tomb to testify of his spiritual authority. Khoja Akhmet Yassawy's mausoleum - historical sight, is put into the List of the World Heritage of UNESCO. The mausoleum is the most famous Islamic center and is holy for Muslims. Three (sometimes, seven) visits (ziyarat) to the Yassawy mausoleum is equivalent to the big pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca. Around the Yassawy mausoleum in Turkestan, an entire complex that acts as a center of mass worship for pilgrims from the whole Central Asia has formed. In this complex, famous State figures, scientists and poets were buried. The pilgrims pray for "God's grace", ask for patronage and cures. Not only are the Islamic holy relics worshipped, but the famous Kazakh "aruahs" as well. This is one of the examples of traditions existing in Kazakh Islam.

Mazars (burial places of saints and once famous people) are especially popular with the pilgrims. Mazars were material "incarnations" of the cult of the ancestors. Kazakhs had an ancient tradition to make a tumulus of stones over a grave.

In Kazakhstan there are a lot of holy sites, there are many mausoleums. Most popular ones are the mazars of Aisha-bibi, Karashash-ana, mother of Akhmet Yassawy, as well as Guahar-ana, daughter of Aristan-baba, the mazars Bektau-ata and Ukasha-ata and the mausoleum "Beket-ata". There is "Bes Ata" - five grandfathers - in every area. In the Almatinski area there is the mausoleum Almerék-Baba, dedicated to the enlightened hero Batyr. Ayscha-Bibi is the symbol of love. Rayimbek-Ata fulfills woman's wish for children. Many wish for different reasons to visit these sites, and they think that this will heal body and soul.

Every year thousands of Kazakhs go on pilgrimage to mazars. They look for redemption from illnesses, unhappiness, hope for family prosperity, and happiness of motherhood. In the holy sites people ask for forgiveness and think of their wishes. They believe that wishes put forward with pure heart will really be fulfilled and that the soul thus be purified.

Pilgrimage to the tombs of the saints in order to bring offerings and to pray are made by the followers of Tengri and by the followers of traditional Islam as well. This multi-religious practice shows the convergence of the ancient Kazakh religions and Islam ("Synkretism"), or one can consider that the surface form of sky cult and nature cult ("archaism") was reformed by Islam. However, it is obvious that identical rituals of worship go well without any necessity of fundamentalist interpretation of religion.

The funeral ceremonies of Kazakhs were based both on ancient pre-Muslim customs and on Islamic instructions. Kazakhs held a belief in spirits of the dead and in the afterlife. According to an ancient custom, for about a year, in the house of a deceased person they fried scones ("jeti shelpek") and "effused smell" ("Iis shygaru"), so that the spirits of the dead could be fed. This ceremony took place every Thursday or Friday and prayers from the Holy Quran were read in the memory of the dead. That concerns the Islamic canons. According to the ancient customs the dead were mourned at length. As a sign of grief, women scratched their faces (bet-zhirtu). Daughters or sisters met people who came to present condolences with a mournful song (joktau).

Muslim funeral ceremony observes the obligatory "janaz" (a doleful prayer) reading, burial in posthumous "shrouds" of white cloth, taking care of the tomb and the orientation of the dead. On some over-tomb constructions (fencings, mausoleums) there is the Islamic symbol – the half-moon image.

Nowadays the funeral ceremony in all regions of Kazakhstan is made according to the Muslim rules, the ancient rites, however, did not lose their importance. The ritual of the collective meal like the sacrifices of the totem has been preserved with the Kazakhs like the collective meal (ac).

Nowadays, ceremonies and folk traditions are recovering. /+V8 The celebrations which are dedicated to the birth of the toddler (Schildekana) to embedding the child in the cradle (Besyk toy), to the fortieth day after the birth of the child (kyrkynan shygaru), exist beside the Islamic ritual of the curtailment of the boys at the age of three up to ten years (Sundet toy).

National customs and traditions are especially evident during children holidays and weddings. These are such holidays as Umbilical Cord Cutting ("*Kindik keser*"), Mother's Day ("*Suyindir*"), Baby Birth Holiday ("*Shildechana*"), Name's Day ("*At koju*"), Cradle Day ("*Besik Toy*"), Forty Days After The Birth ("*Kyrkydan shygaru*"), Child Purchase ("*Satyp alu*"), First Steps ("*Tusaukeser*"), Initiation Into A Horseman ("*Ashamajga mingisu*"), First Ride ("*Tokum kagu*"), Circumcision Holiday ("*Sundet Toy*"), Knowledge Day ("*Til aschar*"), 13th Birthday ("*Muscheli Zhas*"), and other ceremonies.

Such holidays as 40 Days After The Birth ("*Kyrkydan shygaru*") and First Steps, i.e. cutting off the manacles ("*Tusaukeser*"), are becoming more and more essential. "*Tusau kesu*" (or "*Tusaukeser*") is an old Kazakhs custom. Like many other ceremonies it is a pagan ritual. This tradition exists not only in the Kazakhs' culture, but in the traditions of the Kirghiz, the Khakassian, the Tuvian and other close peoples, as well. It is also called in the same way – "cutting off the manacles": "*Tusau kesu*" is used in the Kazakhs' culture, "*Tuschoo kyrktyruu*" – in the Kirghiz' culture, and "*Tuzhak keser*" – in the Altaian' one. According to this custom, they cut off a colored rope entwined around the legs of the baby who makes the first steps.

Pagans worshiped the supreme divinity Tengri (the Sky) and divided the world into three parts: underground, ground and heavenly. A person should visit all three worlds in the course of life. The first world to meet on the way is the underground. A child was believed to come to earth from the underground world. The connection between the child and the underground world is still very strong in the first year of life. The child cannot break this connection by itself. It needs help from outside, from a strong grown-up person. Since those times only a spiritually and physically strong person was trusted to cut off the manacles. It represented a kind of a break of the last strands connecting the child with the underground world. The child is making its first step into the ground world.

Natural attributes of the ceremony "*Tusau kesu*" have been preserved from the old times, as well. Manacles were made of green grass which represented growth and prosperity. Sometimes they used sheep intestines as a symbol of rich life. Nowadays black and white threads or a colored cord ("*Ala Zhip*") are used which means that life consists of black and white stripes, of both the good and the evil. Everyone should learn to overcome these difficulties. Each colour has its own destination: white color means nobility of the child, green - longevity, red - wealth. The colored thread ("*Ala Zhip*") means a wish – "*Ala Zhipti attama*", i.e. „Be honest”.

During the ceremony a lot of guests are invited. A white fabric stripe is spread on the floor or grass. It represents a light and long life path ("*Ak zhol*"). After this the child's legs are bound in a special way – in a "figure-of-eight". Manacles are bound three times and respectively cut off three times while repeating the best wishes during this ceremony.

Parents choose the person to cut off manacles ("*Tusau Kesuschi*") in advance. It should be an honoured and wise person who has achieved a lot in his life because, according to the belief, the child would take over his best features and the child's fate would resemble the fate of this person. Besides, the person should be deft and agile so as in this case the child would not stumble in its grown-up life.

The ceremony is accompanied with traditional songs "*Tusaukeser zhyry*". The child is supported when making its first steps on the fabric strip. At this moment traditional Kazakh "*Shaschu*" (candies, sweets, etc.) are thrown. After the ceremony the parents give a present to the person who has cut off the manacles. In the old times the child was given a horse and a saddle after the "*Tusau keser*".

Nowadays many people present a toy horse. It is believed that after this ritual the child stands sure on the ground, overcomes difficulties steadily and meets the good (that is why the cord is colored). In contrast to the traditional “*Tusau kesu*”, the Circumcision Holiday (“*Sundet Toy*”) is considered a religious one. The word “*Sundet*” (from Arabic “*sonat*”) means a ceremony of the obligatory Muslim ritual of boys’ circumcision. In Kazakh language this ceremony is called “*Sundettau*” or “*Sundetke otyrgysu*”. Circumcision is conducted when boys are about 5-7 years old (any odd-numbered year between 3 and 9). Kazakhs also consider the circumcision ceremony to be an important event in the family, parents’ obligation and a family holiday.

This is one of the celebrations still widely celebrated in all Kazakhstan regions (especially in the previous years). In the former times circumcision was performed by Mullahs, but nowadays this operation is mostly performed by surgeons in medical institutions. Traditionally they are rewarded for their services. The boy is psychologically prepared for this event in advance by explaining the importance of this ceremony.

In the Muslim tradition it is necessary to organize a great celebration (“*Sundet Toy*”) on the occasion of the circumcision, guests are invited, and the treat is prepared. By the scope of it this Toy equals to a wedding as this is the beginning of a new stage in a boy’s life for he has *already* become a young man (“*Djigit*”). That is why this Toy is called “arranging a marriage to the son”. In a few days after the circumcision, other boys awaiting for this ceremony and wearing long loose fathers’ shirts invite relatives and neighbours for a “*Sundet Toy*”, accompanied by grown-ups.

It is obligatory to invite a Mullah and read Qur’an, kill a sheep, and make a sacrifice. Previously this ceremony bore some elements of charity. In case a rich man organized a celebration dedicated to the circumcision of his son, it was obligatory to invite the poor along with the whole village.

Guests give a horse and many other presents to the hero of the day. This celebration requires parting words (*bata*) for health and prosperity of the child. Competitions between boys, songs, dances, congratulations to parents are taking place. It was believed that the more people were involved and the more wishes of “all the best” were pronounced, the more words would reach the sky.

The ceremony “*Sundettau*” does not mean just a fact of the Muslim initiation. First of all, it impacts boys ethically and psychologically. From this moment on they start to feel like real men who are expected to behave worthily.

Wedding ceremony is connected with a great amount of traditional ceremonies. Wedding ritualism of the Kazakhs is notable for a combination of traditional and religious forms. Nowadays reasons for marriage have changed. A marriage is entered into by mutual consent of the newlyweds. A wedding cycle is divided into several stages: matchmaking (*Kuda Tusju*), youth marriage, *Kudalyk*, and after-marriage ceremonies.

A burst of national consciousness of the Kazakhs that has occurred within the previous years developed into re-birth of the traditional rituals. Before the bride’s leaving the father’s house they began to sing a ritual song - parting words to a maiden, so-called “*Jar-Jar*”. The ceremony “*Bet ashar*” (literally meaning “to open a face”) has also been restored; this ceremony is conducted in the groom’s house. Toy takes place both in the groom’s and the bride’s houses. The treat consists of traditional dishes necessarily including ritual food and modern dishes with the table setting arranged in accordance with the generally accepted standards.

Islamic canon in the marriage system of the Kazakhs is represented only by the ceremony of the Muslim Marriage (“*Neke kiju*”). The “*Neke*” marriage did not go that deep in the Kazakhs’ marriage rite due to the late spread of Islam. “*Neke*” was conducted in the groom’s house either right after the arrival of the bride’s train or after the wedding celebrations were over. A Mullah drops coins into the cup (*Piala*) filled with water and says a special grace. Then he gives a drink to the bride and the groom and sends it round the guests. Seniors take coins out of the *Piala* and give them to their grandchildren. It is believed that the coins bring happiness.

After carrying out a modern wedding a traditional part of the wedding ceremony – “*Kudalyk*” - takes place. “*Kudalyk*” is conducted twice: on the bride’s and the groom’s parts. The quantity of guests and content of the Holiday Sack with presents (“*Korjyn*”) is strictly agreed upon. Several days before going to matchmaking (“*Kudalyk*”) the bride’s and the groom’s mothers invite women from the number of guests in order to discuss the ceremony and collect the presents for the opposite party into the “*Korjyn*”. This ceremony is called “*Kalta*”. Each woman should bring something to fill the *Korjyn*. The mistress treats them with meat and tea.

“*Kudalyk*” is different from a modern wedding due to the careful observation of the traditional ceremony: “*Kuyryk Baur asatu*”, “*Saukele*”, “*Korimdik*”, “*Kalta*”, “*Kit*”, invitation of matchmakers for an obligatory tasting of a sheep liver (“*Kuyryk Baur*”) by relatives and friends of the masters.

Without considering traditional ritualism in the wedding cycle in detail, we will just mention that it is organically intertwined with new phenomena of the generally accepted wedding ritualism.

Thus, the ceremonial of the Kazakhs’ modern wedding is built on the basis of traditional wedding ceremony and contains all its joint moments. At the same time traditional rituals had been subjected to abridgement, simplification and modernization, and have a purely symbolic nature. The Kazakhs’ wedding is a vivid example of coexistence of new and traditional, national and religious forms of spiritual culture.

Kazakhstan witnesses the revival of national traditions. One of them, Nowryz is an ancient pre - Islamic holiday of Iranian origin. One of the highest holidays is Naurys (the new year), celebrated on the day of the spring equinox, on the 22nd of March. It celebrates the New Year, the coming of the spring. Its name, translated from Persian, means "New day". Traditionally it is celebrated on the spring equinox – on March, 21-23.

According to different sources, the history of Nowryz goes back to Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism. This holiday has existed for two and a half thousand years, since the time when Zoroastrianism was spread over the territory of the contemporary Kazakhstan. The origins and the rituals of Naurys, including traces of the admiration of nature, have their origin in the New year of the Zoroastrism.

Yet, Nowryz did not disappear after Islam has taken roots. During the soviet period the attitude towards Nowryz was ambiguous. It was announced as a religious, national holiday. For a long time Nowryz was considered to be a Muslim holiday. From 1920 to 1988 it was completely forbidden to celebrate it. Though Nowryz was not celebrated officially, the memory of this holyday stayed with the people.

When Kazakhstan gained independence and turned to its cultural sources, Nowryz acquired the status of an official holiday. Since 2001 Nowryz has the status of state holiday and it is celebrated at the level of the state. Since 2009 it is celebrated for three days – March 21-23, and those days are days off. The month of Nowryz and its celebration takes place from March, 22 to April, 21. Since the dawn of time the arrival of long-awaited spring has been solemnly celebrated in Azerbaijan, Albania, India, Iran, Kirghizia, Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Nowryz is also celebrated in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and some other autonomies of the Russian Federation. In different countries Nowryz is celebrated according to national traditions, but still there exists much in common between these celebrations.

In 2009 Nowryz was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO. In 2010 General Assembly of UNO supported celebration of Nowryz by the resolution named "International day of Nowryz". Since then March 21 is considered the international day of Nowryz.

Kazakhs call Nowryz "Ulistin uli kuni" (Great people's day), thus underlining the meaning of Nowryz itself and the unity of the people. Nowryz is the symbol of spring-time renewal of nature and of fertility. So Nowryz is a special holiday that symbolizes renewal, purification of the house, body and soul. On the eve of Nowryz people put everything in order in the house; in the south they plant flowers and trees. It is considered better to pay one’s debts and to forgive all offences. On the night of Nowryz all the dishes must be filled with milk, grain, spring water. This will bring well being, prosperity, success, as well as rain and good crops. People believe that more generously they celebrate the holiday Nowryz, more successful the year will be. On the day of Nowryz everybody tries to be in a good mood, wish all the best to one another and that all troubles may pass.

During this time of celebration the main traditional dish is "Nowryz koje". It consists of seven ingredients which symbolize the seven elements of life and nature’s fertility. Those are meat, water, flour, butter, grain (millet, rice, corn or wheat), salt and milk. In people’s consciousness they represent joy, good luck, wisdom, health, success, speed, growth and divine protection. On Nowryz the main drink is kumiss prepared of mare’s milk.

Nowadays this holiday is broadly celebrated in all regions of the country. In cities and villages they erect the nomadic tents (yurts). Even in modern offices men dressed in chapans and skullcaps and women in national dresses, hats – boric and rich saukele, celebrate the spring holiday at their workplaces. In the yurts, women in Kazakh dresses treat guests to Nowryz-koje and Kazakh dishes.

Near every yurt Kazakh national traditions and customs are shown. Nowryz celebration is full of national games, sports competitions, concerts of national songs and dances. In some places spectacular horse competitions are organized.

At the exhibition-fare, national craftsmen from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the cities of Kazakhstan display ceramic, felt, jewelry, and pieces of other types of art. At the height of the day the youth gathers at a traditional swing - "Altybakan". All sing, dance, and play national games. In the evening aytys – competition of the Akyns (singers-improvisators) accompanied by dombura begins. Everyone can participate in it. The one who glorifies Good wins. Special attitude of the people towards Nowryz is seen from the fact that the children born on Nowryz get the names in honor of the holiday. Boys receive the names of Nowryzbai or Nowryzbek, and girls are called Nowryz, Nowryzgul.

For the Kazakhs, the image of Nowryz is connected with tradition of honoring the ancestors. Nomad-cattlemen addressed during the Nowryz the spirits of ancestors, made offerings, and lit lanterns on the tombs of the ancestors.

Interweaving of national and religious traditions is testified by religious rites celebrated on Nowryz, such as the readings of prayers, for example.

The revived tradition of Nowryz celebration is criticized by some mullahs as an attempt to connect heathen rites with the lives of Muslims. To their mind Nowryz does not correspond to the Islamic canons. Nowryz koje, the ritual dish of seven ingredients being considered a kind of symbolic gift to the Sun for a rich harvest, is also criticized. The Sun is regarded in this ritual as the master of universe, and this contradicts the Islamic idea of monotheism.

But Nowryz has long ago lost its sacred meaning and is regarded as one of the favorite popular Kazakh festive days, associated with spring nativity ("*Koktem Tudi*"). Besides the kind traditions and spiritual treasure, some moral values inherent to this holiday (to help the poor, to feed the hungry) do not contradict the Islamic religion. In the course of the centuries, Islam has not succeeded to supplant Naurys or to replace it.

Nowryz is not the only national holiday that has its place in the life of the Kazakhs. Traditionally people celebrated Muslim holidays Oaza Ait and Kurban Ait. Nowadays they are celebrated on the national scale as well. Kurban Ait holiday is a day off.

So in Kazakhstan spiritual traditions of the Kazakh people and Muslim world are harmoniously combined.

The foundation of the Kazakh culture is language. Islam has greatly influenced the Kazakh language. During the period of Islamisation many Arabic and Persian words were adopted as well as quranic expressions. For example, a traditional greeting of men "As-Salamu Alaykum!" is of Arabic origin. Days of week have Persian names, except for the Friday. "Juma" (Friday) is an Arabic word.

In modern Kazakh language there are more than 20 thousand Arabic terms. These are: adam (man), akikat (truth), ar (conscience, honor), bakyt (happiness), kair (good, benefit), kasiet (sanctity, grace of God), galam (Universe), dunie (world), omir (life), otan (native land), adep (morals), machabbat (love), madeniet (culture), tarbie (education), akyl (reason), pikir (idea, thought), gylm (science), kalam (feather), kitap (book), mektep (school), ustaz (teacher) and others. They refer to the spiritual area – religion, philosophy, science, art and morals. In many Kazakh customs one can trace the Muslim influence. For example in the rite of naming (with reading in the ear of the baby "adhan" – the sacred words of the Quran), the wedding ceremony (neke), etc. Today other ancient Kazakh traditions preserved by Islam are being revived. It is institute of Amengerstvo, bride money payment, abduction of girls.

Thus, Muslim culture has had a considerable influence on the nomadic culture of the Kazakh people. Though Islam has taken its roots with the Kazakhs, many ancient ceremonies based on the cult "tanir" (worship of the sky), remain. National traditions are inherent to each people. In hadith it is said that if a tradition does not contradict religion, it is necessary to preserve it.

The traditions, rituals and customs of the nomadic Kazakhs have been preserved and today exist besides Islam.

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Photo of the author.Holiday of Nauryz.

