

Teaching the Islamic History of the Qazaqs in Kazakhstan

I must begin this paper with a disclaimer: I am not a historian of Islam. I have none of the requisite linguistic skills or disciplinary training to produce an original piece of work on the history of Islam on the Qazaq steppe, or indeed anywhere else in Central Asia. Insofar as my research has touched on Islam at all, it has been to explore Russian attitudes towards it, and in particular the assumption that Central Asian Muslims were ‘fanatical’, which became such a widespread feature of Russian colonial thinking from the middle of the 19th century.¹ This paper is instead a summary of my experiences teaching the history of Islam amongst the Qazaqs to students (mostly ethnic Kazakh, but some Russian, Tatar or Korean) at Nazarbayev University as part of the obligatory course on *History of Kazakhstan*.

In a now classic review article published over a decade ago, Devin DeWeese excoriated the Sovietological tradition in the study of Islam, which, he wrote, was characterised by the aim of discovering an Islamic ‘threat’ to the Soviet Union, but which nevertheless studied it through Soviet bureaucratic categories, notably the division of Islam into ‘official’ and ‘parallel’ elements, and which took the ‘partial’ or ‘superficial’ islamisation of many Central Asian peoples, principally nomads, as an article of faith.² DeWeese’s blistering critique had a profound impact on the Anglophone historiography of Soviet and post-Soviet Islam, but even before this his monograph on *Islamisation and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* had transformed our understanding of the Islamic history of Central Asia as a whole, and in particular its relationship to earlier religious traditions.³ Through an astonishingly minute analysis of a sixteenth-century conversion narrative by Ötemish Hajji and its

¹ A. S. Morrison *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868 – 1910. A Comparison with British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp.51-87; Alexander Morrison ‘“Applied Orientalism” in British India and Tsarist Turkestan’ *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 51/3 (2009):619–647; Alexander Morrison ‘Sufism, Panislamism & Information Panic. Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising’ *Past & Present* No.214 (2012): 255 – 304.

² Devin DeWeese ‘Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay of Yaacov Ro’i’s *Islam in the Soviet Union*’ *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13/3 (2002) pp.298-330.

³ Devin DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde. Baba Tükles and conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994)

echoes in hagiography, folklore and oral accounts down the years, DeWeese systematically debunked the notion that Central Asians were only superficially Islamised. His work was of particular importance for our understanding of Islam among the nomadic peoples of the region – among them the Qazaqs. In Soviet historiography, and in much Sovietological writing in the West, the Qazaqs were always described as ‘wearing their Islam lightly’, or as retaining their earlier ‘Shamanistic’ beliefs under a thin coating of Islam. He refers to

‘A litany of uncritically accepted pronouncements on Islamization, with a standard theme: Islam “sat lightly” upon the Inner Asian nomad, whose “conversion” was in name only and failed to have any serious impact on his daily life or consciousness. Such a view, that Islamization in effect did not matter, is ... clearly flawed by a remarkable misunderstanding of the nature of Islam and of the indigenous religious conceptions that preceded Islamization.’⁴

DeWeese has thoroughly exploded these myths, firstly by pointing out that Islam has incorporated and adapted earlier religious traditions all over the world: the fact that this is also the case in Central Asia does not make Islam there any less Islamic. Secondly, he has shown the centrality of their new Islamic identity to the nomads of the Golden Horde, such that they even took on a new collective name - ‘Uzbek’ – after Özbek Khan, the ruler of the Golden Horde at the time of conversion, and one of the chief protagonists of Ötemish Hajji’s narrative.

‘Thus, the Özbek nation (*ta’ifal*) became Muslim in the time of Berke Khan, but after him they apostasized and became infidels. But the great Özbek Khan became a Muslim, and since then the Islam of the Özbek nation has not wavered.’⁵

As the Qazaqs emerged from a dynastic split between rival Chingissid lineages among the Uzbeks of the *ulus* of Jöchi, it follows that, far from being ‘superficially’ Islamised, or only converted to Islam by Tatar missionaries in the 19th century (as is still widely believed) they have actually been Muslims for *longer* than they have been Qazaqs. Finally DeWeese shows how Ötemish Hajji’s conversion narrative, and its central figure, the ‘Hairy Saint’ Baba Tükles, continued to find echoes in the folklore and history of the Noghais, Qazaqs and other Central Asian Turkic nomadic peoples into

⁴ DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion* p.9

⁵ *Ibid* p.543

the 19th century and beyond.⁶ The work of DeWeese's pupil Allen Frank has further served to emphasise the deep importance of Islamic identity to the Qazaqs in the 18th and 19th centuries, not as a result of 'foreign' missionary activity, but because of a deeply-felt native tradition.⁷

So far, so familiar, at least to anyone acquainted with the recent Anglophone historiography of Central Asia. Although some historians consider that DeWeese underestimates the impact of Soviet rule on contemporary Islamic belief and practice in Central Asia, his arguments are largely accepted within western academia.⁸ Woe betide the student at any level who refers to the Qazaqs as 'superficially islamised' or talks about 'parallel islam'. In Central Asia itself the picture is rather more mixed; Islam is a politically sensitive topic which in certain well-defined, 'traditional' forms, is considered acceptable as a component of modern national culture. DeWeese himself has published work in the region and frequently works in close collaboration with leading Central Asian Scholars of Islam, notably Bakhtiyar Babajanov and Ashirbek Muminov, with whom he has published important work in a series with *Daik-Press* in Kazakhstan.⁹ The insights generated by this new generation of English-language scholarship on Central Asian Islam are thus far from unknown in the region, but it remains an open question how far they have really penetrated to the heart of the historical establishment even in Kazakhstan, which is much more open to outside scholarship and intellectual influences than most of its neighbours, let alone to the wider public, or to school and university students.

⁶ One example is in a 19th-century Qazaq account of the Russian conquest: Н. Веселовский *Киргизский рассказ о Русских завоеваниях в Туркестанском крае* (С-Петербург: П. О. Яблонский, 1894) с.13

⁷ Allen J. Frank "Islam and Ethnic Relations in the Kazakh Inner Horde: Muslim Cossacks, Tatar Merchants and Kazakh nomads in a Turkic manuscript 1870-1910" in Anke von Kügelgen et al (ed) *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries* Vol. II – *Inter-regional & inter-ethnic relations* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1998) pp.211-242; *Idem Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia. The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde 1780-1910* (Leiden: Brill, 2001)

⁸ Adeeb Khalid *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2007) pp.21-4

⁹ Аширбек Муминов, Анке фон Кюгельген, Девин ДнУнс, Михаэль Кемпер *Исламизация и Сакральные родословные в Центральной Азии: наследие Исхак Баба в нарративной и генеалогической традициях* (Алматы: «Дайк Пресс», 2008)

When designing my course for *History of Kazakhstan* on arrival at Nazarbayev University in January 2014, I naturally wanted to teach my students about the role of Islam in Qazaq history, and to incorporate as many insights from this recent scholarship as possible. I was intrigued to know how they would react to this, and in particular to the suggestion that Islam was something that historically had been central to Qazaq identity. My acquaintance with the school curriculum in Kazakhstan, and the Ministry-approved *uchebnik* for teaching *History of Kazakhstan* is limited, but my impression, at least, was that Islam was consistently played down in favour of more politically congenial topics such as the origins of Qazaq statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*) – the official website does mention the conversion of the Golden Horde to Islam, but only very briefly, in passing.¹⁰ The first encounter my students have with the question of Islam amongst the Qazaqs comes in our very first seminar, where we are considering early Persianate sources on the history of the Qazaq khanate. In some passages from the *Mehmannama-yi Bukhara* of Muhammad ibn Ruzbehan Isfahani (1509), the Persian author writes that the Qazaqs were apostates who had abandoned Islam and turned to worshipping the sun, and that consequently Muhammad Shaybani's campaigns against them in the *Dasht-i Qipchaq* were lawful and, indeed, laudable.¹¹ When I ask my students to analyse this passage they nearly always begin by interpreting it literally, saying that this proves that the Qazaqs were not really Muslim, and that they retained older 'pagan' or 'shamanist' beliefs. It is only when I point out that ibn Ruzbehan was writing for a patron, Shaybani Khan, who was seeking a justification for a war against the Qazaqs, that they begin to question this interpretation. Eventually most of them accept that this is actually a spurious justification for a war against what were actually fellow Muslims, but some remain stubbornly sceptical.

I devote one week of my course to looking specifically at the relationship between the Qazaqs and Islam. My lecture on the subject is based largely on DeWeese's *Islam and Native Religion*, and also

¹⁰ <http://e-history.kz/ru/contents/view/491>

¹¹ Fazlullah ibn Ruzbehan Khonji *Mehmannama-yi Bukhara (Ta'rikh-i Padshah Muhammad Shaybani)* ed. Manuchehr Sotudeh (Tehran: Shirkat-i entasharat-i 'ilmi va farhang, 1384) pp.170-174. We use the Russian translation by R. P. Jalilova: Фазлаллах ибн Рузбихан Исфahanи *Михман-наме-и Бухара (Записки бухарского гостя)* Пер. и Ред. Р. П. Джалилова (Москва: Восточная литература, 1976) сс.105-6

on the observations of contemporary Qazaq religious practice in Bruce Privratsky's *Muslim Turkistan*.¹² I give them a full account of the Baba Tükles narrative, and explore its later echoes in Central Asian culture. I also draw on my own (rather superficial) observations of religious practice in southern Kazakhstan, in particular shrine worship, and try to explain the intellectual genealogy of the notion that the Qazaqs were not 'true' Muslims as a form of 'colonial knowledge' that later evolved into a Sovietological trope. For this purpose I give them a section on Qazaq religion from Alexei Levshin's canonical account of the 'Kirgiz-Kaisak horde', and Choqan Valikhanov's paper on Islam in the steppe.¹³ I try to show them the clear intellectual connections between these two texts, and in particular to contextualise the writing and later circulation of Valikhanov's essay, which was dictated when he was already dying of tuberculosis, and first published forty years after his death by the Russian orientalist N. I. Veselovskii.¹⁴ The students obviously know about Valikhanov, and have sometimes heard of this text, but have generally not been asked to analyse it directly before. They are usually rather shocked by his harsh assessment of Qazaq marriage practices, but initially accept his broader argument that Islam is unimportant for the Qazaqs, and has only been spread among them by the agency of Tatar and Sart 'mullahs':

‘Мусульманство пока не въелось в нашу плоть и кровь. Оно грозит нам разъединением народа в будущем. Между киргизами еще много таких, которые не знают и имени Магомета, и наши шаманы во многих местах степи еще не утратили своего значения... Под влиянием татарских мулл, среднеазиатских ишпанов и своиз прозелитов нового учения народность наша все более и более принимает общемусульманский тип.’¹⁵

I try to show how elements of Valikhanov's argument are simply an echo of Levshin's earlier text, so that his essay is part of the same colonial episteme, despite having been composed by a Qazaq. We try to assess Valikhanov's motives in presenting steppe Islam in this way, notably his education at

¹² Bruce Privratsky *Muslim Turkistan. Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (London: Curzon Press, 2001)

¹³ Алексей Левшин *Описание Киргиз-Казачьих или Киргиз-кайсацких гор и степей* [1832] (Алматы: Санат, 1996) Часть III Глав X сс.313 – 320; Чокан Валиханов ‘О мусульманстве в Степи’ [1864] *Собрание Сочинений* (Алматы: АН КазССР, 1985) том IV сс.71-75

¹⁴ Н. И. Веселовский (ред.) *Сочинения Чокана Чингисовича Валиханова Записки Императорского Русского Географического Общества по отделению этнографии* Том XXIX (С-Петербург: Тип. Гл. Упр. Уделов, 1904)

¹⁵ Валиханов ‘О мусульманстве’ с.71

the Omsk cadet corps and his pride as a Russian officer, and his firm belief that the future for the Qazaq people lay in closer ties to Russia and the adoption of Russian culture, to which he saw Islam as an obstacle. We also examine the sheer usefulness of this and similar texts from the Tsarist period to a Soviet regime bent on a radical secularisation of Qazaq society, reducing the influence of Islam and replacing it with a more innocuous, folkloric form of supposedly ‘national’ religion, usually described as ‘Shamanism’ (*Shamanstvo* – another term employed by Valikhanov, who was drawing on ethnographic writings on the Buryats).¹⁶ As DeWeese shows, Valikhanov himself, in another posthumously published ethnographic text, recorded a Qazaq account of the legendary Nogai Khan Edige in which the figure of Baba Tükles figures prominently, direct evidence of the continued life of the Islamic conversion narrative well into the 19th century.¹⁷ We then examine another source from a different intellectual tradition, namely Qurban ‘Ali Khalidi’s biographical dictionary of the Eastern Qazaq steppe, as published and translated by Allen Frank and Mirkasym Usmanov, which contains numerous instances of everyday Islamic piety among the Qazaqs of the Semipalatinsk region:

‘One day a Kazakh came and asked the Heavy Mulla, “Sir, I have come seeking instruction about a problem”. When he asked, “What problem?” [the Kazakh replied], “There’s nobody who doesn’t die. When one is placed in the grave, two angels will come and ask questions. What will their questions be, and what should our answers be?” [The mulla replied], “The angels will first ask, “Who’s your God and whose slave [*qul*] are you? To that you will say, “I’m God’s slave.”’¹⁸

Student responses to all of this are mixed: some continue stoutly to insist that Islam is an alien import for the Qazaqs, and that their true religion is either ‘Shamanism’ or simply that they are a wholly secular people. Others accept that it has deep roots in Qazaq culture, particularly when it comes to traditions of shrine worship and pilgrimage, and will often refer to having learnt about Islamic texts and practices from their grandparents. What is clear is that most of them have a normative idea of what constitutes Islamic belief and practice which is based on models from the

¹⁶ Privratsky *Muslim Turkistan* p.17

¹⁷ Г. Н. Потанин ‘Отрывки из киргизского сказания о Идыге, из записей Ч. Валиханова’ *Живая Старина* 1891 Вып.4 p.158 quoted in DeWeese *Islamization* pp.428-9.

¹⁸ Qurban ‘Ali Khalidi *An Islamic Biographical Dictionary of the Eastern Kazakh Steppe 1770 - 1912* ed. Allen J. Frank & Mirkasym Usmanov (Leiden: Brill, 2005) p.88

Middle East, or assume that only mosque-based Islam is 'proper' Islam. It is not necessarily that they are ignorant of current and past religious practices among the Qazaqs (though some are), but that they do not consider them to be Islamic, or at least not to be 'Orthodox' or 'official' Islam. This accords closely both with DeWeese's analysis of the effects of the Sovietological approach to Islam, which assumes the existence of 'official' and 'parallel' religion, and takes a highly textual, doctrinal approach rather than observing day to day practice, and Adeb Khalid's argument that seventy years of often aggressive secularizing policies left a profound mark on Post-Soviet Islam.¹⁹

This is a very brief, superficial overview of some of the challenges and indications thrown up by teaching the history of Islam among the Qazaqs to Kazakhstani students using insights from recent Western historiography. I have not carried out any general surveys of student attitudes on this subject (and this might indeed be considered politically sensitive – I am not sure how open answers to such a survey would or could be). It would be interesting, for instance, to break down student attitudes according to the region they come from: my impression, at least, is that students from the South (Taraz, Chimkent, the Syr-Darya valley) are much more aware of the living Islamic heritage around them, but I have not tested this. It would also be interesting to know what students really think of the interpretations of Levshin and Valikhanov which I have suggested to them: they know that they need to approach them critically and make use of recent historiography to get a good mark, but this does not necessarily mean they accept all my interpretations. I do think, however, that my experience teaching some of Kazakhstan's best and brightest students shows how deeply engrained Soviet ways of thinking about Islam still are, even among a generation who are too young to have any direct memories of the USSR.

¹⁹ Khalid *Islam after Communism* pp.1-18