RELIGIOUS CONVERSION THROUGH THE EYES OF WOMEN
ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION
IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to study the peculiarities of religious conversion and changes in religious consciousness on the example of women living in Kazakhstan. The following methods were used for the study: focus group and individual interview. In the focus group, a group discussion was conducted during which the attitude of the participants to religion and religious activities was clarified. The total number of study participants was ten. It was a homogeneous group of older women. Discussion in the focus group was conducted using the open method. The method of individual interview involves an individual expert review. As a result of the study, the following conclusions were made. The increase in the level of religiosity and religious identification are associated with ethnic origin (if Kazakh, then Muslim, if Russian, then Christian-Orthodox). The participants showed intolerance towards religious conversion. The novelty of the research is associated with the study of the phenomenon of religious conversion, which has undergone a certain historical evolution. The research interest is aroused by Kazakh society with a predominance of traditional Islamic culture, which often rejects religious conversion in relation to its followers. The researchers were interested in the process of transformation from a forcedly atheistic society to a secular society with a free choice of religion. Religious conversion in Kazakhstan led to the transformation of the post-Soviet reality, radically changing it in the form of 'conversion of change'. This formulation of the question allows the authors to apply Western theories of religious conversion to Kazakh reality. The methodological basis of the research includes R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge's theory of affiliation, as well as L.R. Rambo's model for conversion.

Keywords: Central Asia, religious identity, Christianity, Islam, women

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Central Asia has been demonstrating a changing dynamic in many areas of public life, including religious life. The purpose of this article is to explore the attitude of women to religion and religious identity. In addition, the research stems from the need to reflect on the subject of religious transformation that took place in the Kazakh society during its independence years. In addition, the urgency of this topic is rooted in the post-Soviet religious awareness transformation. After getting sovereignty in 1991, Kazakh people asked themselves 'Who are we?' 'What is our national identity?' This raises a deeper question about the roots of Kazakh identity. 'Who is Kazakh?' 'Is he a Muslim, a descendant of Turkic civilization or a descendant of nomadic society?' The construction of Central Asian identity has a long history, particularly in relation to the way it was used by the former Soviet Union. There was an emerging sense of national identity following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of new independent states. An answer to these questions came from the choosing of Islam as a factor of cultural self-identification, of the search for spiritual identity [1, 2].

In the Soviet Union, Islam was a national tradition, secondary to the ideology of Soviet internationalism. In the post-Soviet period, Islam became a foundation of the Central Asia states' identification. Nevertheless, these states are secular republics [1, 3, 4]. Islam is part of the national and cultural normative framework, which affected the re-orientation of family and gender relations in Central Asia. There are certain tendencies and patterns that transcend national borders. Women of the post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus share a range of common experiences thanks to the legacy of a shared Soviet past [5, 6]. The Soviet Union proclaimed atheism and religion was secondary to the ideology of Soviet internationalism. Historically, Kazakh women had broad rights, enshrined in Soviet and then Kazakh legislation, based on ideas of liberality and gender equality, and women themselves are fairly emancipated.

In this regard, the post-Soviet Central Asian women face the question: How is it possible to define women's identity? Post-Soviet Azerbaijan faced this question too. In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the same as in other successor states to the Soviet Union, people are seeking to reassess, reimagine and redefine their ethnocultural and national as well as individual identities [6]. Models of women's identity have three variations: Russian-Soviet or post-Soviet model is perceived with a degree of ambivalence; the Western model is offered through mass media, especially through Turkish mass media; and, a veiled Islamic model offered by Iranian and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabian mass media [7].

Models of women's identity in Kazakhstan have several variations and include the post-Soviet, globalized Western, and veiled Islamic models. A variety of external and domestic factors affects these models. In this study, we consider the post-Soviet model of women's identity, where the issues of the religious transformation of society play an important role.

In the post-Soviet era, a flow of competing foreign missionaries invaded Kazakh religious area, they were preachers of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other religious movements. Young people left to study countries of the Middle East and, upon their return they preached the 'pure Islam'. People in Kazakhstan have witnessed a striking competition among Muslim countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, which are attempting to introduce their interpretation of Islam. External influences towards Islam in Kazakhstan were twofold. On the one hand, countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia were active in exporting their versions of Islam in response to a demand in the field of religion [8]. The Turkish influence did not take a radical form and was limited to the spread of Fethullah Gülen's schools, the construction of mosques and the support of religious personal. On the other hand, the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi version condemns Muslim celebrations, feasting and other costly traditions such as Kalym (bridal dowry) as well as veneration of saints and deities [9].

Islam played an important role in the formation of the Kazakh national spirituality. From the Karakhanids' period, Islam has been an integrating factor in the process of the Kazakh statehood formation. In the pre-Soviet Kazakh society, religious affiliation was closely tied to ethnic and familial belonging. Social and political institutes of the time supported these ties. The Kazakhs have always identified themselves as Muslims and Sharia principles were an integral part of adat, custom law [10].

An interplay of pre-Islamic beliefs and Islam shapes the specific nature of the Kazakh religious identification. Nomadic lifestyle impeded the consolidation of religious dogma in the spiritual arena and resulted in a weak Islamization of the Kazakh population. In this regard, it is important to address the pre-Islamic beliefs of Kazakhs and the existential views of Kazakh nomadic culture in general. Kazakh spiritual awareness presents a syncretic model that mixes various elements of pre-Islamic, pagan beliefs and Islamic dogma. Kazakh beliefs framework includes Islamic customs along with the preserved pre-Islamic cult with pagan prayers and spells, scarification and shamanistic rituals [11].

Apart from this, in each country, among each people, Islam, like other religions, took on local characteristics. These local characteristics of Islam were conditioned by the specific historical development of individual peoples, which also influenced the development of Muslim religious thought. Largely, they were also determined by the retention of traditions, which arose in pre-Islamic times but acquired a Muslim tinge. As a rule, the Muslims themselves regard such beliefs and rituals, irrespective of their actual origin, as elements of Islam. Likewise, the representatives of Muslim priesthood, brought up in the cultural traditions of their people, were always capable of distinguishing Islam from surviving pre-Islamic conceptions and rites. In academic circles, it is becoming customary to refer to Islam in its real-life manifestations (the form in which it exists and manifests itself in the life of various peoples) as 'folk Islam' [12].

Throughout many centuries, Kazakh ethnos has been developing a unique nomadic culture with a range of authentic traditions, customs, beliefs, values and philosophy. The famous Silk Road passing through the Kazakh lands contributed

to the formation of a unique cultural identity. Along the Silk Road routes, different cultures came in touch with each other. These cultural encounters facilitated mutual enrichment of these cultures through an exchange in material and spiritual values. This experience made the Kazakh ethnos stand out from other nomadic cultures, which were more isolated. Therefore, the Kazakh civilizational identity is rooted in multiple civilizational sources [13].

As a rule, women – mothers and grandmothers were the primary bearers of the national culture through their behaviour, normative principles and values. In the Kazakh society, a woman played a significant role as a guardian of the hearth. Goddess Umai-ana of the Tengri pantheon of gods was a divine embodiment of such guardian [11]. Women had the right to vote in making crucial community decisions. Mothers of large families and older age – baibishe, who raised a decent generation, enjoyed particular respect within their communities [14].

At present, Kazakh society abides by a traditional mainstream Islam that is inherent to the contemporary Kazakh culture. Traditional mainstream Islam refers to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam [15].

Nowadays, in modern Kazakhstan, Islam is one of the factors of cultural self-identification, of the search for spiritual identity. Edelbay S. asks a question 'Is there today such a thing as 'Kazakh Islam'?' [S. Edelbay, *The Islamic situation in Kazakhstan*, The Daily Journalist, 2016, http://thedailyjournalist.com/theinvestigative/the-islamic-situation-in-kazakhstan/] 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). The majority of the Islamic population of Kazakhstan are the Kazakhs, which account for 65% of the total population. 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 interethnic divisions and oppositions. The question of Kazakh religious identity is a cause for fierce debates [16]. In order to consider the influence of different positions in understanding traditional and non-traditional religious values, it is necessary to show the process of changing the norms and worldviews that are formed in the family as a social unit of society where the woman plays the main socializing role.

2. Methods

This small pilot study has the purpose of exploring women's attitude to the religious transformation that took place in the Kazakh society in the past 25 years of independence. The study took place in the period from October to December 2018. The main advantage of focus groups is that during a joint discussion, people give more diverse information and consider the essence of the subject deeper. An individual interview was also used, despite the fact that this method requires time and money. It provides the reliability of the collected data and minimal standardization of behaviour. The study employed individual interviews and focus-group interviews as data collection methods. In total, 10 women were

interviewed, including 5 individual interviews and 5 interviews in a focus group. The interviewees' age ranged from 50 years old and more. The choice of this age group owes to the following reasons. First, these women were born and raised for about 25 years in the Soviet Union, where atheism dominated. Second, the decision to concentrate on this age group was due to the tradition of respecting mother as a wise mother in the Kazakh culture. Women played an important role as influencers of the new generations. Women were mediators, who transferred spiritual values from generation to generation starting with a lullaby.

The interviewees had certain differences in their education and occupation. In individual interviews, the participants were mostly teachers and civil servants. In the focus-group interviews, the participants were retired people, who worked as medical, education, administrative professionals or were housewives in the past. Random selection assisted the selection of the participants for this study. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A narrative analysis of the transcriptions had a special value as it helped shape the research findings.

Unlike other studies, which focus on just one ethnic group, the participants in this study represented various ethnic groups and included Kazakhs, Kazakhstan-born Russians and Karakalpaks, who migrated from Karakalpakstan. The participants had not only a different ethnic background but also displayed varying degrees of religiousness. Some participants were Muslims, while others were Orthodox Christians. We cannot state that the study participants were deeply religious because they did not perform the corresponding religious rituals to the full extent.

The study uses the method of narrative analysis as a qualitative research method [17]. A narrative interview involves a free story on a given topic. The narrative presents several dimensions – practical, affective and cognitive, which are separate textual modalities with their own set of language and speech markers [18]. Narrative analysis made it possible to keep two layers in focus – individual and social – and to consider the event conveyed by the narrator not only as an individual, related only to their private life, but also as a private manifestation of the social.

This qualitative study does not claim to represent the whole picture of Kazakh society. Under the framework of this small pilot study, we focused on a number of women. In the course of the research, we touched upon the issues of ethnic and religious identity, religious conversion from and to Islam and Christianity.

3. Results

The issue of religious conversion in the post-Soviet space is an urgent topic in academia [19-21]. Kazakhstan as a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic state goes through the process of re-identification, including revision of religious identity. The importance of religion as an accessible socialisation mechanism highlights the process of traditional ethnic and religious identification, as well as broadens the range of opportunities of religious conversion.

In the first instance, we were interested to see whether all participants identified themselves as religious or not. As an outcome, we received a shared response that all participants were religious during the interviewing procedure. The next interview question regarded the changing role of religion in the lives of our participants or their friends. The majority of the participants in both individual interviews and focus-group interviews responded that the role of the religion in their lives had either changed or increased. Some participants mentioned that atheism remained a part of their worldview, while others stated that nothing had changed and the religion had always been in their lives. "I think that a person gets wiser with age, and they inevitably turn to religion." (Aina, 52 years old) "Atheism is still on my mind!" (Aliya, 52 years old)

Some women noted the changing role of religion in the lives of their friends and family. Two participants said that the role of religion in their lives did not change because their parents were religious and they followed their example. "Our grandfathers and grandmothers were deeply religious people, prayed namaz. We carry on this tradition and perceive ourselves the Muslims." (Zeynegul, 55 years old)

The issues of ethnic and national self-identification are a topic of heated debates in contemporary Kazakhstan. Some people believe that ethnic affiliation parallels religious affiliation due to the historical legacies. For example, if a person is an ethnic Kazakh, he should be a Muslim. If a person is an ethnic Russian, he should be an Orthodox Christian.

All participants agreed that each ethnic group should adhere to their corresponding religion, i.e. their historically conditioned religion (a Muslim-born person should stay Muslim; a Christian-born person should stay Christian). However, there are certain differences received in the course of individual interviews and focus-group interviews. In the course of individual interviews, we have often heard such phrases as 'I think…', 'It is a matter of choice', as well as 'I am convinced' or 'A Kazakh must…' An analysis of these responses demonstrates that the participants are convinced in adhering to their ethnic and national identification despite the fact that they do mention the right to choose a religion. "I believe that each person chooses their religion in compliance with their ethnic affiliation. For example, I believe that the Kazakhs should confess Islam! Why so? Because these are our traditional roots that come from history. However, if, for example, a Kazakh would like to confess Orthodox Christianity, this is his personal choice. He has the right to this choice." (Aina, 52 years old)

In the focus group, the participants were more dogmatic when asked about religious affiliation. They believed that people should confess the religion, in which they were born. "In my opinion, each nation should adhere to the religion, which has been developing and forming along with the nationhood." (Saule, 61 years old)

There are two types of religious conversion in Kazakhstan: to Islam and to Christianity. The conversion that is embodied in a multi-dimensional identity of an individual or a group becomes an important trend in the pursuit of identity among the Kazakhs. The pursuit of identity stems from the loss of the connection

to the spiritual legacy of the ancestors during the cultural expansion of the Russian Tsarist colonization policy and, later, of the Soviet Union [22].

The situation in Kazakhstan is characterized by mass religious migration, especially among youth. Within the Islamic community only, there is an active religious migration from traditional Islam to Wahhabi Islam. Despite convinced judgements that a person should adhere to the religion associated with their ethnic affiliation when it comes to the reasons behind conversion from one religion to another, the participants contradict themselves. Here, it is important to know the reasons behind the transformation of traditional religions into new ones and the way the religious migration can change the Kazakh society if it reaches a large scale.

There are fears about the mass religious migration in Kazakhstan: "Converting from one religion to another is a process I don't understand. If entire Kazakhstan changes what would we do? People like this can sell their country, Kazakhstan. People, who have once converted to different beliefs, can betray. People, who have adopted a different religion, will make their family follow them and it will be extremely difficult." (Nazira, 60 years old) "I think this is not a positive practice to change your beliefs often. If a person does not have a spiritual axis, he cannot progress and reach a depth and breadth of his views. If he jumps from one religion to another, these processes can become large scale. I do not think this should happen. This will have a negative influence on the life and spiritual health of the Kazakh nation in general." (Irina, 53 years old)

These questions visibly raised an extent of doubt among the participants, who sounded unsure: 'umm', 'possibly', 'fundamentalism', 'careful', 'jump from one religion to another', and 'mess and chaos'. They noted the importance of personal religious views concerning civic position, and the negative attitude to potentially large-scale religious migration. They also touched upon the conversion to other religions. In the opinion of the participants, the reason behind conversion to other religions is due to the lack of ties between parents and children. Other factors mentioned were as follows: financial insecurity and inter-confessional marriages. "If people of different confessions marry, the wife can convert to the husband's religion." (Zeynegul, 55 years old)

In the Kazakh society, the people with Soviet, atheistic education often treats the increasing number of religious people with a certain degree of concern. They often perceive religious people through the external characteristics of religious affiliation – hijab or a beard.

The participants' responses often mention 'external characteristics', 'being cautious about new religions', 'the cult of personality', 'hijab', and 'aggression'. There is a clearly cautious attitude because a person, who adopted Wahhabi Islam, presents an 'alien' or 'other' for the larger public, and raises suspicion. Islamophobia expresses itself through a negative attitude to the hijab-wearing girls and women, bearded men and other external characteristics of Islamic identification. The attitude of the public is not only intolerant but also suspicious about the representatives of the new forms of Islamic identity. The religious transformation changes not only the individual's personality but also their

interaction with the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, the participants attempt to base their judgements on common sense. "For example, I have always been prejudiced towards representatives of certain cults, especially if they are covered in black, or how is it called? Hijabs or when the entire face is covered, only eyes are uncovered. Sometimes I think this might be just following external appearances. Yes, I often see young people. I think they were brainwashed. Some of them are even proud of what they wear and that they attract attention. On another hand, I know my brother's neighbours. They are somewhat aggressive towards traditional Islam, which has its cultural and regional features." (Aliya, 54 years old)

At the same time, the participants spoke about people, who converted to 'other, alien' religion, for example, Jehovah witnesses. "I have seen such cases in my life. My female relative used bringing lots of books home and asked me to read them. However, I would not do it, God forbid, maybe because I am a Muslim I did not read these books. They were Jehovah witnesses." (Saule, 61 years old) "I do not know what this kind of Christianity is called, but my sister and her husband became Christian." (Nazira, 60 years old) "I think that these new waves of Islamism and others have a destructive influence on individuals and degrade the normative foundations, change the true spiritual values to the ones that are dictated from authorities above. I believe that these cults are based on the personality cult, on the domination of one personality over the will of other personalities." (Aina, 52 years old)

The secular person, including many intellectuals, uses explanations that are related to psychological needs, sociological factors, cultural forces, economic incentives or deprivations, and/or political constraints or inducements [23].

In individual interviews, some participants expressed toleration to any religion, be it Christianity or Islam. These views are based on peacefulness, openness and the belief that both the Quran and the Bible are the key sources of universal spiritual values. "I do not think that any religion encourages wars or conflicts. Peace-seeking, openness are at the foundation of all religions. All commandments, from the Quran and from the Bible, present the main humanity principles – do not steal, do not rob, and take care of your family. These are normative and spiritual commandments." (Aina, 52 years old)

The emergence of numerous religious movements and their activities are perceived from different positions. The participants noted that religious movements use psychological mechanisms to recruit followers. In their opinion, the state does control the activities of destructive religious movements, but they also agree that this control should be strengthened. We asked them what important developments related to the current religious situation in Kazakhstan we might have missed and what they would like to add. The participants responded as follows: "It is important that the government should protect our rights, our religion Islam. Let there be other religions, but they should not harm our children, they should not promote their beliefs. Certain state agencies should check them and control. Their numbers should be reduced." (Bakyt, 61 years old)

In the course of the research, we have identified several shared points such as the idealization of a 'religious person'. The participants believe a religious person should have higher moral. In addition, they agree that religiousness should not be expressed only through external characteristics such as religious clothing or niqab. The participants believe that such a person should be an example for others, a takwa (pious) and a sufi (ascetic).

In the course of the research, the following narratives were identified: destructive movements, ideological wars, splitting, atheism, religious morale, righteousness, piety, ascetic, hajj, promotion, Christianity, Islam, missionaries, hijab, caution to new religions, and external characteristics.

4. Discussion

A narrative analysis of these words highlights that that transformation of religious awareness among these women is not completed to a full extent. There are fears of new religious movements, strong support of the state as a defender of the society, conservatism, disassociation of new forms of Islamic identity, and a certain extent of Islamophobia, even despite the fact that the participants identify themselves as Muslims. The majority of the participants, despite their atheistic upbringing, gained faith and had their sense of religious affiliation increased. These are expressed in the spiritual aspects of having God in their hearts and being guided with moral principles in their lives. However, none of them noted the need to perform religious ceremonies, which is more widespread among young people. The participants often refer to the young people's preference to perform religious ceremonies as external characteristics of faith that has nothing to do with the genuine religion. We witness the contradiction between the understanding of the internal and external aspects of faith and religion (rituals, clothing, and alcohol consumption) among the women of this age group. It should be noted that the basic normative principles of an individual form in the first half of their lives. These outcomes of transformation demonstrate us the picture of a transit personality, who lives in the age of normative and societal changes. This transition presents a mixture of the past and the present.

Despite this, religion increases its influence on all areas of life in Kazakhstan. Religious identity is understood as a factor contributing to the renaissance of the Kazakh national self-awareness, which also implies the revival of the Kazakh language and values. For Kazakhs, religion is of crucial importance for this renaissance of national self-awareness not so much as a set of normative principles, but as an integral part of the national historical memory, which is a natural occurrence at the current stage of ethnic self-awareness of the Kazakh society.

5. Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As it is a small pilot study based on 10 participants, it is difficult to generalize. However, we

believe that the data from the focus group and individual interviews offers some insights into the complex process of identity negotiation in the modern post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

The research provides several key observations. First, religion bears a high level of importance for all study participants. However, the participants attach specific meaning to the ethno-religious identification, according to which each individual should profess the religion that is associated with their ethnic group. In addition, they strongly believed in the state's oversight and control over the activities of religious movements in order to ensure societal safety and stability.

Second, the role of Islam as a peaceful religion was described. A high extent of religiousness or religious fundamentalism, especially the new forms of Islamic identity, does not benefit society. The study participants spoke against religious conversion.

Third, the study participants demonstrated the reluctance to tolerate religious conversion. In their eyes, religious conversion is associated with the fear to lose the continuity of traditions passed from generation to generation, familial ties and relations, and cultural identity and values in general.

However, we have also noted that all participants expressed concerns about the extreme forms of religious fanaticism. The participants noted that the external aspects of Islamic practice, such as wearing niqab, hijab, etc., do not represent a historically local cultural practice of the Kazakh identity.

Thus, we conclude that although Islam is important for the study participants, they only perceive the type of Islam that is most related to the fundamentals of the Kazakh identity, i.e. a traditional Islam for them is a mixture of pre-Islamic beliefs and Islamic principles. The national culture might lose its unique nature in case of large-scale religious migration and the increase in religiousness in society. The study participants of this age group show a degree of conservatism related to the Soviet past. In particular, they express conservative views related to the state control over religious affairs and religious migration, the fear of religious conversion, and Islamophobia with regard to the unfamiliar forms of Islamic identity.

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