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The Cult of Holy Places and the Pilgrimage To Them as a Sign of Religious Identity of Kazakh Nomads

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the historical phenomenon of the cult of holy places and the tradition of pilgrimage in the spiritual practice of the Kazakhs. Based on information from archival sources and the works of researchers of the culture of traditional Kazakh society of the 18th – early 20th centuries (Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, I.G. Andreev, A.I. Levshin, Ya.P. Gaverdovsky, N.N. Pantusov, I.A. Kastanye, Yu.A. Schmidt), the characteristic of the historical geography of sacred objects of the Kazakhs is given, the sources of the formation of the cult of holy places in the spiritual worldview of the people are analyzed, regional features (Southern, Western, Central Kazakhstan) of the traditions of veneration of holy places and small pilgrimage are shown. In the southern regions of Kazakhstan, where the level of Muslim religiosity among Kazakhs was higher, and the cult of Muslim preachers dominated; in other regions, in addition to Muslim saints, they revered ancestors, batyrs (heroes), biys (local rich governors), healers, and historical figures. The author summarizes the conclusion that the formation of the religious landscape among the Kazakhs was a consequence of the sacralization of space and the result of the spread and establishment of Islam. The veneration of pagan sacred objects in the cult practices of Kazakh nomads and the deep-rooted traditions of minor pilgrimage can be regarded as a marker of their religious identity and an indicator of the level of Muslim religiosity of the population.

Keywords: Kazakhs, pilgrimage, nomads, Islam, mazars, holy places, religious cults, sacralization.

1. Introduction

E. Durkheim defined religion as constantly repeating rituals and ceremonies to reinforce the feeling of group solidarity among believers. Observance of cult rituals and prescriptions is an important component of acquiring religiosity. The pilgrimage is one of the religious rituals present in almost all religions, but differing in content and form of expression. Dualism of religious consciousness, expressed in the syncretism of monotheism and paganism, was also inherent in Islam. The preservation of relics of the pagan past in Islam was most clearly manifested in the traditions of ritual visits to the holy places.

The pilgrimage to the holy places was an important component of the spiritual practices of believers of different faiths. In Islam, the tradition of pilgrimage was expressed in the worship of sacred places and the relics of saints. Muslim pilgrimage is divided into two categories: Hajj is a major pilgrimage and Umrah is a minor pilgrimage.

The object of our research is the cult of holy places and the minor pilgrimage of Muslim Kazakhs in the 18th-19th centuries, which became widespread in almost all regions of Kazakhstan. The religious daily life of the Kazakhs was connected with the veneration of the saints. The research of spiritual practices of Kazakhs

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enriches and contributes to the formation of a holistic scientific picture of the history and culture of the people. It is the reason for the interest and attention of the authors to this problem.

2. Materials and methods

The sources used were documentary materials from the funds of Kazakhstani archives and the works of the researchers of traditional Kazakh society of the 18th – early 20th centuries. In the funds of the Archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (AP RK), the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan (CSA RK) and regional archives, reviews and reports of authorized Councils for Religious Affairs (CRA) were identified and studied, which contain historical information and characteristics of holy places of pilgrimage for Kazakhs. In the works of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, I.G. Andreev, A.I. Levshin, N.N. Pantusov, Ya.P. Gaverdovsky, I.A. Kastanye, Yu.A. Schmidt there are descriptions of the religious beliefs of the Kazakhs, information on the historical geography of holy places in the Kazakh steppe, descriptions and sketches of mazars, elements of the spiritual practice of the Kazakhs.

The methodological basis of the study is the principle of historicism and a systematic approach to the analysis of cultural phenomena and practices, which allowed the authors to adhere to an impartial and objective consideration of the phenomenon of the cult of holy places and the tradition of small pilgrimage to them by Kazakh nomads.

The study uses methods of comparative-contrastive and comparative-historical analysis of archival materials and the texts of works by researchers from the 18th to early 20th centuries. The discourse analysis method was used to study and comprehend previously accumulated narratives of modern authors about the origins of the formation of the cult of saints and the pilgrimage traditions among Muslim Kazakhs. In general, the scientific concept of the article is based on the works and theoretical provisions of pre-revolutionary, Soviet and post-Soviet researchers of the spiritual culture of the Kazakhs.

3. Discussion

The study of the spiritual practices of believers is an important area of historical science and is one of the relevant topics that contributes to understanding the spiritual worldview of the ethnic groups. The discourse of the cult of the saints has repeatedly become the object of research by ethnographers, cultural scientists, philosophers, and historians (Goldtsier, 1938; Basilov, 1970; Babadzhanov, Muminov, 1999; Sultanova, Khazbulatov, 2015). The monograph by S.Yu. Zhitenev examines the problems of the development of religious pilgrimage as a social and cultural phenomenon with a centuries-old tradition in the world's largest religious systems (Zhitenev, 2012).

The practice of minor pilgrimage among Muslim Kazakhs – ziyarat, has always attracted the attention of researchers of the religious culture of the people and was considered in the context of studying the phenomenon of the cult of saints (Abashin, Bobrovnikov, 2003; Mustafina, 2010; Mustafina, 2020). It is worth noting the series of works by E. I. Larina, in which the cult of holy places among the Kazakhs is interpreted as a factor of hierotopy and identity (Larina, 2018; Larina, 2019). The author gives her vision of the pilgrimage tradition among Muslim Kazakhs and believes that Islam has been developed in two planes among Kazakhs. One was "officially recognized and institutionalized, for example, in muftiyats, madrassas, and state-controlled hajjs to Mecca. Another, everyday Islam, existed in a hidden form among the population, "domesticated", having left public life and lost the theological tradition, but was fully preserved and manifested through ritual practices" (Larina, 2016: 116). Such a practice was a minor pilgrimage to holy places.

As V.P. Litvinov gave his own interpretation, it was the connection between the canonical foundations of the Muslim religion and the relics of paganism that gave rise to "folk Islam." The pilgrimage to the "holy places" of Muslims in Kazakhstan and Central Asia was considered an obligatory sign of true faith in the Prophet, even though canonical Islam condemned it (Litvinov, 2018: 54).

According to the researchers, the great importance of the practice of the pilgrimage among Muslims of Central Asia and the southern regions of Kazakhstan is explained by the specific nature of the emergence of Islam in this region; firstly, the Sufi movement became widespread in the region, and secondly, there was a symbiosis of Islam with local pre-Muslim religious beliefs (Stasevich, 2022: 552).

I.A. Pankov examines the cult of saints in Islam using the example of studying the social space of a particular mazar (gravesite). Drawing on the paradigm of genetic structuralism and the tools of P. Bourdieu's theory of social space, the author reveals the changing nature of social practices and rituals of worship of a sacred object (Pankov, 2018).

In our research, we study the cult of holy places and the pilgrimage to them as one of the indicators of Muslim religiosity of Kazakh nomads, analyze the hierarchical structure of saints, characterize its regional specifics and try to explain the origin and social roots of the cult of saints among the Kazakhs.

4. Results

The tradition of minor pilgrimage among the Kazakhs has a long history and its roots go back to the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the monuments to the holy saints of Islam preserved in the Kazakh steppe, the earliest of which date back to the 10th – 12th centuries. While accepting the basic dogmas of Islam, the Kazakhs preserved in their religious consciousness the stable relics of pre-Islamic indigenous cults,

among which the cult of the saints dominated. Among the Kazakhs, it has been preserved in the form of veneration of the graves of real or mythical righteous people. At the graves of the saints, on sacred days for Muslims (Thursday afternoon and Friday), and on religious holidays, local residents held collective prayers and made sacrifices. Every faithful Muslim was obliged to make an annual donation of the tenth part of his bread, as well as offerings of money and natural products on holidays ([Dashkovskiy, Shershneva, 2020: 252](#)). Popular rumor attributed various supernatural properties to the graves of the saints. Rituals and ceremonies associated with folk medicine were held at holy places.

The cult of mazars – the veneration of tombs and graves, was especially developed among the Kazakh nomads. According to the scientists, the model of the Muslim religion of the Kazakh nomads has long been called the “Islam of tombs” ([Litvinov, 2016: 17](#)). Mazars among the Kazakhs are a specific social and cultural phenomenon, with which certain rituals and customs, traditions and legends were associated. Lieutenant Ya.P. Gaverdovsky noted this feature in the Muslim tradition of the Kazakhs in the Journal of the journey of the Russian embassy to Bukhara in 1803, in which he took part. The lieutenant wrote: “Graves and the memory of the dead are one characteristic feature of this people, left over from the times of idolatry, although it is against the rule of Mohammed, which they follow with vanity, not knowing it at all.” ([Erofeeva, 2007: 36-37](#)). The researcher of the Kazakh society of the 19th century A.I. Levshin also noted this feature of Islam among the Kazakhs, stating the fact of mixing the teachings of Islam with the remnants of idolatry ([Levshin, 1832](#)).

Characterizing the religious beliefs of the Kazakh nomads, the first Kazakh ethnographer, Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, wrote in the 19th century: “Islam has not yet become ingrained in our flesh and blood. ...Among the Kirghiz there are still many who do not even know the name of Mohammed, and our shamans in many places of the Steppe have not yet lost their significance. We are now in a period of dual faith in the Steppe” ([Valikhanov, 1985: 73](#)). Further the scientist states: “He (meaning the Kazakh – *authors*) worshiped the living spirit in the person of the shaman, and the dead spirit – *ongon*” ([Valikhanov, 1904: 11](#)).

Russian explorers and travelers of the 18th to early 20th centuries, who visited the Kazakh steppes and Turkestan, left descriptions of mazars and sacred monuments revered by the Kazakhs. The captain of the Russian army, engineer-topographer I.G. Andreev in his work “Description of the Middle Horde of the Kirghiz-Kaisaks” which was published at the end of the 18th century, wrote about the Kazakhs of the Middle Zhuz: “They have no temples or mosques anywhere, and they only visit the holy place of Tashkent, the city of Turkestan, because there is the tomb of one ancient Khazryat-Saltan, whom they venerate as a saint” ([Andreev, 1998: 55](#)). Complexes of Muslim saints on the territory of modern Kazakhstan and Siberia were mentioned in their works by the following explorers and travelers G.F. Miller (18th century), I.P. Falk (18th century), G. Spassky (19th century) ([Seleznev, Selezneva, 2015: 168](#)).

The description of the mazars in the territory of Semirechye, on the border of the Kazakh lands with the Chinese provinces, was compiled by N.N. Pantusov, who served for more than twenty years as an official in the tsarist colonial administration of the Turkestan region in the second half of the 19th century. Combining the work of an official with scientific activity, the author devoted a lot of time to studying the spiritual monuments of Semirechye ([Pantusov, 1909: 431-444](#)).

In the religious landscape of the Kazakh region, many objects of internal pilgrimage of Muslims have been preserved since ancient times. They can be conditionally divided into two groups: general regional and local, i.e. local. The holy places visited by Muslims from all over Kazakhstan and Central Asia had the status of regional holy places, and their significance in the religious life of Muslims was great. These included the mausoleum of Hodja Akhmed Yassavi in the city of Turkestan, the mausoleum of Arstan-bab near the medieval city of Otrar, the mausoleum and the well of Ukesh-ata, the sacred complex of Ishak-baba, the mausoleums of Aisha-bibi and Muhammad-al-Hanafiyya near the ancient city of Taraz.

Local holy places included those of local significance that formed the basis of the religious landscape of the Kazakh region due to their large number. In almost every region, near every large village, there were locally revered shrines. These were sacred natural objects, graves of local righteous men, famous warriors-batyr, burials of clan leaders, ruins of old mosques, also revered by believers as holy places.

The largest number of sacred objects of the pilgrimage of Muslim Kazakhs were in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan. Such localization is explained by the higher level of Muslim religiosity of Kazakhs in these regions, which was due to the proximity to Central Asia and the Volga region. In the Syr-Darya region, there were dozens and even hundreds of pilgrimage sites, mazars-tombs of Karasopa, Sunak-ata, Koklayky-ata, Aktas, Korasan-ata, Akkorgan, Eabyz, Okshy-ata, Daut, Kozhan-kozha, Maral Ishan, Karmakchi and others ([CSA RK. F. P-2079. Op. 1. D. 3. L. 112-120](#)). Directly on the coast of the Syr-Darya River there was the tomb of Korkyt-Ata, one of the most famous Turkic figures of the 10th-11th centuries, who left behind a rich religious and philosophical heritage ([CSA RK. F. P-2079. Op. 1. D. 3. L. 42-43](#)).

Many holy places were located in the area of the medieval city of Aulie-Ata (ancient and modern name Taraz – *authors*). The city itself was a large region of Islam, revered as the second spiritual center after Turkestan. Until 1917, there were 42 mosques in the city, with madrassas operating under them, and the name of the city translated into Russian sounds like “Holy Father” ([AP RK. F. 708. Op. 26. D. 344. L. 5](#)). Large ishans and sheikhs who had their own murids inhabited the city and its environs. In the city district, in addition to the already mentioned holy monuments of Aisha-bibi and Muhammad-al-Hanafiyya, there were

the mazars of Karakhan and Tekturmas-aulie – monuments of the Middle Ages, revered and visited by believers from all over Kazakhstan. On religious holidays, prayers with sacrifices were performed here.

In the territory of Mangyshlak district in the 19th century there were several dozen holy places, objects of minor pilgrimage: Kapash, Aktyube, Dnim, Sary-Uzek, Minkisi (CSA RK. F. P-2079. Op. 1. D. 3. L. 59-60). More than two dozen holy burial sites have been recorded in Eastern Kazakhstan, among which Muslims especially revered the grave of Isahan Khazret, one of the spiritual leaders of the Kazakh steppe in the 19th century (SAPR. F. 646. Op. 1. D. 551. L. 83).

In Central Kazakhstan, there were dozens of mazars where historical figures from different eras were buried, but equally revered by nomads. The most famous mazars are Alasha Khan, Zhuban-ana, Ayakhamyr, dating back to the 11th – 12th centuries, the mausoleums of Jochi Khan, Bolgan-ana, dating back to the 12th – 13th centuries, mazars of a later time – the graves of Airanbai, Zhuzden, Labak, Ketebai (19th century). All of them were objects of pilgrimage for Kazakh nomads in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and information about these holy monuments is contained in the works of Russian authors. The Russian surveyor Yu.A. Schmidt, who visited the Kazakh steppes at the end of the 19th century, compiled a description and sketch of several mazars in the Akmola region. He describes the mazar of Alasha Khan as follows: "The grave is located inside a large and high mosque with narrow openings instead of a door. ... The building itself has the shape of a massive cube, 10 fathoms high, with a dome and small towers at the corners, the walls are made of red burnt brick and decorated with patterns of white glazed bricks; the dome is covered with blue glaze, there is an internal passage around the dome, which is accessed from the inside via a narrow and steep stone staircase inside the wall" (Schmidt, 1894: 12).

At a distance of seven miles from the mazar of Alasha Khan, there was the mazar of Dombulak, one of the khan's companions. "It (meaning the grave – *authors*) is built of large adobe stones in the form of a high vault six fathoms high with a narrow oval opening at the top instead of a door. The massive masonry, connected with cemented clay and made of less valuable material, but of greater strength and bulkiness, will in any case stand for more than one century and will outlive many historical monuments of the steppe" – this is how the scientist-geodesist Yu.A. Schmidt described the mazar (Schmidt, 1894: 13).

A full member of the Orenburg Scientific Archival Commission, historian and traveler I.A. Kastanye, who made numerous trips to the Kazakh steppes and saw with his own eyes the mazar of Alash Khan, wrote at the beginning of the 20th century: "Steppe tombstones are objects of genuine religious veneration on the part of the Kirghiz. Not only do they not touch the grave of any clan hostile to them, but also even, when riding past them, this superstitious nomad dismounts from his horse and begins to read a short prayer to the spirit of the saint, the patron of the grave. Moving away from him, he will not fail to leave something as a gift to the saint" (Seidimbek, 2001: 448).

The culture of different ethnic groups expresses its own specific features and characteristics of the status of saints. In the Kazakh cultural tradition, the circle of revered saints was wide and diverse, which makes it possible to systematize them (Mustafina, 2020: 158; Stasevich, 2022: 552). The category of saints – *Aulie*, first, included Muslim righteous people, whose names were borrowed from the Koranic tradition and are associated with the history of Islam, with the era of the spread and establishment of Islam among the Kazakh nomads. They also included holy Sufis – founders and leaders of religious schools and orders. According to the researchers, "saints were the ascetics of Islam, those who spread Islam, sometimes at the cost of their own lives, and at first their holiness was recognized in the Muslim environment, among mullahs, imams, ishans (Sufi teachers), among those who had already accepted Islam" (Larina, 2016: 116). Russian researchers recorded complexes related to the cult of Islamic saints in the 18th – 19th centuries practically throughout the entire territory of Kazakhstan. The most famous and especially revered by the Muslims of the steppe are the followers of Sufism – Akhmed Yassavi, Beket-Ata, Shakpak-Ata, and Shopan-Ata.

In the second place, the ancestors, the leaders of clans and tribes were revered. The cult of Muslim saints, going back to the ancient patriarchal cult of ancestors, eventually grew into the cult of the family patron. Thus, in the Syr-Darya region there was the Es-Abyz mazar, where the ancestor of the Abyz clan was buried. The Domalak-ana and Baidibek-ata mazars were revered as sacred burial places of the founders of the Alban, Suan and Dulat clans, and the Okshy-ata mazar was the burial place of the patron of the Kypshak clan (SAKOR. F. 808. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 21). Explaining the phenomenon of the spread among the Kazakhs of the sacred cult of national heroes, famous batyrs, outstanding fighters for the independence of their native land, Ch. Valikhanov noted: "Great and strong people were also all-powerful, omnipotent ongons" (Valikhanov, 1904: 13).

Professional cults and the veneration of saints – patrons of economic affairs and professional activities – played a special role in the spiritual worldview of the Kazakhs. Among such saints there were: Baba-Tukty-Shashty-Aziz – the patron saint of Kazakh batyrs, Dikan-baba – the patron saint of agriculture, Koshkar-ata and Shopan-ata – the patron saints of sheep breeding, Kambar-ata and Zhylykshy-ata – the patron saints of horse breeding, Oysyl-kara – the patron saint of camel breeding, Zengi-baba is the patron of cattle, Seksek-ata is the patron of goats. In the Kazakh tradition of worshiping patrons of professional occupations, a connection with the cult of ancestors is clearly traced. In the hierarchy of saints, a worthy place was occupied by healers-shamans recognized by the people, among whom the most famous was Korkyt-ata – the patron of Kazakh shamans. The people also considered famous cultural figures, akyns (poets), and zhyrau (singers) to be saints.

The researchers believe that among the Kazakhs, "the majority of saints consisted of sacred, but historically quite authentic people, each of whom had his own biography, more or less mythologized. The analysis of these biographies provides a lot of valuable information for clarifying the social reasons for the canonization of this or that character..." (Snesarev, 1983: 13). In this regard, the hierarchy of saints often includes the names of representatives of the local aristocracy, tribal rulers, and members of their families. Their burial sites became objects of the pilgrimage due to the fact that they were located next to the mazars of saints popular among the people. That is why the descendants of the steppe aristocracy buried their dead relatives near holy places. A typical example of the sacralization of the dead descendants of the local aristocracy is the worship of the mazar of Sultan Asan Chingisov, one of the representatives of the bright "sultan era" of the Middle Zhuz of the 19th century. The mazar, most likely built in the 1870s–1880s, is a type of cruciform building with a square base and with small rooms attached to the sides (Beisenov, 2020: 90).

A special place in the hierarchy of saints was given to saints who were patrons of localities. Researchers associate the formation of the cult of holy places and its widespread distribution with the sacralization of space in the culture of the Kazakh people, when the formation of ideas about the native land occurred not only through the economic and political development of territories, but also through the sacralization of populated space (Larina, 2018; Stasevich, 2022). In the interpretation of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, the sacralization of natural objects by Kazakhs is nothing other than "the adoration of nature in general and in particular". Explaining the reasons for the deification of objects and phenomena of nature by the Kazakhs, the scientist wrote: "But the influence of nature in this life on a person, especially an infant, is too strong, too active, and he had to create rules that he was guided by in relation to the mysterious nature, what to do and what not to do. This is the origin of those customs and rituals which we now call shamanistic superstition and which were then true faith, undoubted, living faith" (Valikhanov, 1904: 11).

Scientists believe that "the formation of sacred space in people's minds determines their behavioral strategy and forms their religious worldview" (Dvoretzkaya et al., 2024: 67). In the culture of the Kazakhs, the tradition of endowing natural phenomena and objects with supernatural properties, their revival and deification has existed since ancient times, and its close interweaving and connection with Muslim traditions became apparent already during the period of the establishment of Islam in the steppe in the 18th–19th centuries. E.B. Taylor noted in this regard that "beings that, for example, in the Muslim religion are called angels, saints, demons, should, with the same definitions in polytheistic systems, be called deities" (Tailor, 1989: 438).

The researchers consider sacred space as a product that is created and recreated by society in the process of economic and cultural functioning (Dvoretzkaya et al., 2024: 66). According to the scientists, in the traditional culture of the Kazakhs, the sacralization of the surrounding space was one of the adaptation mechanisms that allowed the people to survive in difficult natural and climatic conditions (Mustafina, 2020: 159).

The classification of natural objects as sacred, personifying the forces of nature, was practiced everywhere. Thus, in the territory of Mangyshlak district in the 19th century, the holy place of Malikozha, located near Lake Inder, was especially revered; its healing mud was used to cure various diseases. The Kazakhs preached not so much the healing properties of the mud as the sanctity of the place itself, spiritualized it, and explained its beneficial properties by the patronage of spirits. The place of the pilgrimage was Lake Baibakty, located near the Dossor oil fields (CSA RK. F. P-2079. Op. 1. D. 3. L. 62). In the eastern regions, the places of the pilgrimage were the springs of healing waters in the Bayan-Aul district, in the Kyzyl-Tau Mountains and in the Bayan mountains (SAPR. F. 646. Op. 1. D. 551. L. 80).

The researchers associate the formation of the cult of holy places among the Kazakhs with the cult of deceased ancestors, the origins of which go back to the patriarchal-clan era (Kulumzhanov et al., 2018). The basis of ancestor worship was the belief in the afterlife of the souls of the dead, who could influence the fate of relatives remaining on earth, and the belief in their protective and defending power. To gain the favor of their ancestors, Kazakhs made sacrifices to them and read prayers. It should be noted that the cult of holy places is not the only socio-cultural institution of Kazakh society that has survived since pre-Islamic times. Such specific social institutions of the Kazakh nomadic society as polygamy, kalym, amengerstvo (amengerstvo is an old Kazakh tradition, according to which a widowed wife would marry one of her husband's brothers), which Russian researchers of the 19th century attributed to Islam, have their roots in the pre-Islamic era and were conditioned by the peculiarities of the nomadic mode of production (Alpyspaeva et al., 2020: 378).

The social root of the cult of ancestors is the patriarchal system with a nomadic mode of production, in which men played a decisive role in the organization of material production. It was precisely the vitality of patriarchal-clan institutions that determined the preservation of the cult of ancestors – *arvakhs* – among the Kazakhs. Ch. Valikhanov wrote: "Arvakhs, or ongons – the spirits of deceased ancestors.... In difficult moments of life, Kazakhs called upon the name of their ancestors, as Muslims call upon saints. They attributed any success to the patronage of the Arvakhs. In honor of the Arvakhs, they sacrifice various animals, and sometimes they deliberately go to worship their graves and, making a sacrifice, ask them for something" (Valikhanov, 1904: 13). The connection between the cult of saints and the tradition of venerating ancestors is possibly indicated by the presence in the names of saints of such words as "ata", "baba", that is, "grandfather", "ancestor".

Researchers characterize the minor pilgrimage of Kazakh Muslims as one of the main practices of the regional form of Islam, the so-called "folk Islam". The researchers define the "folk Islam" of the Kazakhs as a

"synthesis of paganism and the Muslim religion" (Litvinov, 2018: 54). It was the popular "canonization" of Muslim figures that led to the creation of a wide network of mazars in different regions. "Folk Islam" is often called ethnic, since it does not rely on written tradition, but is based on a rethinking of dogmatic teaching and the adaptation of traditional religious practices. Researchers believe that "folk Islam", as a synthesis of autochthonous pre-Islamic cults (shamanism, the cult of the Arvaks) and Muslim "dogma", was most characteristic of nomadic ethnic communities (Stasevich, 2022: 553).

The distinctive feature of "folk Islam" was that it was free from the official dogmas of religion, which gave wide scope for popular imagination, which was based on ancient folk traditions and pre-Islamic beliefs. Moreover, "Muslim popular religiosity defined holiness more broadly than official Islam, not only as righteousness, but also as the presence of any power, a feature that may even go against the idea of a worthy Muslim" (Khazov, Ivanova, 2016: 54).

The tradition of venerating holy places in Kazakhstan had a number of regional characteristics, due to the vast territory and the level of Muslim religiosity. In Southern Kazakhstan, historically connected with settled centers and subjected to deeper Islamization than other regions, Muslim shrines recognized by the official Islamic tradition are concentrated, such as the world-famous complex of Hodja Akhmed Yassavi in the city of Turkestan. A characteristic feature of this region was the veneration of holy places associated with the names of the ascetics of the Islamic faith. In the southern regions of Kazakhstan, geographically close to Central Asia, the ideology of Sufism was popular, the bearers of which were declared "saints" after death, and their burial places became objects of Muslim pilgrimage. In other regions, along with the worship of Muslim saints, the cult of holy ancestors, representatives of the tribal aristocracy and the political elite became widespread. According to the researchers, "the connection of the pilgrimage practices with regional cults ensured a great diversity of rites of veneration of the graves of saints, and the continuity in the worship of sacred objects demonstrates a connection with traditions" (Stasevich, 2022: 553).

The initiative to maintain and preserve holy places was taken by the believers themselves, as well as by "wandering mullahs" – Muslim clergymen who traveled to nomadic villages to perform religious rites. Funds for the maintenance of holy places were collected by the whole world. In the 19th – early 20th centuries, there was an institution of mazar caretakers in Kazakh society – *shyrakshy*. Often, the local mullah, as the main "keeper of the culture and life of the people professing the Muslim tradition performed this function" (Dashkovskiy, Shershneva, 2020: 253).

The tradition of small pilgrimage is something else, like traveling to places with high spiritual significance and meaning. For Kazakh-Muslims, holy places are unique physical places and objects that embody their deep religious values. The places like these became objects of the mass pilgrimage. Visiting of holy places by Muslim pilgrims took place not only during religious holidays and during Fridays, which are sacred for Muslims, but also after the end of economic cycles, due to upcoming important events in a person's life, etc. This was a way of constant communication of believers with the sacred world.

The pilgrimage to the graves and holy places was conditioned by practical goals – healing from diseases. The involvement of Kazakh women in the practice of small pilgrimage was high; therefore, women with children often visited the holy objects. The religious fanaticism of Muslim women manifested itself precisely in the practice of the pilgrimage to holy places, the visit of which got rid of ailments and diseases, gave the joy of motherhood, hope for a successful outcome of difficult life situations and the right choice of the life path, cleansed from sins and instilled faith in the best. I.G. Andreev cites the fact that a young Kazakh, a senior sergeant's son in the Uvakov Volost, lived with his wife for eight years, but had no children. After a half-year pilgrimage to Turkestan together with his wife, a son and a daughter were born to him (Andreev, 1998: 56).

In the Soviet period of the history, when there was an irreconcilable struggle between the state and religion, the objects of pilgrimage were closed to visitors, often deliberately destroyed by the authorities. Places of the holy springs were converted into resorts, pioneer camps, and veterinary clinics. The main spiritual monument of Muslims – the mausoleum of Hodji Akhmed Yassavi – was turned into a museum of the history of religion and atheism, and the Arslan-bab mazar became a district house of atheists (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 32. D. 431. L. 5).

5. Conclusion

The pilgrimage to holy places was an important component of the spiritual life of Kazakh nomads. Extensive geography, dozens and hundreds of holy places, the widely used practice of venerating tombs and burials of recognized saints were the result of the hierotopical creativity of the Kazakh people and testified to the fact that Islam in the 19th century penetrated deeply enough into the culture and had a profound impact on the collective consciousness of Kazakhs. The cult of saints among Kazakhs can be considered as a manifestation of "folk", "household" or "traditional" Islam – a peculiar local form of Islam. The vitality of the cult of saints and its fusion with the dogmas of Islam is explained by the dominance in the spiritual culture of the people of the patriarchal religious consciousness, which was formed in the era of antiquity and the middle ages. Despite the denial of the pilgrimage ritual by canonical Islam, the Kazakhs considered it a sign of the true faith of Muslims, and therefore strictly observed it. The cult of saints among the Kazakhs, in general, has not gone beyond the general Muslim traditions, although it is marked by local peculiarities.

The preservation and veneration of pagan sacred objects in the cult practices of the Kazakhs can be seen as a marker of the religious identity of the people.

The Kazakh tradition of observing Umrah contained a practical component. Kazakh Muslims did not always have the opportunity to perform the hajj to Mecca, it was far and expensive, and therefore, to satisfy their spiritual needs, they visited local holy places located in the regions not far from their residence. The minor pilgrimage to the mazars provided satisfaction to ordinary believers in terms of observing Muslim rituals and ceremonies. The pilgrimages to holy places were supported by the clergy not only to strengthen the feelings of group solidarity among believers, but also because it was a source of income for them, since funds were collected to maintain them, and the pilgrimage ritual itself was accompanied by sacrifices.

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