

## Women and religion in post-Soviet Kazakhstan – a view from within

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A discourse about social, cultural, and political developments of modern Central Asian states can not avoid a “religious revival” phenomenon. Its impact on women’s status in a society is especially visible, transforming previously established patterns. Since the religious identity of majority of population in the region is linked with Islam, its “revival” has played a special importance. Soviet legacy of forced secularization, changing perception of Islam (from culture to the religious doctrine), phenomenon of “new Muslims”, identity formation, difference from mainstream “Islamic world’ need to be taken into consideration while examining influence of re-Islamization on women. Kazakhstan demonstrates the most striking case since it was more than any other Central Asian state had been affected by the Soviet modernization which essentially was antireligious. Nowadays, local Islam with its more relaxed and conformist attitude towards women is losing its positions to ‘global’ Islam with its more strict and codified rules. However, this new trend coexists with mainstream secular gender roles in the Kazakhstan society.

**Keywords:** Islam, woman, identity, Kazakhstan

### Introduction

During the last twenty years, the issue of the revival of religion is more or less regularly raised in the discourse about the political and socio-cultural development of modern Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. It is noteworthy that in the last national census of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2009 a question on religious affiliation was included. According to the census results, the vast majority of people in Kazakhstan (97 %), identify themselves with a particular religion, including Islam (70,1 %), Christianity (26,1 %), Judaism (0,03 %), Buddhism (0,09 %), other religions (0,19 %), non-believers (2,8 %), and those who refused to give any affiliation (0,5 %).<sup>1</sup> These figures, in my opinion, reflect not so much the ‘religiosity’ of the population as much as ‘ethno-religious identity’. The interweaving of religious and ethno-cultural identity is a phenomenon common to many post-socialist societies: “their public space and social context which affects the religious experience is, in many ways, ethno-national” (Hann 2010, 15).

In the Kazakh society, the largest religious denominations, Islam and Orthodox Christianity, are mainly represented by the two largest ethnic groups, the Kazakhs and the Russians.<sup>2</sup> In this case, ethno-religious identity does not necessarily reflect the extent and depth of religiosity. For example, Kazakhs do not refrain from considering themselves Muslims, even if they do not commonly follow basic Islamic rituals such as daily prayer and restrictions or abstinence from alcohol.

Stressing the importance of the gender dimension of religiosity, researchers of the sociology of religion point out that “the inclusion of gender as a category of analysis is a

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challenge to the established, generic, masculine bias, recognizing women as legitimate objects of study, and the gender dimension as important, in the light of which the meaning and symbolic system of religious culture is then interpreted” (Sociology of Religion 2002, 185). In this regard, the study of the relationship between women and religion in Kazakhstan did not get a special attention.<sup>3</sup>

**The purpose** of this article is to show how the post-Soviet religious ‘revival’ affects the status of women in Kazakh society, and to describe women as subjects of religious beliefs. Because Islam is the religion of the majority of the population, and the Kazakhs constitute the largest ethnic group (64,5 %) in its multi-cultural composition, the focus of the article is Kazakh Muslim women who statistically determine the main trends of women's religiosity in Kazakhstan.

This paper examines how religion changes the habitual social and cultural behaviour of women. In particular, Kazakh women have appeared who consider themselves as ‘proper’ Muslims. Thus, it is analyzed what stands behind their proclaimed Islamic identity. At the same time, this new trend coexists with mainstream secular gender roles in Kazakh society. It is argued that, compared to other parts of the ‘Islamic world’, religion has less impact on women’s lives in Kazakhstan.

**Methods.** Historical and cross-cultural analysis is applied in this research. In particular, this paper looks at the historical relationship of Kazakhstani women and religion during both the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. The research is based on statistical data, ethnographical materials on Central Asian religious traditions, and a range of sociological surveys, conducted by local and Western researchers. In addition, the author’s in-depth interviews with women-members of one of the Islamic movements provide unique source material for this study. Their social and economic status, age, education, etc., will be informative in defining the female participants of religious communities in Kazakhstan.

One of the attributes of this article lies in the fact that the influence of Islam on modern Kazakh women is seen through the eyes of a local expert, who has had the opportunity for in-depth participant observation. This circumstance provides a certain advantage to the author, in particular, it provides one with opportunities. One of them is the ability to observe the object of study in its dynamics, in the concrete context, for a long period of time. This period covers the late Soviet era as well as the post-Soviet transition stage, which are key to the development of Kazakhstan and Central Asian societies in general, including women's religiosity.

The investigation of contemporary manifestations of the impact of religion on Kazakhstani women allows one to put forward the following theses:

- A new meaning of religiosity, which is more than just the customary, self-described identity based on ethnic tradition, is emerging. It assumes a gender hierarchy and a return to the ‘traditional’ division of labour in which a woman is ascribed a subordinate role. This approach is seen as a reversal of the ‘traditional’ Soviet-inspired notion of gender equality.
- At the same time, the rehabilitation of religion has carved out new niches for women to express themselves in the religious space and to feel empowered. Emerging Islamic education has created a need for female teachers of religion as well as for the Arabic language for women’s classes. And, religious women create autonomous spaces for themselves to socialize with each other.
- Nevertheless, the current impact of religion on the majority of Kazakhstani women has been limited as a whole. Social changes during the Soviet era contributed to the fact that in contemporary mainstream society, gender roles are based on secular rather than on religious values.

## The religiosity of Kazakhstani society and the status of women

Certainly, the influence of religion on women in Kazakhstan should be considered in the broader context of their role in society at large. In comparing Kazakhstan to the neighbouring former Soviet states of Central Asia it is useful to accentuate existing internal characteristics. A comparison with the countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia where Islamic tradition, knowledge, and practice were not interrupted, will highlight further the position of Kazakhstan in the global 'Islamic world'.

The main sources of information in this chapter are the sociological surveys of religiosity conducted in the Central Asian region, including those conducted both by local and by international experts during the past five years.<sup>4</sup>

All these studies indicate a relatively low level of religiosity in Kazakhstan and an overwhelmingly secular orientation. In the hierarchy of identities of society in general, the first place is taken by 'citizenship' at 48.2 %, followed by 'ethnic identity' at 34.6 %. 'Religious affiliation', by contrast, is only third place at 10.6 %. Overall, the majority of the population of Kazakhstan (71.3 %) wants to see the country as a secular state, and only 3.3 % want a state which is fully religious.<sup>5</sup> The assessment of Kazakhstani society as predominantly secular was confirmed by sociological research conducted by the Pew Research Center (Muslims: Religion, Politics 2012).<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, the imposition of the *sharia*, the Islamic body of law, as the official law of the state is supported by 10 % of its Muslims, several times less than in countries such as Malaysia (86 %) and Egypt (74 %).<sup>7</sup> The Muslims of Kazakhstan are the most tolerant in the list of the surveyed: there is the lowest percentage of support for the death penalty for renouncing Islam among them, at 4 %, while in Egypt, such support demonstrate 86 % of Muslims. The percentage of Kazakh Muslims who would agree with the possibility of their son or daughter marrying to a Christian is twice as high comparing to Uzbekistan Muslims. (Muslims: Religion, Politics 2012).

Kazakh Muslims also exhibit the greatest degree of respect for the rights of women. In comparison with other countries, in Kazakhstan there is the lowest percentage of those who would support the subordination of the wife to her husband (51 %) while in other countries we see Iraq at 92 %, Tajikistan at 89 %, and Uzbekistan at 84 %. Also, the majority (84 %) of Kazakhstani Muslims would not approve of killing a woman for having sex before marriage, while in Uzbekistan the rate is at 50 % and Kyrgyzstan at 65,5 %. Other indicators also demonstrate that Kazakhstan has the highest degree of women's freedoms. Most Kazakhstani support the free choice of a woman to veil, or not to veil, her face (78 %), as well as the right of the wife to initiate divorce (80 %), while in other countries we see Uzbekistan at 59 % and Tajikistan at 30 % (Muslims: Religion, Politics 2012).

The author of this survey came to the conclusion that Muslims supporting the establishment of *sharia* as an official law are less likely to recognize the equality of women. They are more inclined to support traditional Muslim gender roles. In Kazakhstan, according to many indicators, Islam has the least impact on the society as compared to other countries with Muslim population (Muslims: Religion, Politics 2012). This means that Kazakhstani society demonstrates the highest level of secularization and the highest level of the emancipation of women in Central Asia and in the 'Islamic world' as a whole.

It is noteworthy that, according to yet another indicator of religiosity, the adherence to normative Islamic rituals, Kazakhstani Muslims are most likely the religious minimalists. Among the peoples of Central Asia, the five daily prayers are conducted by only 7,2 % of Kazakhs, 8,3 % of Kyrgyz, 32 % of Uzbeks, and 41,3 % of Tajiks (Ro'I, Wainer 2009,307).

It can be argued that the weak impact of religion on the social status of Kazakh women is linked to the higher degree of secularization of the Kazakhstani society in general. Of course, the fact that officially family relations are governed by civil law in itself makes a big difference. This is yet another legacy of the Soviet policy of the emancipation of women. In addition, there is the influence of the cultural and historical heritage, in as much as the family sphere was regulated among the Kazakhs by both the *sharia* and the traditional local law, the *adat*. Thus, marriage was sanctified by a *mullah* and polygamy was permitted. According to traditional law, marriage between close relatives was prohibited until up to the seventh generation.<sup>8</sup> Traditional law also imposed limitations on women's status by the custom of *levirate* when the widow must remarry in her husband's family, i.e. his brother.

By way of comparison, in many contemporary Arab countries, discrimination against women is instilled into family law which in many ways is based on the traditional interpretation of Islamic norms. So, a woman must "obtain permission from her father, husband, or other relative male guardian not only to marry but also to seek employment, start a business, travel, or open a bank account" (Moghadam, Roudi-Fahimi 2005, 2).<sup>9</sup> Adherence to the Islamic norms, which were relevant in the past, in the modern period symbolizes the economic dependence of women on men, and their economic and legal inequality. The influence of religion on the status of Arab women is so deep that attempts to overcome discrimination against women should take into account Islamic tradition, the sensitivity to which is very high in that society. Thus, a look at the level of religiosity in modern Kazakh society, including a comparison with other countries which have a Muslim majority, can lead us to conclude the following. The influence of religion on society and, in particular, on women is seen as limited and marginal in Kazakhstan. This phenomenon is a consequence of several factors, and the pre-Soviet nomadic cultural and historical heritage is one of them. Though, its effect is manifested mainly as a cultural trait. The Soviet legacy of radical secularization as well as the current course of the government to keep religion out of family law have been the most important factors in this regard. Modern society in Kazakhstan as a whole is set up to ensure that gender roles are based on secular rather than on religious traditions.

### **What influence does contemporary religiosity have ?**

Understanding the peculiarities of the influence of religion on women in modern Kazakhstan is possible only within the general context, namely the place and the role of religion the society. It is clear that religiosity in society has increased during the last two post-Soviet decades of freedom of religion and religious choice. During this period several factors affected its forms and content, including the legacy of Soviet modernization, the intertwining of ethnic and religious identity, the effects of socio-economic transition, government regulation of the religious sphere, and the formation of the religious marketplace of ideas.

The influence of the Soviet legacy is especially important for understanding the current stage of the development of religion in Kazakhstan. Needless to say, the neighbouring countries of Central Asia also have been through an experience of radical secularism and Soviet modernization. But due to specific historical circumstances their influence on Kazakhstani society was the most profound and long-lasting. By the late Soviet stage Kazakhstan had become the most urbanized country in Central Asia,<sup>10</sup> because in the course of forced sedentarization and collectivisation the traditional nomadic way of life of the Kazakhs was destroyed. This caused dramatic ethno-demographic changes in the middle of the last century: number of Kazakhs, the titular group, sharply declined, while a massive labour influx of Russian and Slavic population in Kazakhstan resulted in its sharp increase.<sup>11</sup> The demographic and cultural landscape of the territory dramatically changed from the pre-Soviet predominantly

Turk and Muslim to Euro-Asian and Orthodox-Muslim duality. The impact of the Russian-speaking environment on Kazakhs, especially in the cities, has been the most profound comparing to neighbouring Central Asian nations.

Soviet modernization with its social and cultural achievements (universal free education and health care, upward social mobility, rising life expectancy comparable to West European levels, the emancipation of women) leveled the regulatory role of religion. Religious knowledge and the continuity of its transmission were destroyed together with the Muslim clergy who disappeared as a group as a result of the radical secularization of Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> Islam was expelled from the public, especially education, losing its regulatory social function, but survived in people's daily lives, especially in life-cycle rituals such as circumcision, the veneration of "holy places," and Muslim funeral passage.

Secular and rationalist discourse about universal humanity took the place of maxims on religious moral and ethical values. Religion was relegated to the role of 'a relic of the past' and an attribute of a backward society. The very meaning of 'Islamic' radically changed, along with the understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. The Soviet concept of 'nationality', according to which the national republics were established, also standardized a national language, a 'fabricated' national culture, and also influenced religion. The latter became just another national tradition and a marker of ethno-cultural identity.

Now, 'being 'Muslim' came to mean belonging to a certain ethnic and cultural community, not to *umma* (the global Muslim community). No 'Islamic countries' outside the Soviet borders had such an experience. In isolation from the rest of the world, the Soviet Union cultivated a special 'Soviet way of life'. Soviet Muslims saw themselves as representatives of their nationality and as the citizens of their country. Religious affiliation was not a criterion for being in a community. Therefore, residents of neighbouring Iran or Afghanistan, for example, although perceived as Muslim nations, were "non-Soviet" and therefore aliens. However, socialist secularization was not absolute, as evidenced by the post-Soviet phenomenon of the 'revival' of religion. Still, it began in Kazakhstan as one of the elements of a national revival, but not the most prominent one.

The transfer of family laws from the religious sphere to the sphere of civil law in the first Soviet decade was an important step towards the emancipation of Kazakh women. Marriage was no longer concluded with a *mullah* in a ritual *nikah*, but instead recorded by a civil authority. Also, there was freedom of choice of marriage partners, and Muslim rituals such as the *kalym* (the dowry for the bride) were officially banned. It is noteworthy, however, that for Kazakh women, who traditionally do not cover their faces according to Islam provisions, the struggle against the *paranhszha* and *chachvan* (a set of women's outerwear hiding the body and face) dubbed the *hudzjum* in the Soviet period,<sup>13</sup> was not an important campaign. The exception to this was in areas densely populated by Uzbeks, such as in southern Kazakhstan (the Syrdarya province), where distinctive anti-religious propaganda among women was conducted, such as the *anti-paranja* campaign. In 1929, the newspaper "Soviet Steppe," published in Alma-Ata, stated: "The struggle for the emancipation of women reached our city of Shymkent (South Kazakhstan). One by one the Uzbek women there shed *the paranja*, and thus washed away the stigma of slavery." But, considering all of the peculiarities that distinguish the countries of Central Asia from each other, for all of them Islam, as part of their 'cultural heritage', became a symbol of ethno-cultural revival during the late Soviet period and of a new national state in the following decades.

The post-Soviet phase of a rapid transition to a market system as well as the overall social and economic stress are characterized by general demoralization and a loss of family values. Not surprisingly, sociological data show that among the reasons why people in Kazakhstan accept religion the three primary ones are as follows; the desire to attain spirituality

(50.9 %), the lack of prospects and confidence in the future (40.7 %), and the hope to atone for sins (35.9 %).<sup>14</sup>

The social cost of transition for post-Soviet societies, including those in Central Asia, has been very high. Deep social and economic inequalities in society, the destruction of upward social mobility, and closed channels for public participation in the affairs of the state have led to the alienation of certain parts of society, especially that of young people from vulnerable sectors. It is hard not to agree with those scholars who say that the market boom in the Central Asian societies has not created a new moral foundation capable of overcoming social anomie (Hann 2010, 10).<sup>15</sup> As will be shown later in the text, we have to admit that the 'revival' of religion also has not consolidated society on the basis of its values.

The state policy with regard to Islam, or rather, its attempt to control religious life, largely determines the status of religion in Kazakhstani society. The state supports religion as a national, cultural, and spiritual heritage, but at the same time separates itself from actual religious doctrine. According to the president of Kazakhstan, "during independence we again turned to the religion of our ancestors" which primarily means "love of neighbour and country, and this is a consolidating factor for our society".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, religion in a secular state actually becomes converted into a mobilization force for purposes of nation-building. In this case, the state takes on the role of religious authority. For example, it emphasizes that an adherence to Islam should not be considered "the latest fashion", and instructs an organized Muslim clergy on issuing 'fatwas' (a legal opinion based on Islamic scripts proclaimed by the theologian(s) on various aspects of Muslim community's life) under Sharia law regarding current issues in society.<sup>17</sup>

As evidence of freedom of religion, religious pluralism in society has increased during the last twenty years, and the number of denominations has grown from very few to forty three,<sup>18</sup> mainly due to the emergence of neo-Protestantism as well as other new religious movements. Historically, on the territory of Kazakhstan by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Islam coexisted with the Orthodox Church, Baptism, Catholicism, and Judaism after the penetration of the Russian Empire into the Kazakh steppe, and further into Central Asia.

The modern situation in Kazakhstan is different in that not simply a religious diversity, but a 'market' of religious ideas has been formed. Despite the traditional close association between religion and ethnicity, it has become possible for the individual to adopt a new religion. It is a new situation when different religions 'are tried for one's taste' and then selected. The phenomenon of religious conversion appears as a consequence of the freedom of religious choice. This means that the cases of conversion, for example of Kazakhs who are ethnic Muslims, to Christian Orthodoxy or Krishnaism, or of Russians, who are ethnic Orthodox Christians, to Islam or Protestantism, has become part of the religious life in Kazakhstan, albeit not very common. In all fairness to this, it is necessary to note that during recent decades the percentage of people professing other religions except Islam, Orthodoxy, or Judaism in the total religious composition remains at a level below 1%.<sup>19</sup>

The non-religious legacy is manifested by the fact that society's attitude to the phenomenon of religious conversion is quite neutral which contrasts sharply with the situation in much of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. There, proselytism is not only condemned by the public, but is also considered a state crime.

### **The 'new Muslim' woman: shift from equality to hierarchy**

In the course of the 'Islamic revival' in Kazakhstan, as in other post-Soviet Central Asian countries, the understanding of what it means "to be a Muslim" becomes complicated. Now, it

no longer fits into the framework of only the observance of the usual cultural ceremonies of life events, such as the rite of initiation through circumcision (*sundet*) or burial according to Muslim rites (*zhanaza*), or giving alms to the mosque on Fridays (*sadaqah*). Although the majority of the population do not dispute the connection between Islam and ethnic identity (for example, to be a Kazakh means to be a Muslim), the new interpretation of 'Muslimness' emerged. In its core it is the realization that religion is also a system of rules governing the behaviour of a Muslim, for example, an understanding of what is allowed and what is not, such as *halal* and *haram*.

A new form of religion appears which is different from the usual "religious minimalism" (Privratskii 2001) conducted within the framework of family rites. It is characterized by a 'serious' understanding of Islam that goes beyond ethnic custom. A category of Kazakhstani women appears for whom being Muslim is more than the observation of life-cycle events, and in this way they consider themselves as devoted adherents of Islamic tradition.

Thus the idea of 'piety' becomes central, an idea which corrects the established understanding of the role of women as socially active in family and society. This carries with it the traditional division of gender roles in which the woman has the place as "keeper of the home", and the man takes on a public status. Accordingly, a gender hierarchy is recognized when the woman is submissive to the man.

Meetings and interviews with representatives of this new movement, 'the new Muslim woman',<sup>20</sup> consisting of Kazakhstani women, held during 2011-2012 in Almaty, provide enough evidence to confirm the above-made assertions.<sup>21</sup> Almost all of these women, in their own words, 'came to Islam' and began to wear *the hijab* (Islamic female dress-code) under the influence of their husbands or relatives. With the exception of only one woman interviewed, they all migrated to the metropolis of Almaty<sup>22</sup> from the smaller cities of Kazakhstan, rented housing, and now work in the informal sector of low-paid urban employment.<sup>23</sup> For instance, one has a small shop selling Muslim clothing at a *bazaar*, another, her daughter, is a mid-level college student in humanities, a third sells cosmetics of one of the direct sales companies, a fourth is a cleaning lady at a bank, and a fifth is unemployed. Conversations with these and other Muslim women occurred during their *ta'lims*, a weekly meeting at one of their homes.

Women meet to read and discuss '*Selected Hadiths*'<sup>24</sup>, and during every meeting each one reads. According to them, the "*Hadiths*" can speak to everyone, regardless of age and status. The exchange of views on issues of Islam is accompanied by the usual 'girl talk' on the themes of children, family, etc. After the '*ta'lim*' they are picked-up by one of the male relatives, and as a now larger group, the members of the movement gather in one of their home. There they organize a dinner at which men and women are seated separately. All the women members of the movement wear the *hijab*, and some of them are covered by the *niqab* (in Middle Eastern fashion) which completely hides one's face.

Here is the story of one of them, which is pretty typical for women who have chosen the way of religious 'piety'. The woman, 'M.', is 25 years old, she does not work, and she has two children. In the recent past she was an emancipated and Westernized student at a university in Russia. She became a 'real' Muslim when she met her future husband, 'D.' a member of 'Jamaati Tabligh'.<sup>25</sup> He was also quite a socialite and businessman, but due to life circumstances went bankrupt. Technically, he is also unemployed, and periodically makes missionary trips (*da'waat*) proselytizing in various regions in Kazakhstan. During these trips the wife and her two young children are left in the care of their relatives who do not support their devotion, considering it 'fanaticism' and 'medieval'. In her own behavior 'M.' tries dutifully to follow the Islamic norms which, in today's urban environment of Kazakhstan make her isolated within the walls of the house, and sharply limit her mobility. She has dropped her university studies, and the four of them rent a room in the house of her husband's mother.

The new 'pious' Islamic life imposes a lot of voluntary restrictions on her. For instance, she does not move around the city without being accompanied by a relative (*mahram*), on the street she wears the *niqab*, which usually attracts condemning and suspicious looks from passers-by, including fellow Kazakhs. In addition to this, 'M.' is prepared for, and has already given permission to her husband to take a second wife. But there is a precondition, in accordance with Islam, to provide equally for all his wives, which includes individual housing. From the interview with 'M.' we can see that she puts her husband above herself as 'according to the practice of Islam', so she willingly submits to him.<sup>26</sup>

But in a mainstream Kazakh society dominated by secular rules putting religious 'piety' into practice is very difficult and sometimes impossible. For example, it is hard to find an available male relative (*mahram*) ready to accompany her around the city. She and her husband want to bring up their children 'according to Islamic tradition', which means not putting them into a regular municipal kindergarten, but into a Muslim one. But, they can not afford it for economic reasons, as such kindergartens are exclusively private, and that means they are expensive. It will also be unrealistic for her husband to meet the religious provisions in order to take a second 'Islamic' wife since he cannot provide even his current wife with basic resources.<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that the Islamic marriage became a somewhat controversial issue since at the extreme end it is violated by Muslim men. By Kazakhstan's secular law, only civil marriage has legal force, and the religious ceremony may be performed before or after it and does not have legal status. Some 'pious' Muslim women who chose only religious marriage found out after the ceremony they became the second, or even third wife of their husbands. These men used such a marriage as an excuse for a religiously legalized sex exploitation. The number of such incidents was enough for Muslim clergy to become aware of the abuse of religious marriage. The *muftiyat* released a statement requiring the parents of the young bride and of the groom to be present at the marriage ceremony. At the same time, there are secular minded unmarried women who perform the Islamic marriage ceremony to give a moral justification to their relationship with a married man. Thus, there are various ways how women interpret relationships between religious and secular, and this is unique for post-Soviet societies. This uniqueness is noted by the research on Muslim female religiosity in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan where "Islamic, Soviet and Western notions meld and clash" (McBrien 2010:40). The local 'pious' movement in this regard is different from the similar Islamic movement in other societies with Muslim majority which did not experience radical Soviet-type secularization.

Another woman interviewed, 'A.', is 25 years old. Her husband also spends a certain amount of time in proselytizing Islamic missions around the country. She says that she has to work in order to survive with her family (two kids) in a big city. She lives in a rented apartment and is involved into "home business" which is direct selling cosmetics of one of multi level marketing companies. This is a popular type of work for the self-employed women, however is not stable and sufficiently profitable. Her husband's periodic missionary trips become an additional weight on her. During these trips she needs to ask for the help of her mother, who does not live in the city.

Another participant in the 'Jamaati Tabligh' movement is 'D'. She is the oldest in the group of women interviewed, and compared to the rest of them, she has the best livelihood. She owns an apartment and a small business which sells Muslim clothing. 'D' brought her own daughter who is a 16 year-old college student into the movement.

Again we must emphasize that all these women surveyed became involved in the 'Tabligh' movement due to their husbands, the movement's active members.<sup>28</sup> They are united by the awareness of belonging to a group of 'pious Muslim believers'. They strive to draw others into their faith, namely the "not-yet believers" or nominal Muslims. With those who are

not interested in becoming 'religious' persons, the women don't make contact easily, and conversation with them is not an easy business. They are characterized by suspicion and wariness toward those Muslims who do not share their 'piety' which is in itself considered as a guarantee of the moral high ground. One of the females expressed the reproach toward the author: "You've got to be like us, to come to Islam, then you will have the right to study Islam". The communication with this group of 'pious' women left a strong impression of them as being the neophytes, this is reflected in their emotional devotion, self-righteousness, and so on. The 'pious' Muslims in the Kazakhstani environment bear ultra-orthodox features which set them apart from the mainstream Muslims, and overall society as well. This observation is confirmed by other researchers of the role of Islam in Kazakhstani society who point out that there is "the dissonance between the lifestyles and Islamic ideology of members of the piety movement and most Kazakhs" (Shwab, 2011, 240).

Among the 'new' Kazakhstani Muslims there are those for whom religion is not associated with a particular group and who are more rationalist, and they might state, "If a man declares himself a Muslim, that does not make him infallible, for it too can be deceiving." For them, the main thing is spirituality, the desire to be morally better. Such is 'G.' a 35 year-old widow with two children of school age. A few years ago she was in the 'Tabligh' movement, into which her late husband brought her, but then she was disappointed by it. According to her, after her husband's death, 'Tabligh' movement members regularly suggested that she become a second or third wife, but without any obligation to provide for her support or that of her children. 'G.' looks at work not only as a source of income, but also as a virtue, accusing some Muslims of "talking too much about God instead of being engaged in work." She wears the Muslim headscarf. 'G.' does not count on anyone's help and educates her children to be committed to their religion. She sends her daughter to a Muslim summer camp for girls, which was organized by a Muslim activist woman who conducts weekend courses on Islam for girls.

Without participating in any kind of Islamic group, 'G.' tries to proselytize "correct" Islamic behaviour, such as promoting *halal* (allowed by Islam) things (like halal parties among her circle of relatives. She is very sociable, friendly, not prone to being a mentor, and does not impose her own view of religion in conversation. Personal tragic experience (the loss of her husband) brought her not to seek comfort and solace in a group of co-religionists, but to find her own individual way of religiosity.

The personal life stories of these Muslim women support the assumption that a tendency to isolation and to gender segregation between men and women dominates the circle of the 'new pious'. In practice, this is manifested in the publicized demand for exclusively "Muslim" spatial zones, for example, separate women's swimming pools, gyms, train cars, and segregated restaurant tables for men and women. Similar processes are also occurring among Kyrgyz 'piety movement' members (McBrien 2010).

The overall tendency of self-isolation by 'new Muslim women' adds to their detachment from forms of social activity that go beyond traditional female roles. They do not participate in civic non-governmental organizations, including those which are gender-oriented. Kazakhstani women who choose a path of religious 'piety' explain their choice in the following way: the desire for safety, the desire to become acquainted with faithful Muslims such as themselves, and the desire to adhere to obligations to husband and children (Dosanova 2010). Generally, this group of women does not belong to the middle or upper-middle urban economic class. They tend to have limited access to the financial and educational resources of today's competitive environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that their religious 'piety' often represents only a symbolic capital which allows them to establish themselves in the community in the traditional status of wife and mother.

The post-socialist re-traditionalization of gender roles has manifested itself in proclaimed opposition to Soviet emancipation goals (Kandiyoti 1991, 429). 'Pious' believers regard emancipation of women as violation of the 'natural' division of gender roles, in as much as emancipated women strive towards a professional career. In some of the countries of Central Asia the state took it upon itself to promote the idea of the glorification of the woman as mother. In this way women are celebrated as mothers in a patriotic light, for example, in Uzbekistan, a country with a more pronounced gender hierarchy than Kazakhstan. The Women's Committee of Uzbekistan organized a national contest for the title of 'the best daughter-in-law', highlighting the qualities of docility, maternal caring, and competent housekeeping. This represents both an affirmation of traditional Uzbek values and a distancing from Soviet images of emancipated womanhood' (Kandiyoti & Azimova 2004, 346).

Such a trend is less visible in Kazakhstan. At least in the official rhetoric there is a modern approach to gender roles, such as "We should actively involve women in government and public administration, especially at the local level in the regions, as well as create favourable conditions for starting and running women's businesses".<sup>29</sup>

The ambiguity of opinion and interpretation on the role of Islam in Kazakhstan appeared namely because of the *hijab*. Young women dressed in the *hijab*, the Middle Eastern fashion of Islamic dress with head scarves concealing hair, and clothing that covers the entire body except for the hands, ankles, and feet became the most visible symbol of the 'new piety'. This phenomenon has caused controversy in society not so much regarding religious rituals, but regarding the role of religion and the boundaries between the religious and the secular.<sup>30</sup>

This was particularly true for the Kazakhs, asking such questions as "what should religion be?" and "what is the place of Islam in society and the state?" Opinion polls have defined this ambiguity. For example, twice as many Kazakhstani citizens (43.7 %) would not approve, compared with those who would approve (14.9 %) of a decision by their close female relations (such as a wife, daughter, or sister) to wear the *hijab*.<sup>31</sup> The state is also wary of the public manifestations of individual religiosity. Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev has repeatedly and publicly condemned the wearing of the *hijab* by Kazakh women, emphasizing that it is Arab and Pakistani clothing, unusual for "nomads, and sends Kazakh women back into the Middle Ages". In his opinion, "Kazakh girls and women should dress appropriately according to the traditions of our nation."<sup>32</sup>

The wearing of the *hijab* in educational institutions, especially in primary schools, is markedly disapproved by the government officials. Officially, it is not prohibited, but the state has left the final decision to a given school administration which in turn are guided by internal dress-code regulations. School principals set the standards for school uniforms, which include the prohibition of wearing any religious attributes.

State policy toward *hijab* does not look as strict as in neighbouring Uzbekistan where wearing religious clothing by its citizens in public places is officillay banned.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that patriarchal tradition dominates in this Central Asian nation with a long history of sedentary and urban culture. It is characterized by the seclusion of women and their submission to the man in exchange for his material care. This culture has survived even under the pressure of the Soviet policy of women's emancipation. In the pre-Soviet era the veil was a symbol of female subordination to men (Kamp 2006). However, the success of *hudjum* campaign did not relieve the lives of women, especially in the rural areas of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan of the dominance of patriarchy. One of the forms of protest against it became the practice of self-immolation of women.

In Kazakhstani society patriarchal traditions were less strong, which correlates with the historically predominant features of the nomadic way of life. The latter were not predisposed to the strict adherence to religious practices, including those regulating the behaviour of

women. Among nomads there was no strict segregation of sexes in public, and Kazakh women enjoyed relative freedom (Michaels 1998), and did not veil their faces. Shared activities among youth of both sexes were common practice in traditional Kazakh society. For example, the still popular tradition of horse racing 'catch the girl' (*kız kuu*), in which the young man must catch the girl. If a man failed in this attempt he was 'awarded' with blows of a horse whip (*kamcha*).<sup>34</sup> Another example is the practice of unmarried young men and women riding together on a swing in public. Among traditional poets and improvisational singers (*akyns*) who played a key role in nomadic Kazakh culture there have always been women who openly competed in oral singing competitions (*aityses*) with men.

In pre-Soviet Kazakh society, a mandatory part of the wedding ritual was not only the payment of the dowry by the groom (*kalym*), which is in accordance to Islam, but also the preparation of a dowry by the bride's family (*zhasau*). Moreover, the latter was not only equal to *kalym*, but could exceed it in size. The bride's family had to provide her with both goods and real estate which were considered her own property by right (Kazakhi, 1995, 307). This practice established a certain degree of independence for the married woman in her husband's family. Moreover, if the groom could not afford to pay the *kalym* as a price for the bride, he would live in her family and compensate for the dowry by working around the house.<sup>35</sup>

Unmarried Kazakh girls did not wear the Muslim headscarf to hide their hair and neck. To the contrary, hair was considered an ornament, tied in braids, and decorated. And in modern Kazakhstani society the image of femininity is traditionally associated not with a religious piety and its manifestation, but with particular behaviour such as modesty. In particular, the tradition of showing respect for elders and relatives is valued.

Therefore the appearance of religious 'pious' Muslim women meets with a wary attitude, even on the part of their relatives, as well as accusations of fanaticism and of not following national traditions. This is how believer Qasim Amin describes her own experience: "I am currently working among Muslims with whom I can safely wear my *hijab* and read prayers. I could not find a job. And many employers denied me because of *the hijab*, because they said that now everywhere they need their employees to have a presentable appearance."<sup>36</sup> However, we must emphasize that references to the fact that in the past Kazakhs did not wear clothing in a Middle Eastern fashion does not serve as an argument for the 'new Muslim'. They follow Islam as a religious doctrine, not only, and not so much, as a national tradition.

One of them stated: "...we do not profess the national religion. We profess Islam and cover [our bodies and faces] as we need. And if we would not learn from the Arabs, then from whom?" (Dosanova, 2010). These words are in tune with the opinion of some local historians, emphasizing the civilizing mission of Islam for the Kazakhs, which transformed "...naive sons of nature 'nomad' into 'spiritually mature, nomad-Muslim."<sup>37</sup>

It can be argued therefore that for those adhering to religious 'piety', the concept of the new 'Muslim woman' means something more than the observance of ritual purity, and other mandatory prescriptions of Islam (*fard*). For them favourable conditions must be created. In the predominantly secular local environment, these conditions become practically exclusive as they are based on the gender segregation when public place is separated between men and women, examples of which are listed above.

*The hijab* has become the most visible symbol of this exclusivity, and such an 'otherness' stands out against the backdrop of Soviet / Westernized urban culture. At the same time, the Islamic clothing in its Middle Eastern style is completely modern, and is one of the consequences and manifestations of globalization. Any attempts to persuade Kazakhstani Muslim women that this type of clothing is at odds with modernity, and alien "Arab" dress, are doomed to fail. The *hijab* has become as much as a symbol of urban cosmopolitanism as backpackers.

## Female religiosity - new niches

The 'revival of religion' has brought new opportunities for women in whose lives religion occupies an important place. First of all, new forms of socialization became possible, particularly, in groups of 'pious' Kazakh believers (*jamaat*) who call themselves the 'sisters'. In an environment of market individualism and de-solidarization, such a socialization within the community of believers gives a sense of security and comfort, as well as moral and material support. Historically, in Kazakhstani society a social networking to reproduce Islamic identity did not develop. This differs from Uzbek and Tajik communities where the traditional institution of the '*mahalla*', or community of people living in the same quarter or street, has proved its viability and sustainability in both the Soviet era and today. Members of the *mahalla* regularly gather for informal meetings. There are men's gatherings (*gap / gashtak*), and women gather for their own informal meetings (*Bibi Seshanbe – 'Holy Tuesday'*), and conducting Islamic rituals is an important part of these events (Kandiyoti, Azimova 2004).

The "revival" of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan has led to the emergence of religion based social networks (known as 'Jamaat') for Kazakh 'pious' Muslim women. Moreover, they exist not only in the boundaries of mosques and Muslim community education associations (such as *the Khalifa Fund Altai*), but virtually as well, in forums on the Kazakhstan's Islamic websites (for example, *Minaret.kz*). This type of networking provides opportunities which are not limited by religious subject per se. The women are able to search a suitable partner, to help each other with advises how to live a daily life in accordance with Islam (family matters, raising kids).

The process of creating an autonomous space for the self-expression of Kazakh women who have chosen the way of religious 'piety' also exists in the realm of labour division. Increased interest in religion by the general population, including women, has created the need for religious enlightenment and education. As it is known, women have never had a 'professional' position in the organized Islamic hierarchy. Now, there are opportunities for female-dominated occupations in the formal Islamic institutions. In the 20 years of the post-Soviet period a new sector of working women has formed, such as teachers of the basics of Islam and Arabic language in women's educational courses at mosques and at ethno-cultural community associations. These women are graduates of Islamic schools, or courses, or self-learned both in Kazakhstan and abroad.

For another category of Muslim women the new areas of self-realization in informal or daily / folk Islam bring a partial or even full-time income. This so-called self-employed sector of Kazakhstan's Islamic life is not affiliated with organized mosque life. The majority of these women are engaged in the art of traditional healing. It should be noted that at the heart of Islamic healing in Kazakhstan is the visitation of 'holy places' (*ziyarat*), especially those that are in Turkistan city, the historical center of the religious life of the Kazakhs.<sup>38</sup> The pilgrimage boom of recent years is directly linked to the growing popularity of traditional healing. The tradition of female Islamic healers using both Islamic symbols and magic rituals goes back to nomadic history. They are called *baksy, shamans, emshi, kozha, molda kempir*. Female reciters of the Koran in the last 20 years became a distinctive group of Muslim 'professional' women. Historically, there are no differences between women-shamans and men-shamans, both have always been respected in society (Mustafina R.M. 1992, 139-141). This layer of Kazakh religious life has existed in parallel with the formal Muslim clergy (imams, mullah, kadi and others).

The modern 'revival' of religion has led to the emergence of Islamic charity, particularly in the form of privately owned children's orphanages, or of summer camps for girls. They support compliance with the 'Muslim way of life', that is, religious belief and rituals. Typically, these institutions are supported by Muslim volunteer women with donations from individuals

or organizations. Another phenomenon, new to Kazakhstan, has also appeared: women who are members of charismatic occult and mystical movements of a Muslim orientation ('Ayat Allah', 'Ata Joly'). The activities of 'Ata Joly' women (called *akku*) are centered around bringing pilgrims (mostly women) to Islamic 'holy places' in city of Turkistan. *Akkushki* represent themselves as mediums between the souls of saints/ancestors and pilgrims. Activities of this kind are also based on healing as well as on recruiting new members into the organization. The pilgrimage in itself became a profitable business in which tourist companies are engaged, too.

In the post-Soviet era, these rituals are increasingly criticized by 'pious' Muslims and organized Islam (by *imams*) as not being in accordance with Islam. Traditional healers are adapting to the new situation so they and their patients appear as 'legitimate' Muslims in the eyes of the followers of normative Islam and society as a whole (Rasanayagam 2006). For instance, one of the famous contemporary Kazakh healers, *Bifatima*, who lives and practices near Almaty, considers herself the guardian of the nearby 'holy mountain' *Ungurtas*. While she worships the Sun and the Earth, at the same time she believes in God (Allah), and considers her faith that of Islam and regards herself as a faithful Muslim. In her healing practice she utilizes practices common for Kazakh shamans, such as blows with a stick, blessings with water, and wrapping a patient in sheep skin while reading Muslim spells in Arabic.

## Conclusion

The Soviet legacy remains the most long-lived factor which determines the characteristics of the impact of Islam on the status of modern Kazakhstani women. It is manifested by the fact that society as a whole is still secularly oriented, and religion is only one of the many variants of female identity. The interruption of the continuity in the transmission of religious knowledge and experience during the Soviet period led to the fact that religion is chosen primarily as a personal search, but not without the influence, of course, of family tradition, for instance as a 'religion of the ancestors'.

The remoteness in time of the pre-Soviet tradition of religiosity makes its impact on modern religious women endangered and weak. So women borrow available models of Islamic religiosity imported from global Islamic movements. They are based on the idea of religious 'piety', which in itself limits the range of followers willing to voluntarily give up the established standards of behaviour and lifestyle, particularly in urban environments. The 'new religiosity' demands their re-evaluation and carries with it a re-traditionalization of gender roles, accompanied by, for example, the subordination of women to men. However, abstract and transcendental values of 'salvation' have a difficult time competing with a variety of material and more attractive ways of self-identification, including career, leisure activities, and a personal life offered by a modern, information-rich environment. In this context, the influence of Islam as a set of rules and regulations for modern Kazakhstani women cannot be anything but limiting.

At the same time, a category of Kazakhstani women has already formed, the 'new Muslim women', for whom religious 'piety' gives a sense of security and comfort in a complicated and uncertain reality, even at the expense of limiting their opportunities and choices voluntarily. In this regard, new niches for the self-realization of women are created as part of the religious path. Over the past twenty years, the relationship between religion and women in Kazakh society has changed considerably. It can be argued that the female manifestation of religiosity, including its conservative form of 'religious piety', will continue to evolve, but its marginality will persist and continue as such for the foreseeable future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Itogi Nacional'noj perepisi naselenija Respubliki Kazahstan 2009 goda. Analiticheskij otchet, 2010. [The Results of the National Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2009. The analytical report, 2010].

<sup>2</sup> Ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, Uighurs, Tatars also affiliate themselves with Islam. Slavic minorities (Ukrainians, Belarussians) traditionally identify themselves with Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard the study of female religiosity in modern Uzbekistan received more attention. See Kamp (2006), Louw (2007), Kandiyoti, Azimova (2004).

<sup>4</sup> See *Religioznaya situatsiya v Kazakhstane v otsenkakh naseleniya (rezul'taty sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya)*, 2013 [Religious situation in Kazakhstan seen by population (the results of sociological study), 2013, Ro'i, Wainer (2009), The report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life "The The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society", April 30, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The data are from the sociological survey *Religioznaya situatsiya v Kazakhstane* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> The survey took place across three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe) in which 38,000 Muslims were interviewed from 39 countries, including those in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

<sup>7</sup> The survey's authors stress that the views of Central Asian Muslims are close to Southern and Eastern European Muslims of role of Islam in society.

<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, in Arab society tradition of close kin marriage, such as cousin marriage, is widespread, as well as endogamous marriages within the same group, clan, community, see Barakat (1993, 109)

<sup>9</sup> See Moghadam, Roudi-Fahimi (2005).

<sup>10</sup> By 1989, the percentage of urban population in Kazakhstan was 57,2 %, while in the remaining four Central Asia's republics the median was lower - 40,8 %. See *Naselenie SSSR po dannym vsesojuznoj perepisi naselenija 1989 g.* (1990, 16-19).

<sup>11</sup> The percentage of Kazakhs declined from 87,7 % in 1897 to 39,7 % in 1989 while the proportion of Russians increased from 19,6 % to 42,6 %. See Kazakhi (1995, 7).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the impact of Soviet secularization on Central Asia had steered them away from other parts of Muslim world. Adeeb Khalid (2007) even goes so far as to say that 'de-islamization' of the Central Asian societies occurred.

<sup>13</sup> Marianne Kamp (2006) wrote a comprehensive book on 'hudjum' in Uzbekistan.

<sup>14</sup> The data are from the sociological research on the level of religiosity "Rezul'taty sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya: "Uroven' religioznosti kazakhstanskogo obshchestva" (2012) which was conducted by the Kazakhstan Institute of Socio-Economic Research (KISEIP). The sample comprised 1400 interviewed in five regions of Kazakhstan. The data are kindly provided by Aiman Zhusupova.

<sup>15</sup> See *Religion, Identity, Postsocialism* (2010).

<sup>16</sup> From the President's speech at his visit to the Orthodox church in Astana, dedicated to Easter celebration in 2013. <http://newskaz.ru/society/20130505/5061581.html>, Accessed 5 May, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> The president's words addressed to local Muslim clergy on the occasion of 'appointing' the new head of Kazakhstan's Muslim Administration (muftiyat) in March 2013. Accessed 19 February, 2013, [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/dumk-budet-izdavat-fetyvi-po-zakonam-shariata-228802/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/dumk-budet-izdavat-fetyvi-po-zakonam-shariata-228802/)

<sup>18</sup> In 2013, a number of denominations decreased to seventeen due to the strict requirements of the new law on religious associations (2011). As a consequence, not all religious organizations could meet them and were able to re-register.

<sup>19</sup> According to the last national census of Kazakhstan's population, the majority of population identifies itself with a particular religion - about 97 %. Among them Muslims - 70.1 %; Christians - 26.1 %, Jews - 0.03 %, other religions - 0.28 %. *Itogi nacional'noi perepisi naselenija 2009 goda.*

<sup>20</sup> Some researchers call it 'pious movement', for example Schwab (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Practically all of them at the time belonged the Islamic missionary movement "Tablighi Jamaat" which in March 2013 was banned in Kazakhstan. This is a group of five mostly young women under 30.

<sup>22</sup> Almaty - the largest city in the country with a population of about two million people, one of the two cities (along with capital Astana) receives the largest influx of internal, mostly rural, migrants. On social and cultural implications of internal Kazakh migration to Almaty see Sultangaliyeva (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Another survey of women wearing the *hijab* in Astana are predominately also migrants from rural areas of country. See Dosanova (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Translated into Russian the book by Mohammad Yousuf Kandehlavi, the founder of the 'Tablighi Jamaat'.

<sup>25</sup> Islamic missionary movement (Society on Spreading Faith) founded in South Asia in 1920, calls for strict abiding by textual religious norms. Its followers go on regular proselytizing tours (in total - 40 days a year) to encourage ordinary Muslims to maintain their faith. It distances itself from politics. See Metcalf (2002).

<sup>26</sup> For example, while she and her husband prayed in the house of her relatives the latter were sadly surprised seeing her praying right behind her husband's back, and not next to him. By her own words, this symbolizes the woman's subordinate status.

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<sup>27</sup> As new converts/neophytes, they conceive the religious ideas with fervour and enthusiasm, trying to follow them meticulously even if some of them such as the practice of polygamy are not considered obligatory in Islam.

<sup>28</sup> In Kazakhstan, the wives of the 'Jamaati Tabligh' do not go on proselytizing trips, as it is done in some other countries, for example, in Malaysia.

<sup>29</sup> Excerpt from *Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N.Nazarbayev "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state*". Accessed 14 December 2012, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page\\_poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-lidera-natsii-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana-](http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page_poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-lidera-natsii-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana) [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/nazarbaev-nazval-jenschin-oporoy-gosudarstva-225242/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-nazval-jenschin-oporoy-gosudarstva-225242/)

<sup>30</sup> On the role of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan see Sultangaliyeva (2012).

<sup>31</sup> See fn. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Kazakhstan Today <http://kt.kz/?lang=rus&uin=1133168007&chapter=1153564136>, Accessed 16 November 2012.

<sup>33</sup> According to Article 14 of the 1998 Freedom of Conscience Law, a citizen except clergy is not allowed to wear religious clothing in public places. See Uzbekistan: Islam, Communism, and Religious Liberty—An Appraisal of Uzbekistan's 1998 Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations"(2000), [www.lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2000/3/bec.pdf](http://www.lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2000/3/bec.pdf) c/1017, accessed 3 September 2013.

<sup>34</sup> If the guy catches up the girl he must kiss her in public.

<sup>35</sup> Though this usually happened with poor families. Hence such a husband is scorned as *kushik kuyeu* (puppy husband)

<sup>36</sup> From the website of the Almaty Central Mosque. [http://meshet.kz/ru/islam\\_20.html](http://meshet.kz/ru/islam_20.html), accessed 15 August 2012.

<sup>37</sup> See Nurtazina (2007).

<sup>38</sup> Turkistan is a city in Southern Kazakhstan which was known in medieval ages as Yassy. On modern religious life in this city see Privratsky (2001).

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