

WOMEN'S PILGRIMAGE IN NORTH KAZAKHSTAN: THE CASES OF
QABANBAY BATYR AND MÄSHHÜR ZHÜSIP KÖPEYULY SHRINES

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the narratives and practices surrounding women's pilgrimage in North Kazakhstan, focusing on the shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly. Traditionally, pilgrimage offered women a space for prayer, interpersonal connection, and resolving family and personal concerns. Despite the growing availability of alternative religious and spiritual options today, pilgrimage remains a meaningful and widely practiced activity among women in the region. While women's participation in pilgrimage is evident, scholarly research on this subject, especially in North Kazakhstan, remains limited. This study addresses that gap through extensive fieldwork, including participant observation at the shrines, interviews with pilgrims and shrine keepers and workers, digital ethnography, and archival research. These methods yielded rich, in-depth data, which are analyzed using a range of theoretical frameworks, including memory, liminality and *communitas*, agency, and others.

The findings show that pilgrimage holds deep significance for women, who play different roles, from transmitters of religious and cultural knowledge to active agents in shaping sacred landscapes. These sacred spaces function as places of community building and social support through storytelling on history and genealogy, miracles and dreams, and the *bata* blessing practice. Additionally, they help with spiritual exploration and non-institutional worship, where women can access traditional healers and shamans and participate in New Age religious movements such as *Ata Zholy*. Pilgrimage allows women to create spiritual networks, negotiate their roles in Islamic and local traditions, and contribute to the ongoing vitality of sacred sites in North Kazakhstan. Generally, this research contributes original empirical data, highlights underrepresented regional case studies, and offers an analytical perspective on women's religious practices in Kazakhstan.

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Author's declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Note on Transliteration

I use the BGN/PCGN 1979 system for romanizing Kazakh words and names. Proper names of authors are cited as they appear in the original publications. When an author's name is spelled differently in the source (such as in Russian-language publications or newspapers), that version is kept in the references. However, in the main text, I use the standardized Kazakh romanization for well-known figures.

For example, Baurdzhan Momysh-uly is cited in the references as it appears in a Russian-language book, but in the main text, I use the Kazakh transliteration Baūyrzhan Momyshuly. Similarly, Yusuf Kopeyev is used in references to match the spelling in the newspaper, while the common form Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly is used throughout the main body.

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Introduction

For many years, pilgrimage has served as an opportunity for women to travel (Lambert-Hurley et al. 2022), engage in broader activities, seek solutions to family problems through spiritual means (Stasevich 2011), and, significantly, express their devotion and spirituality outside the domestic sphere. In Muslim societies, visiting sacred sites has often been more accessible to women than attending mosques, which are traditionally perceived as male-dominated spaces (Tasar 2017, 20). Despite their active participation, women have long remained a “silent majority” in pilgrimage practices. Today, most women can travel freely without male companions, pray in mosques without criticism, and access alternative methods for resolving family issues, including psychological counseling. Yet, they continue to undertake pilgrimages in large numbers, demonstrating that these journeys fulfill needs beyond the practical, whether social, spiritual, or emotional.

When considering women's pilgrimage in Kazakhstan, the most prominent shrines are often associated with female saints, such as Domalaq Ana, Qarashash Ana, Begim Ana, Gaūhar Ana, and Aysha Bībi, most of which are located in southern Kazakhstan. In contrast, North Kazakhstan is not typically associated with the female shrines. Moreover, it has often been portrayed as less “Kazakh” than other regions due to its proximity to Russia, its large Russian-speaking population, and the impact of Soviet policies such as the Virgin Lands campaign, which is often blamed for the destruction of sacred sites. However, North Kazakhstan has a rich historical and cultural heritage, extensive sacred landscape, and active pilgrimage practices. Specifically, the shrines of Qabanbay Batyr (1692–1770) and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly (1858–1931) stand out as significant landmarks contributing to the region’s spiritual and historical landscape. Although these shrines are not dedicated to female saints, they welcome

a significant number of women pilgrims who preserve and transmit oral narratives, strengthen communal memory, and connect these sites with broader sacred geographies. Furthermore, women visit these shrines with traditional wishes, seeking help for marital and reproductive issues.

Research Aim, Scope, and Objectives

This study aims to investigate narratives and practices surrounding women's pilgrimage in contemporary North Kazakhstan, presenting two case studies, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine in Aqmola region and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine in Pavlodar region. In particular, it explores why women visit these shrines, what role pilgrimage plays in their lives, and how gender affects their experience. These two sites offer a comparative perspective on how pilgrimage functions at North Kazakhstan shrines, highlighting both their interconnectedness and their distinct characteristics. Although my primary focus is on women's pilgrimage, I did not exclude male participants from my observations and interviews. Many groups have women and men in them, the shrine keepers are men, and mixed-gender interactions occur within these sacred spaces. However, this study foregrounds women's voices, as the majority of my interviews were conducted with women and centered on their experiences. As a woman researcher, I found it easier to establish rapport with female pilgrims, whether sitting on the designated women's side at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine or sharing communal spaces at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's complex.

In this study, I define a pilgrim as any person who visits the site, regardless of their motivations or level of religious devotion. Although there is ongoing debate surrounding distinctions between pilgrimage, religious tourism, and other forms of travel, I adopt a simplified approach, treating these locations as *qasīetti*, sacred sites and places of worship. Consequently, I consider all visitors as pilgrims within this context. Regarding language use

and terminology, I employ the terms *ziyaratshy* in Kazakh and *palomnik* in Russian to refer to pilgrims. While Kazakh also has the term *qazhylyq*, it is generally associated with the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In contrast, *ziyarat* typically refers to local pilgrimage practices and visits to cemeteries, which these sacred sites often encompass.

The *ziyarat* pilgrimage is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing religious, social, political, and economic dimensions. I will attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of this process, investigate the roles played by the two shrines within their respective regional contexts, and explore the underlying motivations that drive individuals to undertake the pilgrimage. I will also look into how sacred places shape pilgrims' identities, local memories, and their relationship with the state. The main research objectives are to describe the main practices and narratives of women's pilgrimage at these shrines; to explain the primary motivations for pilgrimage, and what are its defining characteristics; to trace the changes of pilgrimage over time; to examine the state's influence on pilgrimage and sacred places; to explore the women's narratives and practices related to local culture and regional identity.

This study approaches pilgrimage on multiple levels. On the personal level, it examines individual experiences, motivations, and the personal meanings women attribute to pilgrimage. Women who shared their experiences during fieldwork provide insight into their role in preserving, interpreting, and reshaping shrine traditions.

On the community and regional level, this dissertation investigates how pilgrimage contributes to local identity formation, imagined communities (Benedict Anderson), and *communitas* (Victor Turner). This includes examining how sacred sites function as instruments of identity, how pilgrims form connections through shared practices, and the role of commemorative rituals. The surrounding landscape and spatial narratives also play a crucial role in shaping these experiences.

Further, on the national level, this work explores the significance of these shrines within broader regional and national contexts. This includes how diverse groups of people visit and engage with these sites, and how pilgrimage fosters connections across Kazakhstan. Finally, on the state and global levels, it analyzes the historical role of these shrines, their connection to broader Islamic practices, and their place within both national and global religious landscapes. This includes assessing state policies and interventions in shaping or regulating pilgrimage.

Literature Review

There is an extensive scholarship on pilgrimage in Central Asia that examines it from various perspectives, including the state's roles, religious authorities, national identity, and gender experiences. However, research on the latter is limited, and hardly any work has primarily focused on women's pilgrimage. Most scholars mention women's pilgrimage as a secondary topic when discussing overall aspects of pilgrimage, women's religiosity, or related issues. Nevertheless, the existing body of research helps analyze pilgrimage practices within broader contexts such as nation-building activities, religion and traditions, historical perspectives, gender and authority, and related topics. Pilgrimage is a meaningful practice across different religions and cultures, and throughout this dissertation, I draw on works from diverse contexts and regional studies for a comprehensive analysis. However, in this literature review, I will concentrate on scholarship from Central Asia.

One of the central topics in recent works is the role of shrines and sacred sites in the broader state-building and national identity strengthening efforts. In Kazakhstan, the Sacred Geography program, followed by the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's article "Course Towards the Future: Modernization of Kazakhstan's Identity" (2017), increased the popularity of the sacred sites and the investigation of them. The program itself and the selection of the

national sacred sites became the objects of research. Thus, philosophers and anthropologists Kulshat Medeuova and Ulbolsyn Sandybaeva (2018) analyzed the Sacred Geography program and its commemorative character. They argue that the program aims at the unity of the nation and commemorates both “the national heroes, batyr, and aulie”, and the local practices if they “support the idea of integrity” (444). Historian Nikolay Tsyrempilov, anthropologist Ulan Bigozhin, and Batyrkhan Zhumabayev (2021) analyze the program and argue that it aims for “strengthening the political dominance of the Kazakh majority” (705). The list of 100 sacred objects of national importance, created within the framework of the program, further demonstrates “ideological focus” (711) and “the tendency toward ethnic nationalism” (714) by promoting some places and neglecting others. Therefore, the sacred sites play a significant role in the nation’s ideological policy.

The sacred places are important not only in the national but also in the local context since they represent local history, religiosity, and culture, as well as their connection with global Islam. In Kazakhstan, Bigozhin (2022) investigates the sainthood of Beket Ata in West Kazakhstan, Mangghyshlaq, and the significance of this shrine for local tribes as a warrior, saint, the person who connects them with global Islam, “larger Central Asian tradition of saintly families” such as “association with the Prophet’s lineage” (149). In other work, Bigozhin (2019) investigates the North Kazakhstan’s shrine, the current state of religion and sacred lineages on the example of the Īsabek Īshan’s shrine in Aqkol.

One of the foundational works on the religion in Kazakhstan is anthropologist Bruce Privratsky’s *Muslim Turkistan Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (2001), which explored religious practices and the shrines in the Türkistan region. Privratsky gave an extensive analysis of various aspects of religion, starting from the domestic rituals, such as preparing food for ancestors’ spirits, and continuing with the broader religious practices, the pilgrimage itself, the role of qozhas' lineages in the Qozha Akhmet Yasaūi complex, the traditional healing rituals,

and others. This work is a valuable source for analyzing both the spatial dynamics of pilgrimage, the continuities and differences between Southern and Northern Kazakhstan, and the temporal changes over the past 20 years.

In Kyrgyzstan, geographer Vincent Artman and anthropologist Julie McBrien investigate the broader questions of religion and nation, the ethnic and religious identities, and their coexistence. McBrien (2017) analyzed the religious situation in Bazar-Korgon (Kyrgyzstan), where some people had difficulties with religious identity, belonging, and faith. McBrien described their interest in religion, on the one hand, and the impact of the Soviet heritage on the other, the paradoxical situation of being born Muslims but being atheists (120). Artman (2019) also analyzed the identity questions in Kyrgyzstan, the traditional Kyrgyz Islam as the national theology (1738). He discussed the anxieties towards some Islamic practices, such as the hijab wearing, and the efforts of the state authorities and the ethno-nationalists to promote traditional, non-radical Islam. The situation in Kyrgyzstan is similar to other Central Asian countries, where Islam coexisted with local traditions.

Historical perspectives of pilgrimages, gender, and religion

The prominent works are focused on the history of religion, pilgrimages, sacred sites, and their role in society. Historian Allen J. Frank investigates various aspects of religion in Central Asia. His works are valuable for understanding Islamic traditions in the Kazakh Steppe in different periods from the 18th century (2003) to the Soviet time (2019). Frank's book, *Bukhara and the Muslims of Russia: Sufism, Education and the Paradox of Islamic Prestige* (2012), explores Islamic education and religious networks, demonstrating the features of Muslim education. Frank's article on Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly's legacy (2013) and his book on Sufism and miracles during the Soviet period (2019) are particularly important for this dissertation. Generally, Frank's works provide a foundation for understanding the historical

dynamics of religion, the features of northern Kazakhstan's Islamic landscape, and its connections with other regions such as the Volga-Ural area and Bukhara.

The state of religion, shrines, religious figures, and rituals in the Soviet period was explored by historians Paolo Sartori, Sergey Abashin, Eren Tasar, and others. Their works show that in many cases, religious rituals were not abandoned but coexisted with the Soviet realms. Thus, Abashin (2014) demonstrates the informal presence of Muslimness in the Soviet public sphere. Tasar (2018) shows how religion adapts to different conditions, describing the Hazrat Ayub holy spring, which was transformed into the Jalalabat resort. The Qozha families of this spring continue to work on the resort as gardeners and other employees. Sartori (2019) analyzes the pilgrimages in Soviet times in Khorezm and writes that shrines “functioned as public spaces in which forms of communal organization were sublimated into practices of saintly commemoration” (404). He also argues that there should not be a division between official and unofficial Islam in exploring Soviet heritage and the necessity of using different accounts, such as dastans, qissa, hikaya, which were labeled as legends in the USSR. In other work, Sartori (2024) also emphasizes the significance of the shrines in the Soviet period as the “memory spaces” enable to narrate the Islamic history through oral narratives, communities around them (145).

Gender, Pilgrimage, and Religion

From the different works, we see that women played and continue to play important roles in pilgrimages from a historical perspective. The position of Soviet women and the transformation of their lives are demonstrated in the works of Douglas Northrop (2003), Marianne Kamp (2006), and Zhanat Kundakbaeva (2017). Northrop and Kamp analyze the Hujum, the Soviet campaign aimed to liberate Muslim women of the East, and its

consequences. Kundakbaeva focuses on Kazakh women's position and the construction of the Soviet women's model.

The question of the religious authority of women and their participation in religious rituals is important to understand the present activities of women in sacred places. There are special categories of women, such as *otin*, *dastarhanji*, and *bibi-khalife*, who help others with pilgrimages, education, and other questions. Ordinary women visited sacred places to fulfill desires for fertility, healing, successful marriage, and others. Kamp (2006) examines the condition of women in Uzbekistan before and during the Hujum campaign and writes that they did not usually attend mosques but gathered for prayer led by an *otin*. Deniz Kandiyoti and Nadira Azimova (2004) also write that the *otin* (lady), together with the *dastarhanji*, are religious specialists who played important roles in the transmission of rituals and practices (329). Svetlana Peshkova (2013) further examines women's activities and opportunities in society, interviewing Hafiza-Opa, the prominent Uzbek women's activist.

For women, the pilgrimages relate to the questions of gaining authority in their families and communities. As Inga Stasevich (2011) and Aksana Ismailbekova (2015) demonstrate, women's authority in traditional societies was connected with the ability of women to give birth to healthy children, being a good mother, wife, and mother-in-law. If women cannot fulfill these expectations, they usually ask for help from senior women, fortune tellers, visit shrines, conduct different rituals, etc.

Generally, there is a wide range of resources on pilgrimages, the relationships between state and religion, the historical development, the specific practices, and other aspects in Central Asia. However, despite the cultural and religious significance of women's pilgrimage in Central Asia, there is a notable gap in academic research on it. Women's pilgrimage, while usually briefly mentioned in historical and anthropological works, is rarely the primary subject

of research, especially in the context of North Kazakhstan. The northern shrines, particularly those dedicated to Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, remain underexplored in this regard. There is not only a lack of research on contemporary women's pilgrimage practices, but also on the historical aspects of it in Kazakhstan. Existing works on Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly largely concentrate on their biographies, historical, cultural significance, and literary legacy (in the case of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly), with little attention paid to how contemporary pilgrimage practices, especially those involving women, have evolved around their memorial complexes.

This study seeks to address this gap by combining anthropological and historical approaches. Through the methods of participant observation and interviews, it examines women's actions and narratives at the chosen shrines. At the same time, it draws on archival materials and historical sources to understand the historical perspectives, the state policies on religion and pilgrimage, the cultural memory, and how it shapes women's experiences at the shrines today.

The theoretical frameworks and methodology

The pilgrimage is a multidimensional phenomenon, and this dissertation draws on a range of theoretical frameworks to analyze its diverse aspects. I employ the concepts of collective and cultural memory developed by Pierre Nora (1989), and Bruce Privratsky's work about collective memory and religion among Kazakhs (*Muslim Turkistan Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*, 2001) in the analysis of the shrines, their role in the local and broader landscapes, as well as the state commemoration activities. I apply Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969) to examine the women's interactions in the shrine, their joined communities, and the groups visited by the religious movements, such as *Ata Zholy*. In analyzing the figures of Qabanbay

Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, their miracles, I draw on John Renard's examination of *wali* (saints) (*Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood*, 2008). The concepts of religious language (Webb Keane, 1997) and embodiment (Thomas Csordas, 1990) are applied to the analysis of the pilgrimage practices. Next, Inga Stasevich's work, on women's status in traditional society (*The social status of a woman among the Kazakhs: traditions and modernity*, 2011), and Saba Mahmood's work, on women's agency (*Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2005) have become seminal theoretical frameworks for exploring women's experiences at shrines. Building upon these foundational studies, my research also incorporates additional significant scholarship that investigates the shrines, pilgrimage, and gender in Central Asia and beyond. I introduce the primary and supplementary theoretical sources at the beginning of the chapters.

The primary method of data collection for this study was ethnographic fieldwork conducted at two shrines, Qabanbay Batyr's and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's, from summer 2023 to summer 2024. The differences in location and shrine settings influenced the duration and frequency of my visits. Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, located near Astana, was more accessible, allowing for 60 visits over a year, with each visit lasting approximately three hours, totaling around 168 hours of observation. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, situated in the Pavlodar region, 87 km from the nearest city, Ekibastuz, required fewer but more extended stays. I visited this shrine 6 times, spending a total of 15 days there, which provided in-depth and saturated data. Furthermore, my prior research experience in the Bayanaūyl region, including its sacred sites, particularly Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, during my Master's thesis, gave me additional familiarity with the field.

Fieldwork methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations, many of which took place over *dastarqan* (communal meals) and other

social interactions. Given the tradition of shared meals at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, these gatherings became valuable spaces for data collection, where pilgrims exchanged stories about their journeys, personal experiences, and miracle narratives.

In total, I conducted 83 interviews and *dastarqan* conversations across both shrines, speaking with both pilgrims and shrine keepers:

- **Qabanbay Batyr's shrine:** 47 interviews (23 audio-recorded, 24 noted).
- **Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine:** 36 interviews and conversations (15 formal interviews—8 recorded, 7 noted—and 21 *dastarqan* and museum conversations).

The study focuses on women's pilgrimages; therefore, the majority of respondents were women. However, I also conducted interviews with male pilgrims and shrine keepers to gain a broader perspective.

Field notes and numerous photos and videos were collected as well.

Additional data collection methods included:

- **Visits to related sacred sites:** In the Aqmola region, I explored the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route, which includes the graves of Berdibek Khan, Ormanbet Bī, Qyryqbay Baqsy, Niyaz Bī, and Qabanbay Batyr. In Bayanaūyl, I visited other significant sites, such as Qongyr Äülē cave, Sultanmakmut Torayghyrov's shrine, and historical mosques and monuments in Bayanaūyl village. These visits helped contextualize the shrines within broader sacred networks.
- **Archival and museum research:** I consulted archival records (State Archive of Pavlodar Region, as well as archives in Almaty and Astana, though the latter yielded limited findings). Additionally, I examined exhibits in the National Museum and the

State Military History Museum of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan and consulted their library for historical sources. Archival materials from Pavlodar provided insights into the Soviet-era history of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine.

- **Digital ethnography:** I monitored social media discussions, comments, and blog posts about both shrines. I also analyzed Instagram pages managed by shrine keeper, YouTube channels associated with *Ata Zholy*, and other online sources to examine contemporary discourses surrounding these sites.

For data analysis, I employed qualitative methods, including content analysis, coding, and thematic grouping. Interviews were transcribed, key patterns were identified, and narratives were categorized based on recurring themes. Additionally, secondary sources, such as biographies of the saints by the shrine keepers and texts written by descendants of the shrine figures, provided further contextual understanding.

Contributions and Significance

This research contributes to the scholarship on pilgrimage in Central Asia by addressing the absence of focused research on women's pilgrimage in North Kazakhstan. While the existing works explored the historical, literary, and religious significance of these figures, the contemporary pilgrimage practices surrounding their shrines, especially women's ones, were overlooked. Significantly, this is the first in-depth case study focused on women's pilgrimage in northern Kazakhstan.

One of the key contributions of this research is its interdisciplinary approach, combining anthropological fieldwork with historical analysis. Drawing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials, the study offers a multi-layered view of women's pilgrimage practices. This interdisciplinarity allows for a richer exploration of both the

contemporary meanings of pilgrimage to women and the historical processes that have shaped these practices over time. Overall, this study provides new, rich empirical data, introduces underrepresented regional cases, and offers an analytical perspective on women's religious practices in Kazakhstan.

The growing popularity of Qabanbay Batyr's and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrines demonstrates the broader efforts to reclaim and sacralize the northern steppe. This region is sometimes presented as "less Kazakh", but the activities of the state and locals reinforce its connection to Kazakh heritage. This is the dual process, on the one hand, activated by the state through building the shrines, monuments, supporting sacred sites, and research initiatives. On the other hand, local people, and not only, contribute to the popularity through visitation, sharing the knowledge, and increasing visibility in social media. I argue that together these dynamics form part of the movement to re-sacralize North Kazakhstan and strengthen regional and national identity. Women play a crucial role in this process by engaging in pilgrimage not only for personal spirituality but also as participants in constructing narratives of national pride and historical continuity.

Chapter Outlines

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters.

The first chapter introduces the research field by presenting two historical figures—Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly—whose shrines are central to this study. This chapter addresses the reasons for selecting these particular shrines and the narratives surrounding these figures. It also explores the historical significance of Qabanbay Batyr, the debates around the authenticity and sanctity of his shrine, and the role of the state in sacralizing the site, particularly in connection with the construction of the National Pantheon nearby. The

second half is devoted to the figure of Mäshhür Zhüsip as both a scholar and a spiritual leader, the secular and religious interpretations of his legacy, and the historical transformations of his shrine. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how these sites became sacred spaces and how they function within broader spiritual, historical, and political contexts.

The second chapter focuses on the main activities inside the shrines, exploring both commonalities and differences between the two sites. The shared practices include the key motivations for pilgrimage, prayer rituals, gendered behavior at the shrines, and the significance of oral traditions such as *bata* (blessings). At Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, pilgrims engage in intellectual discussions about genealogies (*shezhire*), national history, and heroic narratives. At Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, the main emphasis is on dreams, miracle narratives, and spiritual revelations. By analyzing these ritualistic and narrative dimensions, I show the role of shrines in shaping religious and national identity, fostering spiritual experiences, and serving as spaces for cultural transmission.

The third chapter focuses on women's experiences and roles in the pilgrimage landscape. Following Saba Mahmood's (2005) notion that religious agency may be enacted through embodied practices rather than resistance to norms, I argue that women's pilgrimage is not only an act of devotion but a form of agency, self-expression, and community-building in the relatively patriarchal shrines. Sacred spaces extend beyond individual shrines, forming interconnected pilgrimage routes that women actively construct and sustain. I observed that many female pilgrims did not limit their journeys to one site but engaged in a broader network of sacred places, reinforcing regional religious traditions and personal spiritual pathways. Religious hybridity and agency are central to women's engagement with pilgrimage. I examine how women participate in and shape new religious movements, particularly *Ata Zholy*, which blends traditional Kazakh spiritual practices with contemporary interpretations of Islam. For

many women pilgrims, their personal beliefs, deeply spiritual worldview, and embodied practices in the shrine shape pilgrimage as a profoundly private and meaningful experience.

The dissertation concludes by synthesizing the key findings across these three chapters, emphasizing how pilgrimage functions as heritage, memory, culture, tradition, identity, recreation, and a site of negotiation between state and popular religious practices.

By addressing these themes, this study contributes to the broader understanding of women's pilgrimage in Kazakhstan, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of gender, religion, and cultural heritage in contemporary sacred landscapes.

Chapter I The introduction to the shrines, towards the shrine, and the saint

The North Kazakhstan region is home to various sacred sites, with the most prominent and widely recognized being the shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly. I argue that these shrines represent a unique case of sacralization, influenced by historical narratives, state involvement, and pilgrimage practices. Drawing on late sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1912/1995) theory of the sacred and profane, sacralization refers to the process of creating sacred things, ideas, humans, and other objects by society (215). In this context, sacralization is the social process of the transformation of the burial sites into revered shrines, and broadly, the creation of a sacred landscape by connecting several sacred objects. My analysis explores the reasons for Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrines' popularity, the efforts invested in their promotion, and the ways in which these sites have become active pilgrimage destinations.

The broader regional context is also significant. The North Kazakhstan region includes the North Kazakhstan, Qostanay, Pavlodar, and Aqmola regions and has sometimes been subject to debates regarding its cultural and national identity. Due to its proximity to Russia, there are persistent stereotypes that the population is highly Russified and less engaged with Kazakh cultural and religious traditions. These narratives, in turn, influence political discourses, with some even questioning the region's belonging to Kazakhstan. However, historically, Kazakh tribes have long inhabited these territories, and their cultural and spiritual heritage remains deeply embedded in the landscape. Pilgrimage traditions and the veneration of saints serve as crucial means of asserting historical continuity and cultural belonging.

While South Kazakhstan has historically been associated with prominent pilgrimage sites, such as the shrine of Qozha Akhmet Yasaūi, Arystan Bab, Ükasha Ata, Domalaq Ana, and Aysha Bībi, other regions, including West and East Kazakhstan, also feature well-known sacred places such as Beket Ata, Shopan Ata, Qozy Körpesh – Bayan Sulū, and Abay-Shäkärım complexes. In contrast, Northern Kazakhstan has generally been less recognized in the national pilgrimage landscape. As Tsyrempilov, Bigozhin, and Zhumabayev (2021) write, implementing the Sacred Geography program in this area met struggles as “an equal number of sites for the registry” (711) due to the different events, including the consequences of the Virgin Lands campaign. Many of its sacred sites have only recently gained prominence¹. However, their contemporary significance stems from both historical factors and modern revival efforts.

Qabanbay Batyr’s and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrines align with a broader trend of constructing memorial complexes and mazars following Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991. Many of these projects were designed by the same architects, including Sadūaqas Aghytaev and Bek İbraev, who were also involved in the creation of sites such as the Rayymbek Batyr’s mazar (1992) in Almaty, Abay-Shäkärım memorial complex (1995) in the Abay region, the memorial complex of Qarasay and Aghyntay Batyrs (1999) in the North Kazakhstan region, and others. These memorials function as symbols of national identity and self-consciousness in the post-independence period.

I have chosen to focus on Qabanbay Batyr’s and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrines because they are located in North Kazakhstan, and represent relatively new yet evolving sacred spaces. They are different from conventional women’s pilgrimage sites in Kazakhstan, which are associated with the female saints, and the traditional wishes of the family, children.

¹ Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine was built in 2000, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s was rebuilt in 2006.

Nevertheless, women constitute a significant portion of pilgrims and make significant contributions to the pilgrimage. These shrines are significant yet underrepresented in research. They show both similarities and differences in terms of their development and reception. The study of these two shrines provides insight into different strategies and processes of sacralization. It highlights the significance of the regional sacred landscape in the case of Mäshhür Zhüsip, a figure whose burial site is undisputed and deeply integrated into local spiritual traditions. Here, I understand a sacred landscape as a geographical area that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, holding spiritual significance for the local community. In contrast, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine exemplifies the sacralization of a historical figure, despite ongoing debates surrounding his burial site. Additionally, analyzing these two shrines, both of which are strongly interconnected with other sacred sites or the region, offers a more comprehensive understanding of pilgrimage networks and the dynamics of sacred space in Northern Kazakhstan, which has been understudied.

In this chapter, I provide the background of my research, outlining the fieldwork locations and the figures central to my study. I examine the processes of commemoration and sacralization by introducing the key figures and their shrines. The chapter is structured around four core arguments. First, Qabanbay Batyr (1692–1770), a revered ancestor and batyr, whose legacy is central to the contemporary pilgrimage and national identity, despite debates over his burial site. Secondly, the state has supported the Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and the subsequent sacralization processes by constructing the National Pantheon nearby. Thirdly, Mäshhür Zhüsip's (1858–1931) significance in the region lies not only in his roles as a scholar, ethnographer, and poet but also in his status as one of the “last classical” saints, whose legacy is reinforced through widespread miracle and seer narratives. Fourthly, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine is deeply embedded in regional pilgrimage networks and represents the transformation of attitude and policy towards sacred sites.

Generally, these case studies illustrate how figures with diverse backgrounds, whether military leaders or scholars, can be transformed into revered persons, attracting pilgrims who continue to engage with these sites as spaces of spiritual significance and communal identity. These figures are perceived differently by pilgrims; while being both revered as ancestral spirits (*aruaqtar*), their recognition as saints varies. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is seen as the “classical” saint, who was actively engaged in religious activities, known for his strong Islamic devotion and miracle performance. Qabanbay Batyr, in contrast, is not usually associated with the religious practices. Pilgrims’ perception of him is different; while he is commemorated and respected, many perceive him as an ancestor rather than a saint, although some pilgrims refer to him as the saint *äülīe*. Generally, despite the complexity of his status, Qabanbay Batyr is widely regarded as an ancestral figure to whom people perform pilgrimages and ask for support.

Qabanbay Batyr and the debates around the shrine

Kazakhstan has different local and national batyrs, and Qabanbay Batyr is among the most well-known of them. His legacy has been shaped by historical, religious, political, toponymic, and national narratives. Despite ongoing debates among scholars, the descendants of Qabanbay Batyr and the broader public regarding the authenticity of his shrine, it has become an important pilgrimage site. The popularity of Batyr is the result of the combined activities of state-driven promotion and efforts by local communities who actively engage in preserving and transmitting his memory.

Commemoration practices related to Qabanbay Batyr include monuments appearing in various Kazakhstan regions and even one in Turkey. They include monuments built in Üsharal (Almaty region, 2002), Semey (Abay region, 2004), Istanbul (2006), Taldyqorghana (Zhetisay region, 2008), Türkistan (Türkistan region, 2010), the Bogas area (East Kazakhstan region, 2012), and in Öskemen (East Kazakhstan region, 2014). Numerous streets and villages bear his

name, including Qabanbay Batyr village in the Aqmola region and settlements named Qabanbay in the Abay, East Kazakhstan, Türkistan, and Zhetisū regions. His shrine has been officially recognized as a significant heritage site and included in the *100 Sacred Places of Kazakhstan* within the framework of the Sacred Geography program. Furthermore, Qabanbay Batyr's memorial complex now incorporates the National Pantheon of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a resting place for individuals who have contributed to the country's development. His figure also plays an important role in Kazakhstan's history textbooks. Generally, Qabanbay Batyr's figure is commemorated through processes at schools, universities, public spaces, and maps.

For Kazakhstani people, Qabanbay Batyr is a brave, strong person who always won in battles, who loved his homeland, and who defended it. In addition to being a batyr for visitors of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, he is the *arūaq* (ancestor's spirit), to whom they perform the pilgrimage. The public image of Qabanbay Batyr is constructed from history books and different literary works, and I will start with the biographical data of batyr, based on these works.

The main sources of the batyr's life and deeds are *dastans* (oral epic poems). According to the shrine keeper Kamal Äbdirakhman, there are 18 of them. My analysis primarily relies on secondary materials that include excerpts from these *dastans*. The most relevant works include Äbdirakhman's *Qarakerey Qabanbay* (2009) and Zeynolla Sänik and Beysenghalī Sadykhan's *Qarakerey Qabanbay: Angyz, Zertteū, Qıssalar (Qarakerey Qabanbay: Legend, Research, Stories)* (1991). In addition, I use Volume 58 of *Babalar Sözi* (Abylqasymov Alpysbaeva, et al. 2010), dedicated to batyrs' dastans.

Kamal Äbdirakhman is the researcher and the shrine keeper of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, who has published two books and numerous articles about batyr. Äbdirakhman has over 40

years of experience in the research of Qabanbay Batyr's legacy, participating in expeditions to China, Russia, and Mongolia to find information about batyr. His second book, *Qarakerey Qabanbay* (2009), not only provides biographical insights but also examines various debates surrounding the batyr's burial site. The book includes historical context, perspectives from scholars, and testimonies from residents of Qabanbay Batyr village regarding the location of his grave. The research draws from *dastans*, oral histories, historical documents, and *shezhire*. Sänik and Sadykhan's book (1991) offers a broader exploration of Qabanbay Batyr's legacy, analyzing *dastans* about him and other batyrs. Both works contain valuable excerpts from preserved poems.

In addition to these books, numerous academic articles and digital sources explore Qabanbay Batyr's historical role. The *batyr* institution itself is a topic of significant scholarly interest in Kazakhstan. The works examine the historiography of batyrs (Kuanbay, 2022), as well as the main functions of the batyr's institute, and their relation to patriotism and heroism, memory practices around them, monuments, and others. Qabanbay Batyr is frequently mentioned among other renowned batyrs.

Beyond academic and historical studies, fictionalized portrayals of Qabanbay Batyr further shape his image. He is the central figure in Qabdesht Zhumadilov's novel *Daraboz* (1996) and Zeynolla Tileūzhanuly's *Qarakerey Qabanbay* (2009). He also appears in Iliyas Esenberlin's *Nomads* (1976), particularly in the second volume, which focuses on the Kazakh-Dzungar wars, the siege of Türkistan, and Qabanbay Batyr's role in these events. Using these materials, I will examine the key biographical events of Qabanbay Batyr, his significance in Kazakh history, and how he is revered today as an ancestral spirit.

Qabanbay Batyr's real name was Erasyl Qozhaghululy; his father Qozhaghul was a batyr, who died when Qabanbay was 7 years old (Sänik and Sadykhan 1991, 58). Born in 1692,

Qabanbay Batyr was from the Nayman tribe of the Middle Zhüz; he died in 1770. While he is most widely known as Qabanbay, he was also called Izbasar, Daraboz, Nar Bala, and Khan Batyr at different points in his life. The origins of these nicknames vary, but most sources agree that from an early age, Qabanbay Batyr demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities and physical strength, earning the nicknames Izbasar and Nar Bala. However, he became most famous for his role in the Kazakh-Dzungar wars (17–18 centuries).

In the 17th century, a confrontation arose between the Kazakh Khanate (established in 1465-1466) and the Dzungar or Oyrat Khanate (established in 1635). The Oyrat tribes, divided into Derbets, Khoshouts, Torgouts, and Eluts, inhabited the foothills of Altay, Tarbaghatay, and Ertis from the 15-16 centuries (Äbil 2022, 174-175). Later, the tribes split; some migrated to Tibet, some to Edil (Volga), and the rest created the Dzungar Khanate in 1635 (175). The conflicts between Kazakhs and Dzungars began in the 17th century and lasted until the mid-18th century.

This period was crucial in Kazakh history for several reasons. One of them connected to the traumatic memory: the wars led to the loss of many people. During the Kazakh-Dzungar wars, the very survival of the Kazakh people was at stake. One of its most tragic episodes was the Great Disaster or Barefooted Flight (*Aqtaban shubyryndy, Alqaköl sulama*) of 1723–1727, when large numbers of Kazakhs were forced to flee their lands, losing their livestock and suffering devastating casualties, including among the elderly and children. Another major consequence was the Kazakh Zhüzes' acceptance of the Russian protectorate (Younger and Middle Zhüzes in 1731). Furthermore, at this time, the role of batyrs and sultans (title of Kazakh nobility) in society strengthened (Äbil 2022, 176). Many batyrs emerged as key defenders of the Kazakh steppe, including Qanzhyghaly Bögenbay (1680–1775 or 1778), Kerey Er Zhänibek (1714–1792), Shapyrashty Naūryzbay (1706–1781), Bayan Qasabolatuly

(1714-1772), Rayymbek Tökeuly (1705-1785), and others. Batyrs were an important part of society, demonstrating high physical and moral qualities, being at the center of political life, and shaping the territorial integrity of present-day Kazakhstan.

Qabanbay Batyr served as a military commander in several strategically significant battles, including: “the Battle of Ayagoz (1717), the Battle of Shubarteniz (1728), the Battle of Bulanty (1729), the Battle of Anyrakay (1730), the Battle of Ili (1730), the Battle of Shagan (1735), the Battle of Shorgin (1740)” (Zhaqsylykov 2022, 118). He also played a crucial role in the defense of Türkistan in 1724, when the city was under siege by the Dzungar army. It was during this defense that Qabanbay Batyr earned the title Khan Batyr (Äbdirakhman 2009, 6–7). Notably, he is remembered for never suffering a defeat; he fought in 103 battles and, allegedly, won in all of them. His reputation as a fearless leader and military strategist cemented his place in Kazakh history and collective memory.

Dastans about Qabanbay Batyr share common features with those of other batyrs, including portrayals of enemies as honorable and equal opponents, depictions of strength and endurance from childhood, the presence of great companions, and loyal animal friends (Sänik and Sadykhan 1991). The level of an opponent often served as a measure of a batyr’s greatness, and Qabanbay Batyr was frequently depicted as confronting only the strongest persons from enemy ranks. One example is his battle with the Dzungar Batyr Myqtym, who, like Qabanbay Batyr, adhered to the strict codes of combat honor (11). The works often mention the horse of Qabanbay Batyr named Qūbas, highlighting the traditional importance of horses, particularly for batyrs in the battles. While Qabanbay Batyr shares common features with other batyrs in Kazakh epics, he is distinguished by the weight of the strategic decisions and responsibilities he assumed during wartime, such as his leadership of the defense during the siege of Türkistan.

The partners of batyrs usually supported them, and Qabanbay Batyr was not an exception. His wife was Gaūhar Toktaūlqyzy, the sister of the Malaysary Batyr. She was known as the woman batyr and was distinguished by her intelligence and shooting accuracy (Imangaliyev 2015, 48). Gaūhar Batyr supported Qabanbay Batyr and fought alongside him in battles. Their daughter, Nazym, continued this tradition and became a batyr herself. These narratives of women batyrs contribute to the popularity of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine among pilgrims, particularly women, inspiring some of them. Generally, women respondents feel proud of the women of the past, who were respected in society, and demonstrate their power: "Before, it seemed to me that our women were stronger, and this wasn't so much noticed, that women should be weaker and so on ... Kazakhs never shut up women, the Amazons came from us^{2,3}. Moreover, pilgrims mention other powerful historical women, such as Tomīrīs, the queen of the Massagetae (around 570-520 BCE), sharing about how they inspired them, as well, "there are such people, warriors. And there is always a desire to imitate them, even though I am a woman. For example, there is the same Tomīrīs. Yes, she is also one of the great women"⁴. This is one of the reasons Qabanbay Batyr's shrine is popular among women, not all of them wish to perform pilgrimage with the traditional desires of family, but also to feel a connection with the past and get inspiration from the strong figures, including the women batyrs.

Qabanbay Batyr is known not only as a military leader but also commemorated as the ancestor spirit *arūaq*, so his burial place became a pilgrimage destination. Generally, many batyrs' graves in Kazakhstan have become sacred sites due to the heroic deeds of the batyrs and their efforts in protecting the land. However, their connection to religious devotion varies. Some batyrs, such as Beket Ata, were both warriors and deeply religious figures, while others,

² There are no reliable sources about the connection between Kazakh tribes and Amazons, but some myths circulating about it on the Internet, and the articles comparing women of the past with Amazons, which could be the reason for such an utterance.

³ Interview with the group of women, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 29, 2023.

⁴ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 23, 2024.

like Qabanbay Batyr, do not appear to have had strong religious affiliations. Particularly, he was not associated with the women's traditional wishes for family and children. Despite this, pilgrims regard Qabanbay Batyr as a partly saintly figure, highlighting his exceptional talent, which they view as a mark of Allah. They wondered how, in the times when there was no special education in the military arts, he was so impressive and explained it by divine intervention. Therefore, it is reasonable for them to pray here, for the general well-being, and specific reasons, particularly one woman mentioned how she prayed for the qualities of Qabanbay Batyr, which she also wants, including bravery, logic, leadership, and others. The presence of the family, Gaūhar Batyr and Nazym Batyr, also influences the women's pilgrimage. So, while not directly associating Qabanbay Batyr with the person who gives the wishes of marriage, children, and family, they view him as the ancestor, protector, and venerated figure who facilitates different questions and problems. His legacy carries historical, cultural, and religious significance, demonstrating how the memory of batyrs continues to shape Kazakh identity and spiritual traditions today.

The shrine and debates

Qabanbay Batyr's memorial complex was built in 2000 on the initiative of the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The main information about the memorial complex from the inscription says that the organizer of the construction of the complex was the Republican Federation of the National Equestrian Sport. Chairman: Qayrat Satybaldy. General contractor: Tigrokhaud firm, Almaty. General director of the Tigrokhaud firm Zhaūzhürek Ädil Khan Zheksenbayuly. Foreman of works: Äbitov Qazbek Bopauly. Project authors and architects: Saūmenov Aqzhayyq, Aghytaev Sadūaqas.

The shrine soon became a pilgrimage place; however, it sparked debates about its authenticity, which, with different intensity, continues today. The main sides were presented

by the shrine keeper Kamal Äbdirakhman, who supported the legitimacy of the shrine’s location, and famous Kazakh writer, poet, and editor Qabdesht Zhumadilov (1936–2021), who argued that Qabanbay Batyr’s grave is actually in East Kazakhstan. There were also other participants and hypotheses on the real location of the grave. Still, Äbdirakhman and Zhumadilov remained the most influential voices in shaping public knowledge of Qabanbay Batyr’s resting place. These debates demonstrate the importance of Qabanbay Batyr, the interest in history, and historical accuracy. To present this topic, I will first examine the construction and historical context of the shrine and then key debates over the burial site.



Figure 1. Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, June 2024, author’s photo

The construction of Qabanbay Batyr's memorial complex seems connected for some observers with the relocation of the capital from Almaty to Astana (that period Aqmola) in 1997, as part of efforts to reinforce the new capital's historical and cultural significance. While there is little direct discussion of this theory in public sources, Äbdirakhman (2009) indirectly addresses such speculations in his book: "The grave of Qarakerey Qabanbay batyr near the new capital of the country may also attract mystery seekers. But Astana probably has nothing to do with Qabanbay. Qarakerey Qabanbay will not be affected by the transfer of the capital to the region where Daraboz was buried. Khan Batyr is already a giant. His fame is enough. What we are looking for is the truth" (127). Here, the shrine's keeper emphasizes the historical legitimacy of the site. The debates surrounding the shrine thus reflect not only historical and academic concerns but also the evolving ways in which national figures are remembered and commemorated in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Shrine keeper Kamal Äbdirakhman is one of the key figures advocating for the location of Qabanbay Batyr's grave near Astana. He has presented his arguments in books and articles, most notably in the chapter "*Arqagha arnap, beyit soghyp. Ot ornyma qoyyngdar*" (Make the grave in Arqa⁵, bring the fire on my place) from his book *Qarakerey Qabanbay* (2009). This chapter is dedicated to defending the authenticity of the shrine's location and is also available online in Kazakh and Russian on Äbdirakhman's blog *NaimanKz* on the popular blogs platform *Yvision.kz*⁶. In this chapter, Äbdirakhman (2009) cites five main sources of knowledge about Qabanbay Batyr's burial site. Three of these were originally identified by Doctor of Philology Bolatzhan Abylqasymov: samples of orally transmitted folklore (comments of poets, legends, stories, poems), chronicles (genealogical legends), and historical documents (120).

⁵ Arqa is Sary-Arqa, the region of Kazakhstan, including the Aqmola region, where the shrine is located.

⁶ "NaimanKZ," *Yvision.kz*, accessed May 5, 2025. <https://yvision.kz/u/NaimanKZ>.

Äbdirakhman adds two additional sources: toponymics (names of places and waters) and Qarakerey Qabanbay Batyr's descendants' sayings (120). Based on these sources, he argues that the most logical location for Qabanbay Batyr's grave is precisely where the mazar stands today.

Äbdirakhman (2009) also addresses opposing views that claim either (1) the land was empty before the shrine's construction and the grave was never there, or (2) the grave belongs to a different Qabanbay, not the famous batyr. To counter the first claim, Äbdirakhman provides narratives from locals in nearby villages, such as Qyzylzhar, who state that the grave had long existed at the site but was destroyed in the 1950s (127). He also highlights the region's ancient sacred heritage:

If we dig deeper, the history of the Aqmola region stretches back at least 2,000–3,000 years. Near the Qarakerey Qabanbay mausoleum, there are numerous Scythian and Sak burial mounds. Most have been looted, but even in their current state, they serve as evidence that our ancestors lived in this area during that era (159).

Indeed, the collections of monuments demonstrate archaeological remains of a medieval settlement, cemeteries, and sacred mounds (*Collection of Historical and Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Kazakhstan* 2019, 58–59) in the region.

The second counterargument suggests that the grave was indeed located in this area, but belonged to another individual named Qabanbay. Some propose that the site could be the burial place of Qangzhyghaly Qabanbay Bī (a judge). Äbdirakhman (2009) refutes these claims. He points out that there is no mention of Qangzhyghaly Qabanbay Bī in *shezire* and that people from the Qangzhyghaly tribe in Ereymentaū are unfamiliar with him, making the location of

his burial in the Aqmola region unlikely (160). So, through these analyses, Äbdirakhman asserts that the current shrine indeed marks the true burial place of Qabanbay Batyr.

While there are no official state statements about the shrine, it appears to be the supported narrative, as seen from its inclusion in official lists and the construction of the National Pantheon nearby. Additionally, the continuous flow of pilgrims to the site demonstrates public belief in its authenticity, even though some visitors still ask the shrine keeper whether Qabanbay Batyr is truly buried there. However, there are other opinions according to which Qabanbay Batyr died and was buried in another place, suggesting locations ranging from other parts of Kazakhstan to China and Russia. The most vocal critic of the Aqmola shrine was the writer Qabdesht Zhumadilov, known as the author of the novel *Daraboz*, who argues that Qabanbay Batyr's actual grave is in the Tarbaghatay region of East Kazakhstan. Although Zhumadilov was not a professional historian or researcher of batyrs, he collected the information about Qabanbay Batyr for his novels, which may explain his confidence in the location of the grave.

The different opinions about the Qabanbay Batyr's grave coexisted without major conflict; however, in 2013, a series of articles published in the *Zhas Alash* newspaper sparked the debate, followed by a public discussion. The authors of these articles, Qabdesht Zhumadilov, Kamal Äbdirakhman, and Bolatbek Nasenov, presented their arguments, which divided the readers who took one side or another and shared their opinions on various media platforms. Both Äbdirakhman and Zhumadilov are from the Nayman tribe, the same as Qabanbay Batyr, which also explains their interest in the batyr, his legacy, and burial place.

Zhumadilov first expressed his opinion in the February 28, 2013, issue, but the debates started when Äbdirakhman wrote an opposite article answering not only *Zhas Alash's* article but also the previous accusation of Zhumadilov about the shrine's location in the Aqmola

region. Äbdirakhman's response, titled "Where is Qarakerey Qabanbay Batyr Buried? (Reply to the Writer Qabdesh Zhumadilov)," appeared in the newspaper on March 12, 2013. In his article, Äbdirakhman (2013) highlighted previous instances in which Zhumadilov had questioned the authenticity of the shrine. The examples are: "Because some people misrepresented to the public that an old cemetery near Astana is the grave of Qabanbay, and they erected a mausoleum there, without telling me or consulting me", and "Qarakerey Qabanbay batyr was buried in Sarybel on the eastern slope of Toqta Mountain according to his will". As the shrine keeper and Qabanbay Batyr's researcher, Äbdirakhman could not leave these words unanswered and gave an analysis of different sources, supporting the location of the shrine in the Aqmola region. He drew upon historical documents, oral traditions, and academic research.

The article by Äbdirakhman was noticed and soon, in the issue of April 16, 2013, Bolatbek Nasenov answered him with the article "We All Need the Truth as the Air". Nasenov, a Doctor of Historical Sciences and a supporter of Zhumadilov's position, later republished his article on Zhumadilov's website and in his book. Throughout the article, Nasenov questioned some of Äbdirakhman's conclusions because of their "questionable sources", not the archive ones, but "That one wrote, that one said, the poem said, etc" (2015, 276). Nasenov presented archival evidence to counter Äbdirakhman's claims, for example, he doubts the presence of the Nayman tribe in the Aqmola region at that time (in 1830). Ultimately, Nasenov reaffirmed Zhumadilov's position that Qabanbay Batyr was buried in East Kazakhstan and urged Äbdirakhman not to be offended but to admit the truth.

After this, neither Äbdirakhman nor Zhumadilov continued their debate on the pages of *Zhas Alash*, yet this exchange of opinions had already sparked wider public interest. Readers and various figures published their responses, either defending or refuting the arguments

presented. Zhumadilov also issued a direct reply to Äbdirakhman on his website Zhumadilov.kz and in his book *Not to Shoot the Swan: Stories, conversations, interviews, thoughts* (2015), in an article titled “You Deceive People—Why Do You Deceive Allah? (A Brief Response to the Shrine Keeper’s Many Words).” (266–275). In this piece, Zhumadilov not only restated his stance but also launched personal attacks on Äbdirakhman, accusing him of self-interest. The debate had become deeply personal for Zhumadilov.

For the general Kazakh reader, a person who knows about Qabanbay Batyr mostly from the history lessons in schools, it would be difficult to navigate the numerous historical references and documents cited by the debate participants. As a result, additional articles and opinions emerged, supporting one side or the other. Among those who left their opinions on these debates, several authors (Aytsapīn 2013⁷; Sälimbay 2013⁸) on the website Abai.kz, a popular news resource where people can submit their articles and posts. One notable report by journalist Bīakhmetova (2016) described a conference marking Qabanbay Batyr’s 365th anniversary, where both Äbdirakhman and Zhumadilov presented their arguments. According to Bīakhmetova, the conference was the first time the two had met in person, and she found Äbdirakhman’s position more convincing.

My analysis demonstrated that most sources and public opinion seem to support Äbdirakhman’s argument on the position of Qabanbay Batyr’s grave in the present-day Aqmola region. While there are no documents regarding the official state’s position on this issue, its actions, including the shrine in official lists of sacred sites and constructing the National Pantheon nearby, strengthen the shrine’s legitimacy.

⁷ Aytsapīn, Nurtūghan. 2013. “Qabanbay batyr Esil-Nura boyynda tūghan” [Qabanbay Batyr Was Born On The Banks Of The Esil-Nura,] Abai.kz, accessed June 1, 2025. <https://abai.kz/post/17662>.

⁸ Sälimbay, Qyrzhy. 2013. “Qabanbay batyr qay zherde tūghan?” [Where was Qabanbay Batyr born?] Abai.kz, accessed June 1, 2025. <https://abai.kz/post/17612>.

Nevertheless, the question of Qabanbay Batyr's burial site remains an unresolved "historical mystery" for many. Twelve years after the debates in newspapers and 25 years after the shrine construction, the question of whether Qabanbay Batyr was indeed buried here is common among the pilgrims. The media sources are also interested in this question and occasionally produce articles with titles announcing the "final finding" of the grave. For example, in 2022, articles about Qabanbay Batyr's grave in Russia appeared on different news sources⁹. However, these articles did not present strong arguments in support of these claims.

These ongoing debates and people's genuine interest demonstrate the significance of Qabanbay Batyr's legacy and a broader concern for historical truth. Despite the aura of uncertainty, the shrine remains a sacred site and a place of pilgrimage. Ultimately, these discussions illustrate that the shrine is part of a living heritage—an ongoing process in which history, belief, and identity intersect. The debate has moved beyond newspapers and influenced online discussions, social media, and continued pilgrimages to the shrine itself.

National Pantheon and the State Role

The National Pantheon, built near the Qabanbay Batyr shrine, aims to honor prominent figures of Kazakhstan, reinforce national identity, and highlight Astana's role as the capital. While it symbolizes continuity in national values and commemoration, it has sparked debate, with some praising it and others criticizing it as an "elite graveyard" and a misuse of public funds.

The National Pantheon is defined as:

⁹ "Stalo izvestno, gde zakhoronen Kabanbay batyr" [It Became Known Where Qabanbay Batyr Is Buried,] Tengrinews.kz, accessed May 1, 2025. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/stalo-izvestno-gde-zahoronon-Qabanbay-batyir-486239/.

a place for the burial of deceased (dead) persons, which shall be an architectural object of memorial significance, founded in order to perpetuate the memory of prominent figures of the state, science, culture, as well as persons who contributed to the development of Kazakhstan. (Regulation on the National Pantheon 2020)

Unlike traditional cemeteries, it is distinguished by its secular nature, focusing on individual contributions rather than religious affiliation.

The first official document regarding the National Pantheon, “On Some Issues of the National Pantheon”, was released on September 26, 2014. It outlined key decisions, including the approval of the project, the selection of its location, and related measures¹⁰. Construction activities began around this time, but the first formal Regulation on the National Pantheon was introduced in 2017 and later annulled. The most recent version of this regulation, which remains in effect, was adopted on April 15, 2020.

However, the idea of the Pantheon appeared much earlier. The shrine keeper, Kamal Äbdirakhman, who is responsible for both Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine and the National Pantheon, provided information about the origins of the Pantheon and its deeper historical and cultural significance. He began by referencing the tradition of pantheons among the Saks, Huns, and Turks, highlighting that the concept of burying notable figures near a revered leader is deeply embedded in Kazakh cultural heritage: “For example ... the Bilge Qaghan Pantheon, the Tonykök Pantheon, as well as the pantheons in Saray¹¹, Saraishyk, and Türkistan—all of them were established around a significant historical figure.”¹²

¹⁰ “On some issues of the National Pantheon,” Adilet. zan.kz, accessed April 12, 2025.

<https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P1400001020>.

¹¹ There is no reliable information on the Pantheon around Saray, the capital of the Golden Horde (XIII–XV centuries).

¹² Interview with the shrine keeper, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine. July 19, 2023.

According to Äbdirakhman, the idea of establishing the National Pantheon first emerged in 2002. He recalled being invited to a meeting with Tölegen Mukhamedzhanuly, composer, public figure, who was serving as the deputy äkim¹³ of Astana from 1998 to 2004. Prominent intellectuals and cultural figures, including Adamgalī Nūrgalīev, Aqseleū Seydimbek, Qoyshyghara Salgharīn, Tursyn Zhurtbay, Nayzaghay Zholdasbekov, and others, also attended the meeting. Initially, the main discussion revolved around the proposal to construct a monument for Äz Täuke Khan and Äz Zhänibek Khan. However, the majority of participants opposed the idea, arguing that the Kazakh Khanate was built by two persons, Kerey and Zhänibek, and it is not appropriate to divide them and build the monument to only one of them.

Once this debate was settled, the writer and journalist Aqseleū Seydimbek intervened, urging those present to stay and address an additional matter: “Wait, we need to resolve another issue. Kazakhstan does not have a Pantheon. The Pantheon in Türkistan has been closed. We need a new Pantheon.”¹⁴ At that moment, the idea of establishing a National Pantheon was proposed. According to the shrine keeper, this decision was not initiated by Nursultan Nazarbayev or any single political figure, as it is sometimes supposed in the media, but emerged as a consensus among the intellectuals and officials gathered at the meeting. During the meeting, the participants determined the location of the Pantheon near Qabanbay Batyr due to his significance as a respected ancestor and central figure here.

Generally, there was a lack of a designated burial place for distinguished individuals in Kazakhstan, despite the existence of several famous cemeteries. The most well-known pantheon in Kazakhstan is located in Türkistan, where several khans and historical figures were laid to rest near the Qozha Akhmet Yasaūi. Many political and cultural figures of the Soviet

¹³ Äkim is the head of the local executive body of state power in Kazakhstan.

¹⁴ Interview with the shrine keeper, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, July 19, 2023.

period and independent Kazakhstan, including the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Dinmukhamed Qonaev, were buried in Almaty Kengsay graveyard. In Astana, a historically significant cemetery is Qaraötkel, where notable individuals, including Kenesary Khan's comrades-in-arms, are buried. However, there was no designated space for commemorating figures from contemporary Kazakhstan, and traditionally, many individuals or their families prefer burials in family cemeteries, alongside their ancestors.

Strategically, the building of the National Pantheon near Qabanbay Batyr's shrine was a practical and symbolic decision. This place is situated outside the capital and has sufficient space for burials, while also being close enough to visit from Astana. The location also fulfills the functions of the historical connection, the broader nation-building, and the enforcement of the shrine's legitimacy. So, this place connected Qabanbay Batyr and the general Batyrs, who are famous for their patriotism and bravery, with the contemporary figures, who also contribute to the state's development.

The National Pantheon plays a central role in Kazakhstan's nation-building efforts, being in line with state programs and national ideologies such as *Mänggilik El* (Eternal Country), *Uly Dala Eli* (The Great Steppe Country), and *Rūkhanī Zhangghyrū* (The Spiritual Modernization)¹⁵, which seek to construct a unified national identity. These initiatives, including the Sacred Geography program, aim to create what the late political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) termed "imagined communities," uniting citizens around shared sacred and commemorative places. Late historian Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("places of memory") is particularly relevant: the Pantheon

¹⁵ The program *Rūkhanī Zhangghyrū* appeared in the 2017 Nazarbayev's article "Course towards the Future: Modernization of Kazakhstan's Identity", Akorda.kz. https://www.akorda.kz/en/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/course-towards-the-future-modernization-of-kazakhstans-identity. The ideas of *Mänggilik El* and *Uly Dala Eli* were described in the 2017 Patriotic Act, although the ideas were expressed by Nazarbayev earlier, in 2014, Online.zakon.kz. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36637518&pos=5:-108#pos=5:-108.

institutionalizes memory, raising questions about whose histories are preserved and promoted. Unlike grassroots memorial sites supported by both local communities and authorities, the National Pantheon fits Nora's category of top-down memory construction, where a "national authority" promotes the site, and individuals "attend them rather than visit" (23), emphasizing formal commemoration over personal devotion.

The Pantheon exemplifies how the state seeks to shape collective memory and foster national unity by commemorating select figures deemed essential to Kazakhstan's development and statehood. It is a part of a broader memory policy, which transitions from Soviet-era practices to the independent Kazakhstan's ones, with the building and reconstruction of pantheons, monuments, memorial complexes, and shrines, oriented to national heritage and pride. As philosopher Kulshat Medeuova (2020) demonstrates, in the early years of independence, such monuments were influenced by Soviet aesthetics but focused increasingly on national history and cultural revival. Over time, however, these commemorations have become more generalized and metaphorical in their messaging (270).

Medeuova's (2020) analysis of two major monuments on Astana's Independence Square—the Qazaq Eli (Kazakh Land) monument and the Wall of Peace—illustrates this shift. The Qazaq Eli monument embodies a large-scale, traditional design inspired by classical imperial patterns (e.g., the Alexander Column in St. Petersburg and the Vendôme Column in Paris), reinforcing national consolidation through monumental grandeur. The Wall of Peace represents the case of modernizing commemoration practices through dynamic visual narratives, with digital screens to display historical events (271). In this context, the National Pantheon is a hybrid construction, inspired by the global and regional models. It is standing in line with the grand constructions together with the Memory Arc in Astana, representing the generalized memory construction, not the regional, tribal affiliation sites. It also demonstrates

the national identity, independence, and historical continuity, with the smart and minimalist design, the location near the national batyr. Generally, the Pantheon is a case of the construction of a national narrative through space, memory, and symbols.

Who are buried:

The first burials in the National Pantheon took place between 2013 and 2014, marking the beginning of its role as a site of national commemoration. The question that arose from the start of the Pantheon's operation was: Who qualifies for burial in the National Pantheon? So, the first graves in the Pantheon appeared during its development phase. Among those interred are Oral Mukhamedzhanov (1948–2013), a statesman and deputy; Farīza Onggharsynova (1939–2014), a poet, writer, and public figure; and Sayakhat Qonaqay (1955–2014), who served as Deputy Chairman of the Board of JSC National Mining Company Taū-Ken Samuryq and was known and usually mentioned in lists as the brother of Sara Nazarbayeva, the wife of Nursultan Nazarbayev.

According to official regulations, those eligible for burial in the Pantheon include:

- High-ranking political figures such as presidents, prime ministers, deputies, ministers, parliamentary chairpersons, and regional governors (Äkims).
- Individuals awarded state honors, orders, and honorary titles.
- Other citizens designated by a special decree of the President of Kazakhstan.
- Additionally, spouses of eligible individuals may also be buried in the National Pantheon.¹⁶

¹⁶ Regulation on the National Pantheon, 2020.



Figure 2. The National Pantheon, June 2024, author's photo

As of August 2024, a total of 27 individuals have been buried in the National Pantheon.

Below, I provide a list of their names along with the general categories they belong to:

Name	Date of Birth – Date of Death	Description
Oral Mukhamedzhanov	November 11, 1948 – October 15, 2013	Politician

Äbîsh Kekîlbaev	December 6, 1939 – December 11, 2015	Writer, politician
Farîza Onggharsynova	December 25, 1939 – January 23, 2014	Poet, journalist
Sayakhat Qonaqay	June 3, 1955 – September 21, 2014	Statesman, brother of Sara Nazarbayeva
Maqsut Närîkbaev	March 30, 1940 – October 12, 2015	Politician, jurist
Sergey D'yachenko	September 18, 1952 – October 26, 2016	Former Äkim of Aqmola Region
Gülbanū Altynbaeva	1946–2016	Wife of former Minister of Defense Mukhtar Altynbaev
Qozy-Körpesh Zhangbyrshîn	July 2, 1960 – February 12, 2017	Former Chairman of the Accounts Committee for Budget Control
İbragîm Zhanghorazov	July 19, 1937 – January 15, 2020	Soviet and Kazakh organizer of agricultural production, Hero of Socialist Labor (1981)
Zeynolla Shaydarov	November 14, 1933 – June 25, 2020	Statesman

Qosman Aytmukhametov	August 29, 1963 – July 15, 2020	Government and public figure, former First Deputy Äkim of the Türkistan Region
Kenzheghalī Saghadīev	February 18, 1938 – July 25, 2020	Politician, academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan
Klara Zhumabaeva	1941–2020	Wife of writer Äbish Kekilbaev
Änes Saray	November 21, 1937 – February 2, 2021	Writer, playwright, journalist, laureate of the State Prize of Kazakhstan
Serik Qīrabay	March 23, 1927 – October 26, 2021	Literary scholar, critic, Doctor of Philology, professor, academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan
Bayan Zhaqypova	December 18, 1949 – April 24, 2021	Wife of former Speaker of the Mäzhilis ¹⁷ , Qabībolla Zhaqypov

¹⁷ Mäzhilis is the lower house of the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

Qozhakhmet Balakhmetov	June 26, 1926 – November 6, 2021	Labor veteran, former Minister of Education of the Kazakh SSR
Mnaūra Saghyndyqova	January 28, 1951 – June 19, 2022	Wife of the former Äkim of Aqtöbe Region, Eleüsin Saghyndyqov
Qazhymurat Naghymanov	June 1, 1948 – July 2, 2022	Minister of Transport and Communications of Kazakhstan (2002–2005)
Marīya Ghabdüllīna	July 15, 1938 – July 2022	Wife of politician Myrzatay Zholdasbekov
Qonysbay Äbil	May 21, 1954 – December 3, 2022	National poet of Kazakhstan, aitys, performer, satirist
Klara Bazī	July 24, 1939 – April 15, 2023	Wife of İbragīm Zhanghorazov
Nesipbek Ayt	September 22, 1950 – October 16, 2023	Poet, translator, journalist
Anar Zhayylghanova	July 10, 1969 – February 12, 2024	Politician, government figure
Seydakhmet Quttyqadam	May 9, 1946 – March 2, 2024	Political scientist, publicist,

Ömirbek Bägeldi	April 15, 1939 – April 3, 2024	Chairman of the Senate ¹⁸ of the Parliament of Kazakhstan (1996–1999)
Ryash Naghymanova		Wife of Qazhymurat Naghymanov

The table shows that the most popular category is the politicians and the high-ranking officials. The reasons include the idea of commemorating the state leadership and recognizing their work. In addition, this is a more easily identifiable category, since it is more difficult to determine the contributions of others and their eligibility for burial in the Pantheon. The second popular category is cultural figures such as writers, poets, and academics, which demonstrates Kazakhstan's emphasis on cultural heritage. Gender representation is mixed, and while most of the figures are male, females are primarily represented by spouses or notable cultural figures (e.g., Farīza Onggharsynova).

The National Pantheon presents here the idea of one nation of Kazakhstan, without a special ethnic identity. Religious affiliation is also not a criterion for burial in the National Pantheon, and people of different religions are buried here, which distinguishes it from traditional cemeteries. The majority of individuals in the Pantheon were buried according to Muslim traditions. The exception is Sergey D'yachenko, who was buried following Christian funeral rites.

So, the distribution of affiliations is seen through the pie chart:

¹⁸ Senate is the upper house of the Parliament of Kazakhstan.

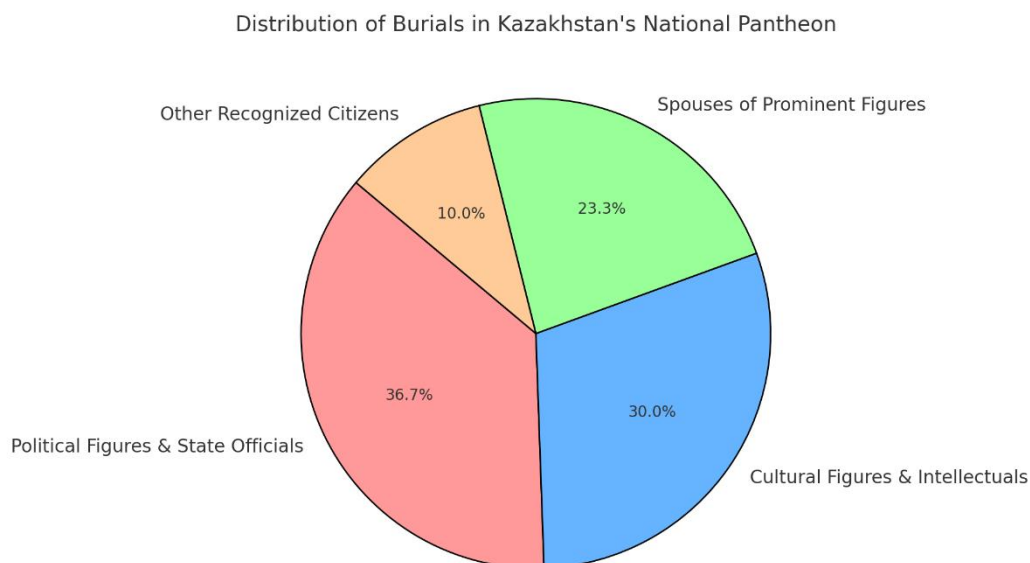


Figure 3. The distribution of burials in the National Pantheon

The general popularity of the Pantheon varies, depending on regional and political affinities. While the National Pantheon is not a pilgrimage site itself, it benefits from the visibility of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. Many visitors encounter it as part of their pilgrimage experience, allowing them to engage with Kazakhstan's history through both historical and contemporary figures. Visitors to Qabanbay Batyr's shrine generally demonstrate a neutral attitude toward the National Pantheon. Most circumvent the Pantheon, either before or after offering prayers at the shrine. A small number of visitors—primarily the family members and friends of the deceased—come specifically to visit the Pantheon without engaging with the shrine. Occasional flowers on graves suggest continued remembrance, but there are no elaborate ritual practices observed at the site. However, some pilgrims express interest in both sites, often walking through the Pantheon while explaining the significance of the figures buried there to their children. From time to time, pilgrims pause before the graves to recite Quranic verses for the deceased. More commonly, visitors walk past the Pantheon without engaging in religious rituals.

The most known persons at the Pantheon are Äbish Kekilbaev and Farīza Onggharsynova due to their literary contributions. The pilgrims mention them, stay before their graves longer, and generally mention them when discussing the Pantheon. These persons, as well as the majority buried in the Pantheon, started their careers and gained fame in the Soviet period, and the Pantheon also demonstrates an inclusive narrative linking Soviet history to the independence period.

The image and evaluation of the National Pantheon in the media demonstrate the controversial opinions on it. While some support the idea and project, others question the place, the choice of elites, and the public funding of the Pantheon. The National Pantheon is relatively popular topic in media, raising different questions, that the places in the Pantheon are limited and what to be when no will left¹⁹, as well as the amendments to the regulations, for example that the government plan to delete the permission of burial the family members of the Presidents of Kazakhstan²⁰. However, for this moment, the regulation remains the same.

To conclude, the National Pantheon embodies the idea of commemoration, serving as a site that honors and showcases distinguished figures in the country's history. The decision to locate it near Qabanbay Batyr's shrine is useful from both practical and conceptual points of view. The proximity to the capital and the symbolic importance of Qabanbay Batyr as a national hero suggest that the site was chosen to reinforce a historical and ideological connection between Kazakhstan's legendary figures and modern elites who have contributed to the nation.

¹⁹ "V Natsional'nom panteone v Astane zakanchivayutsya mesta" [The National Pantheon in Astana is running out of space,] Tengrinews.kz, July 18, 2023. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/v-natsionalnom-panteone-v-astane-zakanchivayutsya-mesta-505103/.

²⁰ "Chlenov sem'i prezidenta Kazakhstana khotyat zapretit' khoronit' v Natsional'nom panteone" [Members of Kazakhstan's President's Family to Be Banned from Burying in National Pantheon,] Nur.kz, February 22, 2024. <https://www.nur.kz/politics/kazakhstan/2062267-chlenov-semey-prezidenta-kazahstana-zapretyat-horonit-v-natsionalnom-panteone/>.

The Pantheon and Qabanbay Batyr's shrine have faced debates regarding their necessity and authenticity. However, rather than diminishing interest, these debates increased the popularity of the sites and highlighted the growing interest in national history. While the shrine's location is not accepted by everyone, it has become the established site for the general public. Most pilgrims, even those who question its authenticity, still come to pray and believe in the sanctity of the site.

I now turn to the second site—Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, which, in contrast to Qabanbay Batyr's one, enjoys strong public support and unquestioned legitimacy. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine holds considerable importance as a pilgrimage destination and serves as a key symbol for the Pavlodar and Bayanaūyl regions. This shrine's significance is evident in its enduring importance to pilgrims and its evolving relationship with the state, from its destruction in the 1950s to renewed support from the 1970s and in independent Kazakhstan.

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly as the “local” saint

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is one of the most prominent figures of Bayanaūyl: on the one hand, he is recognized as a scholar, writer, and collector of folklore; on the other, he is revered as a saintly figure, believed to possess extraordinary abilities. While his image has evolved due to ideological influences, he remains a key figure in the cultural and spiritual identity of the region. Mäshhür Zhüsip continues to be perceived as both a historical figure and a spiritual symbol for the people of Bayanaūyl and the Pavlodar region generally.

This part examines Mäshhür Zhüsip's biography, commemoration practices, and contemporary representations of his legacy. While his memory is most actively preserved in the Pavlodar region, it has gained broader recognition across Kazakhstan. Statues of Mäshhür Zhüsip stand in Bayanaūyl and Ekibastuz, a mosque in Pavlodar bears his name, and the

Pavlodar State University hosts the Center for *Mäshhürtanū* dedicated to his study. His life and works have been extensively explored through conferences, publications, and academic research. The 165th anniversary of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly was marked by large-scale commemorations, bringing together around 20,000 people and featuring 100 yurts²¹. President Qasym-Zhomart Toqaev extended special congratulations, underscoring the national significance of the event.

Regarding Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's family, he was married and had three sons and two daughters. His spouse was Rabīgha Shegebayqyzy (1865–1915)²², and there is not much information about her and their daughters. The three sons are Mukhammed-Sharapīden (1885–1936), Mukhammed-Ämen (1887–1921), and Mukhammed-Fazyl (1889–1969). Their descendants are actively researching the heritage of Mäshhür Zhüsip, and some of them work at the memorial complex.

There are various works about Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, including biographies, research works, analyses of his oeuvres, and others. The main sources for this study are works by Mäshhür Zhüsip's great-grandchildren, Äset Pazylov and Abay Sharapīev. Pazylov, the local historian (*kraeved*) and the researcher of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, is one of the two keepers of the shrine. He is the author of numerous books and articles about Mäshhür Zhüsip in Kazakh and Russian. Pazylov's publications, some of which are sold at the local museum or accessible online, include *Biography of Ancestors and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly* (2007), *Historical Legacy of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly* (2007), *Legacy of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly* (2010), *Mäshhür Zhüsip and the Principles of Religion* (2013), all in Kazakh, as well as *Steppe*

²¹ "Yubiley poeta i etnografa: 165-letie Mashkhura Zhusupa otmetili v Pavlodarskoy oblasti" [Anniversary of the poet and ethnographer: 165th anniversary of Mashkhur Zhusup celebrated in Pavlodar region,] 2023, Sputnik.kz, August 13, accessed June 9, 2025. <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20230813/yubiley-poeta-i-etnografa-165-letie-mashkhura-zhusupa-otmetili-v-pavlodarskoy-oblasti-37631450.html>.

²² Information from the inscriptions at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's museum.

Seer Mashkhur Zhusup (2022), in Russian, and others. These works provide biographical details, miracle narratives, analyses of Mäshhür Zhüsip’s writings, and discussions of religious aspects. Overall, their main content is relatively similar, so I primarily relied on the recent one, Pazylov (2022), which I purchased at the Memorial Museum of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly.

Abay Sharapīev is the President of the “Mäshhür Zhüsip” public foundation in Ekibastuz, and the author of the book *The Mysterious World of Mäshhür Zhüsip* (2023), which I also obtained from the museum. This book consists of historical materials, oral narratives, and recollections from conversations with local people. In addition to these sources, this study draws on various other books, articles, digital resources, and archival materials.

To begin with, the course of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s life was profoundly shaped by his education and the scholarly figures he encountered. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly (1858–1931) was born in Qyzyltaū (Bayanaūyl), and his given name was Adam Zhüsip. The family was relatively poor; his father, Köpzhasar or Köpey, lost almost all of his cattle. Despite their limited means, his father was determined to provide Mäshhür Zhüsip with a strong education. So, at the age of five, Mäshhür Zhüsip began studying with Nazhīmaidīn Hazrat²³ (a person of high religious status) at the Bayzhan Smagūluly madrasa in Bayanaūyl (Baratova and Zhusupov 2011, 16).

Generally, the Islamic education at this time (the second half of the 19th century) was relatively widespread in the Kazakh steppe. The primary schools *maktabs* grew in number on the steppe and became the foundation for students attending higher education in madrasas (Frank 2003, 284). The *maktabs* usually provide “basic literacy through Qur’anic recitation” (Pickett 2020, 110), “Islamic catechism, some Arabic prayers, and possibly a degree of literacy

²³ Alpysbes in Sharapīev’s book (2023) writes about him as Nāzhmedtīn Mullah. There is no single principle for writing names among Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s biographers, and there are some discrepancies.

in Turki” (Frank 2003, 283). Kazakh students received Muslim education in Kazakhstani madrasas in Semipalatinsk and Petropavlovsk, and many of them attended the madrasas of “Troitsk, Astrakhan, and Orenburg’s Seitovskii Posad, as well as in smaller communities along the steppe frontier” (Frank 2003, 284). There is no information about Mäshhür Zhüsip’s education in the *maktab*. He started from the madrasa in Bayanaūyl, but the madrasa probably provided the general education first. According to the book about Bayanaūyl’s history, there were three madrasas here before the 1917 revolution (Abenov and others 2001, 195), although no additional information is provided.

At the age of eight, Mäshhür Zhüsip continued his studies with Qamaraddīn Hazrat, a former *akhund*, an Islamic scholar rank in the Russian Empire (Tuna 2015, 39), from the Omsk region, who later moved to Bayanaūyl at the invitation of the district governor, Musa Shormanuly (Baratova and Zhusupov 2011, 17). Mäshhür Zhüsip quickly distinguished himself as a gifted student, displaying a talent for poetry and oral traditions from an early age. At just 13 years old, he composed a *zhoqtaū* (lament) dedicated to Īsabek Īshan.

Īsabek Īshan is considered one of the most prominent figures in the religious education of Mäshhür Zhüsip, and his spiritual mentor (Pazylov 2022, 16). Significant information about Īsabek Īshan is preserved in the later works of Mäshhür Zhüsip and the *zhoqtaū* of 1871. Drawing on them, Frank (2013) highlights Īsabek Īshan’s influence, noting that he had numerous *murīds* (disciples) among the Bavir and Qanzhīghalī communities in the Ereyemen and Aqköl regions (227). Moreover, Īsabek Īshan was revered as *pir*, a title equivalent to *shaykh*, meaning the leader, or, in Sufism, “senior Sufis who exercise various specific kinds of institutional authority in Sufi orders” (Renard 2009, 220). He remains an important figure of the region with the continuing flow of miracles and legends about him (Frank 2013, 227). It is known that Īsabek Īshan left a letter to Mäshhür Zhüsip, with which he went to Bukhara. There,

Bahaüedden äülîe read this letter and took Mäshhür Zhüsip to study (Alpysbes [2005] 2023, 29).

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's further education exemplifies the classic Muslim scholarship of his time, studying in Bukhara, "the most prestigious and foremost destination for study in Central Asia ... attracted students from throughout the region, not only including Russia, but also India, the Qazaq steppe, and Afghanistan" (Frank 2012, 96). The opportunity for studying in Bukhara suggests that Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's family improved financial state, or that he received support from the generous teachers or sponsors, because the journey, living, and education require a significant amount of money. Historian Allen Frank (2012) describes the student experience in Bukhara, drawing primarily on Imam Ahmad al-Barangawi's work *Tarikh-i Barangawi*. Frank (2012) provides information on the practical aspects of studying in Bukhara, such as the need to join a caravan, funding, finding lodging and the instructors, and other things. So, it was a challenging yet prestigious experience.

There are different accounts of Mäshhür Zhüsip studying in Bukhara. Mostly, biographies state that in 1872, at the age of 14, he traveled to Bukhara to study at the Kökiltash madrasah (Qosaeva and Küzembraeva 2008, 308). Some articles narrate that he studied with Qamaraddîn Hazrat from 8 to 15, and in 1874, "For 2 years he lived in Akimbek's house and taught his only son Kabylbek. His *zhaylau*²⁴ was located in the Aqmola region near lake Aqshakol" (Baratova and Zhusupov 2011, 17). So, according to them, Mäshhür Zhüsip had not left North Kazakhstan at that time. Other authors wrote that after 1871, he studied in Bukhara, in the madrasah Mir-Arab, and his teacher was Khanäbil Qasym īshan (Alpysbes [2005] 2023, 29). Despite these variations in biographical details, the accounts agree that Mäshhür Zhüsip received a high level of Islamic education in Bukhara and was proficient in multiple languages,

²⁴ *Zhaylau* is a summer grazing area for cattle.

including Chagatai, Persian, and Arabic. His extensive knowledge and intellectual pursuits would later play a crucial role in shaping his contributions as a writer, ethnographer, and religious figure.

The presence of figures like Mäshhür Zhüsip, alongside other religious scholars, demonstrates North Kazakhstan's established Islamic educational environment and its significance within wider scholarly networks. Notable religious figures from North Kazakhstan who shared similar educational backgrounds with Mäshhür Zhüsip include Naūan Khaziret (1844–1917)²⁵ and Ghabdül-Ūakhīt Khaziret (1853–1926). For the information about Naūan Khaziret, I used Sadūaqas Ghylmanī's *Biographies of the Islamic Scholars of Our Times Volume 2: English Translation* (2018). Sadūaqas Ghylmanī (1890–1972), Kazakh Muslim religious figure, translator, and poet who served as qadi (Muslim judge) of the Kazakhstan branch of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia in 1952–1972 (Muminov and Utepbergenova 2023, 17), and performed Hajj in 1953. Ghilmani (2018) left valuable biographies of the Islamic Scholars of his time, including Naūan Khaziret, and used, among other sources, the information from Mäshhür Zhüsip's works.

Naūan Khaziret (Nawrız-Mukhammed Talasulī) was born in a middle-class family on the territory of Kōkshetaū outer district (present-day Aqmola region). He first studied in Petropavlovsk with Wāli Khaziret, then in 1869 went to Bukhara, where he spent 15 years, learning from Ubaydolla Khaziret at the Kōkiltash madrasah (Ghylmanī 2018, 461). Naūan Khaziret acquired different knowledge and languages, including Persian. Later, in 1884, Naūan Khaziret became the imam in the Kazakh mosque in Kokchetav (Kōkshetaū) (461). After 1885,

²⁵ These years of life according to Ghylmanī. On the site of KGU "Center for the Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Heritage" of the Department of Culture of the Akmola Region, the years of life are listed as 1843-1916. "Naūan Khaziret," History-akmola.kz, accessed July 5, 2025. https://history-akmola.kz/kieli_obektileri/qr44.html.

he opened the madrasah and educated many students (463). Today Naūan Khaziret is respected and commemorated, particularly in Kōkshetaū, where there is a mosque named after him.

Ghabdūl-Ūakhīt Khaziret Tilenshiuly (1853-1926) was an educator, imam, and religious figure of the Pavlodar region. He studied at the Mir-Arab madrasah in Bukhara. After studies, Ghabdūl-Ūakhīt Khaziret worked as an imam and a teacher in the mosque of Esilbay aūyl (village) (Abeuova, Akhmetova, and Tolpeko 2023, 143). Later, he built the mosque in the Arbīgen aūyl of the Keldiqyz area, where he lived until he died in 1926 (143). Today, the mausoleum of Ghabdūl-Ūakhīt Khaziret Tilenshiuly in the Sharbaqty district of Pavlodar region is a popular pilgrimage place. Pilgrims at Māshhūr Zhūsip Kopeyuly's shrine often mentioned visits to Ghabdūl-Ūakhīt Khaziret's mausoleum.

These biographies of Māshhūr Zhūsip Kopeyuly, Naūan Khaziret, and Ghabdūl-Ūakhīt Khaziret demonstrate the strong Islamic educational traditions in North Kazakhstan and the vibrant scholarly networks that connected it to broader intellectual currents. All three figures are commemorated and venerated today, with the religious buildings, including mosques, shrines dedicated to them. While each of them plays a significant role in the regional context, Māshhūr Zhūsip Kopeyuly's combination of scholarly activities and the miraculous accounts distinguishes him as the most visible not only at the local but the national level.

The later activities of Māshhūr Zhūsip Kopeyuly further solidified his reputation as a scholar, researcher, and influential person in the region. His contributions to the documentation and preservation of oral traditions were substantial. For example, he collected numerous materials, including the epic "Er Olzhabay-Batyr", various dastans, historical tales, and legends, as well as the works of Buqar Zhyraū, Shōzhe, and other folk aqyns (singers, poets, improvisers). In addition to his literary contributions, Māshhūr Zhūsip is credited with the

discovery of Buqar Zhyraū's grave at the foot of Mount Dalba. In 1927, he built a wooden platform over the site, although it eventually collapsed.

Beyond his role as a collector and historian, Mäshhür Zhüsip was also a correspondent for the newspaper "*Dala Ualayaty*" (*Osoboye pribavleniye k Akmolinskim Oblastnym Vedomostyam*). Through his articles, he addressed a wide range of social and educational issues. For example, in the seventh issue of "*Dala Ualayaty*" (1890), Mäshhür Zhüsip (published under the name Yusuf Kopeyev) wrote about the benefits of education and science, since scientists strive for everything sublime and useful for people. He also advocated the need for education for both men and women:

The Kirghiz say: "Why teach girls? They will not become mullahs. No, if we judge by reason, then education is more necessary for a woman, since she has a family responsibility, and in her hands should receive the initial education of the young generation, which owes much of its moral rudiments to the family; in addition, she can influence her husband, who, especially among us, has little to do with the family, wandering about the trades. (Kopeyev 1890)

This stance on women's education demonstrates his broader social vision, advocating for intellectual development as a means of strengthening both the individual and society.

Furthermore, Mäshhür Zhüsip's significance lies in his detailed accounts of Bayanaūyl's religious history. He identifies the early 1800s as a key period of religious revival in the region and documents the first recorded Kazakh pilgrimage (hajj) from Bayanaūyl. He writes about Nurken, the first Kazakh from Bayanaūyl to undertake the journey, which lasted four years. Later, in 1858, Bayanaūyl residents Nogay and Bayzhan also performed the hajj (Abenov, Abenov, and Akibaev 2001, 158). As Frank (2013) has observed, Mäshhür Zhüsip's

writings provide insights into the role of religious figures among mid-19th-century nomadic communities, noting that “īshāns, khwājas, and divanas were not uncommon among the nomads of the Middle Horde” but rather prominent figures supported by wealthy patrons (216).

Māshhūr Zhūsip’s writings not only reflect the religious and social dynamics of the 19th and early 20th centuries but also provide valuable ethnographic insights into the wider region. His extensive interactions with contemporaries and predecessors positioned him at the center of an intellectual network that went through various fields, including literature, music, and Islamic scholarship. As Abay Sharapēv noted in an interview with Timoshenko (2006): “Among his friends were Sultanmakhmud Torayghyrov, composers Aqan Seri and Mādī Bāpīuly, Turkologist Wilhelm Radlov, Zhūsipbek Aymaūytov, Zhayaū Musa, Abay Qunanbaev, Shākārim Qudayberdīev, Isa Bayzakov, singer Mayra, and director Zhūmat Shanīn.” Furthermore, his works, such as “Khal-akhual”, “State”, and “Who Owns Sary-Arqa?”, were published in 1907 by the Kazan-based Khusainov publishing house. This publication highlights his connections with the Muslim intellectual community of the Volga-Ural region, facilitating knowledge exchange and access to contemporary historical and religious discourse.

Finally, in addition to being a scholar and writer, Māshhūr Zhūsip Kopeyuly was an educator. As mentioned earlier, he taught the students in the Aqmola region, and he also used new methodologies in pedagogy, “the new alphabet “*Usuli Jadid*”, in which teaching methods were based not on cramming, but on the conscious assimilation of educational material” (Pazylov 2022, 17). Pazylov did not elaborate on the topic of Māshhūr Zhūsip’s educational methods and did not provide the supporting documents, sources for the information he gave. According to Pazylov’s book (2022), in 1872–1872 Māshhūr Zhūsip studied in Bukhara, then

spent around 3 years teaching using a “new alphabet”, and later in 1877–1887 traveled throughout Sary-Arqa (16–17).

This reference to the “new method” suggests the possible connection with Jadids and should be approached critically, within the broader context of Jadidism. Jadidism refers to the group of Muslim intellectuals who promoted this new method of education (*usul-i-jadid*), from which the movement takes its name (Khalid 1998, 89). According to historian Adeeb Khalid, this method started with Ismail Gasprinskii (1851–1914) Crimean Tatar political and public figure, intellectual, and educator. Gasprinskii used this phonetic method to teach the Arabic alphabet from the 1880s, and promoted it by travelling across Muslim communities of Russia and visiting Central Asia (Khalid 1998, 89). The period mentioned in Pazylov’s book (around 1873–1877) appears too early for the influence of Jadidism, and the sources on Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly usually do not connect him with the movement.

Generally, it is difficult to characterise Mäshhür Zhüsip’s ideas and works as Jadidist. He is not listed among people considered Jadids, nor discussed as Jadid in public or scholarly discourse. Some of his ideas, such as support of women’s education (1890), resonate with Jadids' reformist ideas, such as “breaking women’s seclusion and providing them with new public roles” (Kamp 2006, 164). However, such positions were shared by other political movements of the time, including the Bolsheviks' ideas of women’s liberation, Hujum. The life span of Mäshhür Zhüsip helps to suggest that he possibly knew about new methods, and probably even used them later, but as Frank (2016) notices, “Clearly, one did not have to be a Jadid to care about effective teaching methods” (180). Overall, the role of Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly in a broader historical and intellectual context is a significant topic to study. While his connections with the reformist movements, such as Jadidism, can be suggested, this question needs further investigation and lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Returning to the topic of pedagogy and Mäshhür Zhüsip's students, the existing information suggests a relationship characterized by mutual respect and lasting connection. Among the students most frequently mentioned in biographies and interviews with his descendants is Īmanghalī Manenov (1903–1993). According to an interview with Sharapīev, the great-grandchild of Mäshhür Zhüsip, before his death, Mäshhür Zhüsip entrusted Manenov with some of his works, particularly forecasts. He was afraid that leaving them to the children would turn into negative consequences, but warned Manenov to keep them secret too: “Do not show this to anyone either, or you'll be guilty before the communists. Someday life will get better, there will be benevolent researchers, and then you can pass it on to them” (Timoshenko, 2006) Before his passing, Manenov gave the works to a person named Aldabergenov, who translated them from Arabic²⁶. This chain of preservation underscores the historical significance of Mäshhür Zhüsip's intellectual and prophetic legacy. His contributions extend across multiple fields, including history, genealogy, ethnography, and literature, making him a key figure not only in Bayanaūyl and the Pavlodar region but in Kazakhstan's broader intellectual and cultural heritage.

Mäshhür Zhüsip as a Saint and Seer

Mäshhür Zhüsip is known not only for his academic and educational contributions but also for being a saintly and mystical figure. His biographies frequently highlight his deep religious devotion and his performance of miracles. According to his descendants, Mäshhür Zhüsip devoted many of his writings to religious themes, including “About Zhüsip the Prophet”, “The Old Woman and Nur the Prophet”, “The History of Religions”, and “The History of Iblis Shaytan”. He was known for his strict adherence to Islamic teachings, faithfully observing Quran and its commandments. His descendants and followers compare him to historical Islamic

²⁶ The author of the article writes “from Arabic”, but it is possibly the Arabic-script Kazakh.

figures, describing him as: “responsive like a prophet, prudent like Hazrat Abubakir, fair like Hazrat Omar, energetic and strong like Hazrat Ali” (Pazylov 2022, 26). These characteristics emerged mainly in works published after 1991. During the Soviet period, he was portrayed solely as a poet, folklore collector, and thinker, although oral sources consistently revered him as a saint.

The stories of Mäshhür Zhüsip’s miracles align with the traditional narratives of saints. So, Mäshhür Zhüsip’s biographer and descendant, Pazylov (2022), put him in the broader context of saints and categorizes his miracles into two types: “Spiritual miracles” associated with self-perfection and spiritual enlightenment, and “Miracles of the Quran and Surahs” related to divine origins and supernatural interventions in nature (24). Pazylov also listed different stories about Mäshhür Zhüsip. Some stories describe how he predicted the birth of children, while others claim he could command evil spirits or miraculously produce food from nowhere. These narratives reinforce his status not just as an intellectual and historian but as a revered spiritual figure.

Despite the regional reverence and significance of Mäshhür Zhüsip’s shrine, it seems to face criticism from certain Islamic groups, particularly Salafists, who view practices of pilgrimage and saint veneration as *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism considered as sin in Islam). This opposition has compelled Pazylov (2022) to actively defend the legitimacy of pilgrimage to the site, emphasizing its compatibility with Islamic beliefs. He underscores the deep religiosity of *äül̄e* and stresses the importance of distinguishing true *äül̄e*, described as “servants of Allah,” from various *baqsy* and healers who communicate with spirits (29–30). Citing examples of the Prophet and genuine saints of Kazakhstan, “In Medina, Muhammad; in Türkistan, Qozha Akhmet; in Mangystau, Saint Beket”, he situates Mäshhür Zhüsip within this spiritual lineage, highlighting his consistent invocation of Allah. Addressing concerns about

the legitimacy of pilgrimage practices, Pazylov asserts that “asking for support from ancestors is not worship” (30). So, such clarifications have to respond to public doubts and accusations, particularly regarding Islamic orthodoxy.

In fact, many miracle stories of Mäshhür Zhüsip demonstrate the Islamic concepts and the connection with significant religious leaders. So, several stories about Mäshhür Zhüsip suggest the possibility of Uwaisi transmission, a mystical concept in Sufi traditions, where a spiritual connection is established with a deceased master without direct physical interaction. A significant figure in Mäshhür Zhüsip’s spiritual journey was Qozha Bagaueddin, whom he referred to as his pir (spiritual guide), stating: “Qozha Bagaueddin is my pir, my patron saint.” (Pazylov 2022, 24). Pazylov recounts a story illustrating how Mäshhür Zhüsip received his sacred power through Qozha Bagaueddin’s intervention. According to this account, Mäshhür Zhüsip once intended to visit a bathhouse. On his way, he encountered an elderly man who invited him to the bath and assisted him. However, upon leaving, Mäshhür Zhüsip turned around and saw that both the bathhouse and the elderly man had disappeared. When Mäshhür Zhüsip relayed this event to his madrasa teacher, he explained that it was Qozha Bagaueddin, who accepted him: “From this day forward, your life will change—you will gain the gift of foresight and become a saint” (25). The other story related to Bagaueddin Qozha was that he predicted that Mäshhür Zhüsip would die at 73 years.

However, the identity of Qozha Bagaueddin (Bahauddin) remains ambiguous. Some sources mention him in relation to Īsabek Īshan, suggesting that he was alive when Mäshhür Zhüsip traveled to Bukhara. Yet, the aforementioned stories portray him as an already deceased person. The most plausible historical figure fitting this description is Baha’ al-Din Naqshband (1318–1389), the founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, widely venerated across Central Asia. However, Mäshhür Zhüsip’s biographies do not explore this connection further.

Some miracle stories related to Mäshhür Zhüsip and his friends, who were also gifted people. Frank (2013) analyzes the patrons, scholars, *īshans*, and *divanas* in the works of Mäshhür Zhüsip. He gives information about 4 *divanas*, “figures embodying both the Sufi tradition of the itinerant dervish” (227) whom Mäshhür Zhüsip knew personally: “These were Batir Divana of the Ormanshī clan, Eskendir Divana of the Qarzhas clan, Shalqīman Divana of the Aqbura clan, and Shalqīman’s son Isaqbay Qazhī” (229). There was another *divana*, Abzhalaq (real name Zhumatay Tyshqanbayuly), who was the friend of Mäshhür Zhüsip and was often mentioned in stories. He was known for predicting the birth and gender of children, wearing the same light clothing year-round, and having the gift to heal people (Pazylov 2022, 56–57). Their bond extended beyond friendship - Mäshhür Zhüsip himself recited the funeral prayer for Abzhalaq *divana* and made a remarkable prediction: “The body of Abzhalaq will not lie in the grave, the body of Mäshhür will remain in the same form (untouched) for 40 years” (55). This prophecy, like many others, reinforced their spiritual connection and miraculous reputations.

One of the most famous miracle stories about Mäshhür Zhüsip is his foreknowledge of his death and the incorruptibility of his body. Shrine keepers, pilgrims, and various sources frequently recount this event. So, a year before his death, Mäshhür Zhüsip began preparing his own *mazar* and even organized his *as* (funeral feast). He explained that next year will be a famine, *zhut* (cattle death), and the relatives will not have the opportunity to do it. Mäshhür Zhüsip also instructed that his body be placed in an underground chamber, with his shroud being periodically replaced: “You may enter the underground chamber and see my body, but only replace my burial shroud if it yellows in the summer months” (Sharapīev 2023, 294). After, he appointed his eldest son, Sharapī, as the shrine keeper. According to the will, Mäshhür Zhüsip’s body was meant to remain intact for 40 years, but due to the destruction of his *mazar* by the Bolsheviks, it remained uncorrupted for only 21 years. Eyewitness accounts describe a

fragrant scent emanating from the burial chamber, reinforcing the sacred status of the site. The pilgrimage to the mazar began soon after its building, and today, Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly is widely venerated as a saint, and his miracle stories contribute significantly to his spiritual authority and prominence.

For many Kazakh people today, Mäshhür Zhüsip Kopeyuly is widely recognized for his predictions. His biographies often dedicate entire chapters to his prophecies about the future of Kazakh lands, covering events both during his lifetime and beyond. According to Pazylov (2022), Mäshhür Zhüsip foresaw major historical events, including the 1928 confiscation of property: “One day, the rich and the poor will become equal” (38), the Great Terror of the 1930s, the collapse of the totalitarian regime in the late 20th century, and others. One of his predictions concerns the collapse of the Soviet Union, which he reportedly expressed as: “In seventy years, the peasant’s noose will rot away (35). This has been interpreted as a reference to the events of 1986, when protests in Kazakhstan challenged Soviet authority, marking the beginning of political upheaval in the region.

Mäshhür Zhüsip’s predictions have gained popularity in Kazakhstan, spreading through various sources, including websites and WhatsApp groups. One of the most widely circulated prophecies states: “For seventy years, society will be godless. Then, for thirty years, the people will be plundered. But afterward, a peaceful time will come, when a lark will lay eggs on sheep.” However, an investigation by Factcheck.kz found no direct evidence of these words in Mäshhür Zhüsip’s original works. Their analysis (Terlikbaev and Bannikov 2022) concluded that this prediction likely emerged from a combination of his authentic quotes and a modern poem by poet Aspanbek Shughatay. Despite this, such narratives continue to shape the public perception of Mäshhür Zhüsip as a visionary, illustrating the ongoing myth-making surrounding his figure and the strong popular interest in his legacy.

Talking about the public image of Mäshhür Zhüsip, during the Soviet period, he was primarily recognized as an ethnographer and philosopher, with little emphasis on his religious significance. However, recent works, particularly those by his descendants, highlight his mystical qualities, Islamic worldview, and accounts of miracles attributed to him. The respect and promotion of Mäshhür Zhüsip's figure are seen at the political level and Erlan Aryn, the former Äkim of Pavlodar region and Rector of Pavlodar State University named after Sultanmakmut Torayghyrov, even referred to him as the “last classical saint” as expressed in the following statement: “Among the people, Mäshhür Zhüsip was called a saint. He was the last classical saint to have lived on this land. He had the gift of foresight, could help the sick, and heal them” (2010, 4). This notion of sainthood is complex, particularly in an Islamic context, where defining sainthood is not institutionalized. For many people, Mäshhür Zhüsip is unquestionably a saint.

Even without the mystical narratives surrounding Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, his contributions to Kazakh folklore, regional historiography, and cultural preservation are substantial. He wrote for newspapers, published his works, collected oral traditions, and even identified the burial site of Buqar Zhyrau. His writings remain valuable sources for understanding the religious and intellectual life of northern Kazakhstan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as historian Allen J. Frank notes. Despite his academic and literary contributions, many people today primarily remember him as a saintly figure—a man of extraordinary abilities, capable of making predictions and performing miracles. These two aspects of his identity are not necessarily contradictory; rather, they intertwine to form a multifaceted legacy.

The history of the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine, destruction, and the revival

The contemporary memory of Mäshhür Zhüsip is embodied in his shrine, which reflects state policies toward sacred sites and pilgrimage, highlighting its importance to the local community, cultural landscape, and collective memory. Beyond its local significance, the shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is also linked to broader historical and sacred networks, spanning the Soviet period, contemporary Kazakhstan, and transregional religious connections.

The shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip dates back to 1930–1931 when it was constructed under the supervision of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly himself. The construction of the mazar can be seen as an act of sanctification, as no prior family graves belonging to Köpeyuly or others were in the area. The reason for choosing this place was Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's will, and one of the supplementary reasons could be the Sarybulaq spring, which has long been believed to possess healing properties. During the construction of the shrine, Mäshhür Zhüsip lived in a house near the spring, which has since become part of the memorial complex. Thus, the sanctification of the site began with the construction of the shrine, and today, it is surrounded by the graves of Mäshhür Zhüsip's relatives as well as others deemed worthy of burial there.

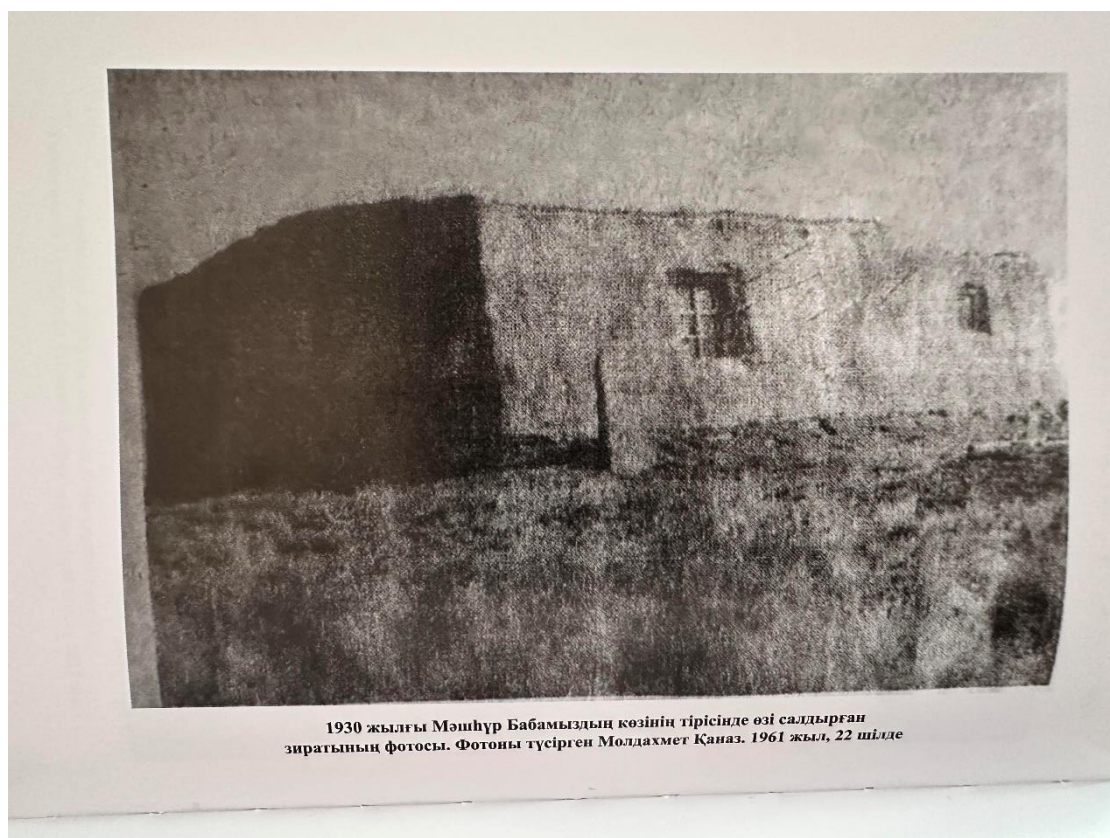


Figure 4. The shrine photo 1930 from Sharap̄ev's book *The Mysterious World of Mäshhür Zhüsip*.

It is important to provide a historical background to understand the attitude and policy towards Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. The last years of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly were during the Soviets' gradual anti-religious policy. If at the beginning Soviet authorities started from the accusations against the Russian Orthodox Church (Corley 1996, 13–14), later in the 1920s it extended to the Muslim population as well. This policy was oriented not only to the religion, but to the way of life as well, for example, the Hujum, the unveiling of Muslim women, and the eradication of some traditions as *kalym*²⁷, polygyny, underage marriage, illiteracy, and the abolition of female seclusion (Northrop 2003, 83). Generally, most religious schools, courts, and mosques were closed and even destroyed (Khalid 2007, 72).

²⁷ In Kazakh *Qalyng mal* – the tradition of paying a certain amount of cattle for a bride.

However, this anti-religious policy inside the USSR was conducted simultaneously with some support toward Muslim foreigners. There was a brief, yet significant, period from 1926 to 1930, during which the Soviet Union supported the hajj by providing transit routes for Muslim foreigners, reconstruction of Hajj infrastructure by Sovtorgflot, and undertaking other activities (Kane 2015, 158, 166). This support was part of the USSR's global policy, which had various strategic purposes, including the desire to create a positive image for the USSR among Muslims (Kane 2015, 158, 160). Despite its short-term nature, it demonstrates the multifacetedness of Soviet religious policy. Generally, by the time Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's death in 1931, due to the natural conditions, the situation had become complex, but his newly built shrine remained untouched by state policy until 1952.

In 1931, the shrine consisted of a structure with two rooms and an underground chamber where Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's body was interred. According to the local narratives, the site soon started to attract visitors, particularly those seeking healing and spiritual aid. Pilgrims were permitted to stay overnight, and in some cases, they performed animal sacrifices—practices that remain integral to contemporary pilgrimage traditions. Later, Banū Arynova, a researcher from the Institute of Language and Literature, visited the mazar in 1945 and described it as a two-room building. She noted that forty sheep bones hung on the southern wall, a feature possibly tied to religious traditions of spiritual guardianship. The underground chamber, approximately two meters deep, was accessible through a hatch and a set of steps, requiring visitors to descend with a lamp for illumination. Arynova also recorded the presence of various kitchen utensils, which were kept in the shrine for the comfort of pilgrims (In Sharap̄ev's 2023, 292).

Despite the anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the Great Terror, the shrine remained intact and continued to receive visitors until 1952. Several factors may

have contributed to its survival, including its remote location and the likelihood that it was initially perceived as an ordinary grave.

During the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), the Soviet government employed various ideological tools, including religious affiliation, to mobilize citizens for the war effort. As historian Jeff Eden (2021) notes, the Soviet Union allowed the revival of religious practices, including sermons, rituals, and mosque reopenings, as well as references to hadiths and fatwas, to inspire patriotic devotion. This shift in policy likely explains why the 1945 expedition to document the works of Mäshhür Zhüsip and Sultanmakmut in the Pavlodar region, and Arynova's testimony of mazar's state as part of the expedition proceeded without interference, despite detailing the shrine's structure, visitors, and the preservation of the body.

The question of whether the Bolsheviks were informed about the pilgrimage to Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine is unclear. On the one hand, the information about this site was circulated, as seen from Arynova's expedition and description of the shrine. On the other hand, there are documents on religious sites dating back to 1948 that do not mention the shrine. On January 8, 1948, the authorized representative of the Council for Religious Cults under the USSR Council of Ministers for the Pavlodar Region, K. Mashrapov, wrote a letter to the chairpersons of district executive committees about identifying sacred places and sources of healing water. In this letter, he requested information about the existence of such places, their location, condition, and attitude of believers and guardians of these places in the Pavlodar region (Boltina and Sheveleva 2001, 160). Having received the requested information, in April 1948, Mashrapov wrote a letter to the authorized representative of the Council for Religious Cults under the USSR Council of Ministers for the Kazakh SSR, N. Sabitov. In this letter, Mashrapov mentioned two sources of healing water and one sacred place, the grave of "Isakan Hazrat", which was restored in 1946 and was considered a sacred place, but is currently not

visited (Boltina and Sheveleva 2001, 177). In the letter, Mashrapov did not even mention the shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip or the pilgrimage to it. Therefore, we can conclude that, by this time, the information was either unknown to the Bolsheviks or deliberately concealed by someone.

However, later with the new wave of anti-religious activities, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine became the object of attention and was destroyed in 1952. Numerous sources provide information about this demolition, including archival documents and works of archive workers, the testimonies of the relatives, oral accounts of pilgrims, and others. This period played a significant role in shaping the present-day image of the shrine and the figure of Mäshhür Zhüsip, who came to be seen as a person who suffered under Soviet repression yet was later recognized and always remembered by the people.

The destruction of the shrine is closely linked to the actions of Mikhail Zolotukhin, who was the 1st Secretary of the Pavlodar Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan in 1950–1954. He publicly criticized Mäshhür Zhüsip and the reverence shown to him by local residents.

This criticism began at the meeting of the party activists of the city of Pavlodar, held on January 7, 1952. 372 people participated in the meeting, among them 9 secretaries of local party organizations, 117 heads of enterprises and institutions, and 166 party activists. The Workers' Presidium consisted of 33 people, including Zolotukhin himself, Yegorov, Secretary of the City Party Committee, Diyarov, Chairman of the Regional Executive Committee, and others²⁸. During a meeting, Zolotukhin raised concerns about the continued existence of the shrine and the ongoing pilgrimage activities. As he put it in the report, “On the results of the 5th Congress of the Communist Party of Bolsheviks of Kazakhstan”:

²⁸ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.32, op., 1, d.478, page 90.

To this day, in Bayanaul District, the mausoleum of the saint Mashur Zhusup remains a place of pilgrimage for many residents. People bring offerings and gifts, hoping for healing from various ailments. Unfortunately, the site has been visited not only by uninformed, ‘backward’ religious individuals but also by certain regional and republican officials, which has further contributed to the shrine’s sanctity in the eyes of the public.²⁹

This report also criticized how Mäshhür Zhüsip had been portrayed in historical narratives as a progressive figure who opposed the Tsar. It stated that the Tsar was criticized not only by Mäshhür Zhüsip but also by liberal landowners and capitalists. Additionally, the report claimed that Mäshhür Zhüsip lived in Turkey for a long time and was a member of a Muslim religious sect³⁰. Further, it accused the Party members' work and claimed the existence of the followers, disciples of Mäshhür Zhüsip: “The party organization overlooked this fact. No effort was made to investigate the authenticity of this ‘saint’ and his followers, although he certainly had them.”³¹ These documents demonstrate the widespread veneration of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s grave among various social groups.

Unfortunately, following this report, criticism of Mäshhür Zhüsip’s legacy and his shrine intensified. Numerous Bolshevik officials expressed their opinions, largely agreeing that the veneration of his grave was inappropriate. For instance, Kenzhebay Makin, the 1st Secretary of the Bayanaūyl district Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, reported that some Communist Party members continued to revere Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly:

²⁹ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.32, op.,1, d.478, page 123.

³⁰ There is no information about Mäshhür Zhüsip living in Turkey or leading a sect other than the accusations in this report.

³¹ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.32, op.,1, d.478, page 123.

The chairman of the Kyzyl-Kogam village council, Comrade Imanbaev, the chairman of the “Zhana-Zhol” collective farm, Comrade Omarbekov, the secretary of the party organization of this collective farm, Comrade Tokenov, and certain district leaders remain inclined to show reverence for Kopeev’s remains.³²

Makin’s report was supported by others, including Malaev, Head of the Department of MGB of Bayanaūyl district, who endorsed Zolotukhin’s previous criticism. Malaev further pointed out that some newspapers had published favorable articles about Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly:

As you know, serious articles about the idealist Mashur Zhusup Kopeev have been published in the newspapers Kyzyl Tui, Bolshevistsky Put, and Socialistik Kazakhstana. In the homes of activists in certain collective farms, such as “Zhana-Zhol” and those named after Voroshilov, cards of Mashur Zhusup and his old manuscripts are still being preserved.³³

Thus, authorities not only condemned Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s works but also scrutinized his relatives and followers. Particular attention was given to Communist Party members, who were expected to serve as ideological role models but continued to visit his grave. One report explicitly indicates that certain individuals left inscriptions of their names after visiting Mäshhür Zhüsip’s grave. Specifically, Communist Zhūsūpbaev Tūmar visited on October 13, 1950; Oqasov Qoshqarbay on August 6, 1950; and Komsomol member Azmūqanov Ersin on August 23, 1951.³⁴

³² State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.68, op.,1, d.493, page 23.

³³ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.68, op.,1, d.493, page 35.

³⁴ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.68, op.,1, d.488, page 137.

Based on these accusations, Makin took decisive action against Mäshhür Zhüsip's legacy, including disciplinary measures against Communist Party members who had visited his shrine and the dismissal of his son. The son is Zhüsipov Pazyl (Mukhammed-Fazyl), who was working as a teacher and even received the Order of Lenin in 1950, but in 1952 was removed from his post after the Party resolution. The resolution stated the need to criticize the works of Mäshhür Zhüsip because they are "full of bourgeois nationalism and religious mysticism" (Pazylov 2022, 77), the need for anti-religious propaganda, that the son of Mäshhür Zhüsip Pazyl, "uses the mausoleum 'grave' of his father to spread religious poison" (Pazylov 2022, 77), and the dismissal of Mukhammed-Fazyl from his teaching position. Even if Mukhammed-Fazyl was not a religious activist, he still suffered from the state's anti-religious policy.

Malaev's report further emphasized the need for ideological work among the population and warned against the perceived reactionary and harmful nature of Mäshhür Zhüsip's influence. This illustrates the authorities' fear of his legacy and their broader policy of suppressing figures deemed counterrevolutionary. This led to the destruction of the shrine in 1952. However, as archival worker Khanshayym Maqazhanova argues, no official documents regarding its demolition in September 1952 have been found in the archives, and they probably do not exist anymore (2020, 15). The exact date of the demolition is also unclear, and people mention August, September, and November days, so Sharapiev describes the cold November days of these actions.

Still, the destruction happened, and Sharapiev, in his book, suggests that the orders to destroy the shrine came from the highest levels of Soviet authority, allegedly even from Joseph Stalin himself:

Finally, what can we say, this situation must have reached Moscow, and so on, in the Bayanaūyl district of the Pavlodar region of Kazakhstan, a Kazakh man considered a

saint is buried openly, and the locals worship him more than Lenin. It seems that during the lifetime of I.V. Stalin, the order was given to tear down the upper tomb, only Lenin should lie openly, and no one else should be worshipped. (Sharap̄iev 2023, 294–295)

These narratives about Stalin’s alleged involvement in the shrine’s demolition continue to circulate today. Pilgrims and workers share this story and demonstrate the negative attitude towards Stalin and his policy. The other common stories are about the punishments of those who were involved in the process. Notably, these efforts to suppress Māshhūr Zhūsip’s influence only reinforced his status as a revered figure. Today, his memory endures, further solidifying his position as a saintly figure in popular consciousness.

The account of the shrine’s destruction in 1952 aligns with the broader context of that period in northern Kazakhstan. Similar narratives regarding the destruction of numerous sacred sites exist, and usually blame the Virgin Lands campaign. They include accounts suggesting that Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine was also affected in the 1950s (Äbdirakhman 2009, 127). However, it would be inaccurate to claim that religious sites entirely disappeared. The sacred places did not vanish but rather adapted to Soviet realities. The example of Communist Party members who continued to venerate Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly’s legacy illustrates the complex coexistence of Soviet and Muslim identities during this time.

The Shrine from 1977

The history of the shrine between 1952 and 1977 remains unclear, but the relatives of Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly actively worked to rehabilitate his name. Notably, the museum holds a letter statement from Zholmūrat Zhūsūpov, the nephew of Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly, addressed to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of

Kazakhstan, Comrade Leonid Brezhnev. Given that Brezhnev held this position from August 6, 1955, to March 6, 1956, the letter was likely written during this period.

In his statement, Zhūsūpov presented arguments against the accusations made against Mäshhür Zhüsip. He emphasized that Mäshhür Zhüsip was born into a *batrak* (landless peasant) family and obtained an education despite significant hardships. He noted that during his lifetime, Mäshhür Zhüsip's works were rarely published and that he faced numerous difficulties. Regarding the shrine, Zhūsūpov wrote that Mäshhür Zhüsip had personally decided to build it, with the support of the local community. He described how, in 1953, individuals arrived at the site and destroyed everything, including personal belongings and a memorial plaque. Zhūsūpov also addressed the accusations of nationalism leveled against Mäshhür Zhüsip, arguing that they lacked a clear basis: "When certain hostile elements fought against Soviet power with weapons and words, he was already an old man who had ceased all activities, including literary work."³⁵

In the letter, Zhūsūpov requested the rehabilitation of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's name, the reconstruction of his grave memorial, the publication of his works, and the commemoration of his 100th anniversary in 1957. The letter, as could be expected, does not mention the veneration of Mäshhür Zhüsip or the pilgrimage to his grave, and it remains unclear whether this letter was ever officially sent or received a response. Despite the lack of immediate action, it can be assumed that Mäshhür Zhüsip's descendants, as well as local community members, continued their efforts through further petitions and statements.

The region's authorities mention Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine in the January 23, 1977, document regarding the celebration of *Qurban Ayt* (Eid al-Adha) in the region. The

³⁵ Zhūsūpov's letter in the memorial museum of Mäshhür Zhüsip

author of the letter, N. Aitpaev, an authorized representative of the Council for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers for the Pavlodar Region, writes about three sacred sites in the region that are mentioned in reports, but which, in fact, are not visited by people. Among them is Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine: “The grave was closed and covered with earth, so it was no longer of interest to either believers or non-believers: they can no longer see Kopeev's incorruptible body” (Boltina and Sheveleva 2001, 333). Later this year, the authorities decided to reconstruct the mazar. The officials were likely sure that the pilgrimage was over, and decided to rebuild, highlighting Mäshhür Zhüsip's secular activities, poems, collecting of folklore, and others.

Thus, in 1977, the mazar was reconstructed and placed under state protection, marking a significant shift in the official recognition of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's legacy. From that point onward, his figure was acknowledged, though initially framed within a secular historical and cultural context. At the time, the shrine was classified as an architectural and historical monument, whereas today, it is primarily regarded as a pilgrimage site.

Archival documents, including the *Passport of the Object*³⁶, the document with the main information about the object, the location, date of construction, the type, and others, provide evidence of the shrine's reconstruction and its evolving role. The shrine was not merely rebuilt but officially designated as a historical monument. The archive contains an inventory card for the monument, signed by junior researcher G.G. Okun, as well as a preservation commitment for the architectural, historical, and cultural monument No. 120, titled The grave of M.Z.Kopeev, issued on July 27, 1981³⁷. In addition, the Security Obligation document, issued on behalf of the Zhanazhol Village Council of People's Deputies and signed by

³⁶ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.400, op.,6, d.128, page 4.

³⁷ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.400, op.,6, d.128, page 1.

representative Zarkyn M. Makzumov, designated the Pavlodar Regional Museum of History and Local Lore named after G.N. Potanin as the responsible institution³⁸.

The other documents include the photos of the new mazar (see Figure 5), the gravestone, and people visiting this place. The inscription on the gravestone from this period reads: *Mashhur Zhüsip Kopeev, 1858–1931, Kazakh poet, historian, philosopher, and collector of oral literature*. This portrayal emphasized Köpeyuly's literary and scholarly contributions while omitting any reference to his religious significance. The current inscription reads: *Poet, historian-ethnographer, philosopher, researcher of Kazakh oral folklore, expert in Eastern literature and Islamic theory, thinker, clairvoyant, great scholar*. This description highlights his scholarly contributions, his expertise in Islamic theory, and his gift of clairvoyance.

So, in 1977, the decision to reconstruct the shrine was likely based on this secularized interpretation of his legacy. Descriptions of the newly built mazar from 1977 focus on its architectural features and the historical significance of the site, recording the date of Köpeyuly's death in 1931. However, no mention is made of the shrine's destruction in 1952. The new mazar was officially categorized as a monument of architecture and history, bringing it under state protection. These actions illustrate the process by which Köpeyuly's figure was legally recognized and his shrine integrated into state-sanctioned historical narratives. Despite the absence of explicit references to religious veneration, archival photographs from 1981 show relatives and other visitors at the mazar, suggesting that pilgrimage traditions persisted. The reconstruction and official recognition of the shrine also reflect shifts in policy and the enduring efforts of those for whom Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly remained an important figure, his shrine continuing to shape the local sacred landscape and collective identity.

³⁸ State Archive of Pavlodar Region, f.400, op.,6, d.128, page 6.



Figure 5, The photo of mazar, 1981, State Archive of Pavlodar region

The shrine in independent Kazakhstan

Since its official recognition by Soviet authorities and later by the independent government of Kazakhstan, the shrine has undergone further transformations. The most significant reconstruction took place in 2006 under the *Mädeni Mura* (Cultural Heritage) state program. This program, which lasted from 2004 to 2011, was initiated by the Nazarbayev and realized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The goal was “Development of the spiritual and educational sphere, ensuring the preservation and effective use of the country's cultural heritage” (State program “Cultural Heritage” for 2004-2006)³⁹. Many historical and architectural sites, including mazars were reconstructed under the program, and

³⁹ “O Gosudarstvennoy programme “Kul'turnoye nasledie” na 2004–2006 gody” [On the State Program “Cultural Heritage” for 2004–2006,] January 13, 2004. Adilet.zan.kz, accessed May 16, 2025. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U040001277>.

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's one is among them. An inscription behind the shrine provides a brief history of the changes:

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly personally oversaw the construction of his tomb, instructing his descendants on burial practices and the method of interment. However, during the anti-religious campaign of August 1952, the mausoleum was destroyed. In 1970, it was rebuilt as a historical monument. In 2006, under the *Mädeni Mura* program initiated by the First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the shrine was reconstructed following modern architectural standards.

While the 2006 reconstruction marked the last major transformation of the shrine, minor restoration and maintenance work have continued. The site is supported both by the state and by local communities. However, the shrine is currently under private ownership, as noted by one of the shrine keepers:

For now, the mausoleum remains privately owned and is not under direct state management. However, the state does assist. For example, local authorities and generous patrons sometimes offer support. They visit the site and ask what is needed, or we submit official requests to the administration when necessary.⁴⁰

Today, the shrine has developed into a complete memorial complex. Several monuments inscribed with Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's poems surround the site, and a staircase with 73 steps leads visitors to the mausoleum. For the convenience of pilgrims, the complex features two guesthouses, one free and one paid, along with designated buildings where visitors can prepare and share meals.

⁴⁰ Interview with the shrine keeper of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, April 27, 2024.



Figure 6. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine in the winter evening, January 2024,
author's photo



Figure 7. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, October 2023, author's photo

A significant addition to the complex is the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's Memorial Museum. Initially housed in one of the guesthouses, the museum was later relocated to a dedicated building. The museum exhibits the personal belongings of Mäshhür Zhüsip, family heirlooms, and other historical artifacts in its first large hall. The second hall serves as a reading room, housing various books written by and about Mäshhür Zhüsip, as well as literature on Bayanaūyl, religion, and other related topics. Handmade crafts created in his memory are also on display, and visitors have the opportunity to purchase books at the museum.

Many of Mäshhür Zhüsip's descendants are actively involved in the management of the shrine. The museum director is a direct descendant, and one of the two shrine keepers is also a

family member, while the other is connected to the lineage as a *küyeū bala* (a son-in-law). Other employees from outside the family work at the complex, particularly in the guesthouse.

In addition to the main shrine and related structures, the site also includes a location significant to Mäshhür Zhüsip's life. In this place, he lived when the original mausoleum was constructed. This site, located approximately 2–3 km from the shrine, can sometimes be reached on foot by pilgrims. Here, a reconstructed version of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's house stands in its original location. In front of the house, a monument bears the inscription:

This site was once home to the great scholar Mäshhür Zhüsip. Before his passing, he foresaw the future, wrote religious treatises, and in 1930–31, prepared his burial site and organized his own commemorative meal (*as*). This stone was installed by Altynbek Zhumatuly, Aygül Beynollaqyzy, and other descendants.

Pilgrims frequently visit this site as part of their journey and are welcome to gather and share a meal inside.

The sacred spring Sarybulaq, whose waters are believed to have healing powers, is located near the house. During my 2018 visits, the spring was freely accessible, allowing people to collect water directly. However, a well has since been constructed, and visitors now draw water using a bucket. A commemorative plaque has also been installed, dedicated to a charitable fund named in honor of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly.

Overall, the infrastructure surrounding the shrine continues to improve each year. Beyond its religious and cultural significance, the shrine contributes to the local economy, particularly for the nearby village of Mäshhür Zhüsip (before 2018 Zhanga Zhol). Pilgrims purchase supplies from local vendors and often buy livestock for ritual sacrifices from nearby residents, further integrating the shrine into the region's social and economic life.



Figure 8. The Memorial Museum of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeuly, October 2023, author's photo



Figure 9. The well on the sacred spring Sarybulaq, October 2023, author's photo

The Shrine as Part of the Sacred Landscape

Today, the shrine has become an integral part of the sacred landscape of Bayanaūyl and holds deep cultural, spiritual, and historical significance for the region. While it attracts visitors from various parts of Kazakhstan and beyond, its primary importance remains rooted in the local community. Each year, the shrine garners increasing attention, reinforcing its role as both a pilgrimage destination and a cornerstone of regional identity.

The shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is an integral part of the local landscape of Bayanaūyl and pilgrimage routes, contributing to both its preservation and growing popularity. In Central Asia, narratives connecting saints with landscapes are widespread. DeWeese (2021), for example, discusses regional sacrality through saints' shrines, using the example of *The*

Description of Khwarazm “pilgrims ... see, and experience, the interconnection between the sanctity of their native soil and the spiritual edification they need, and seek, in their local environment” (213).

Bayanaūyl is the origin of a great number of prominent people, not only religious ones but also scholars, directors, writers, poets, and others. There are different sacred places in Bayanaūyl, and the graves of distinguished people are among the most widespread ones. A notable example is the memorial “Gifted people from Bayanaūyl”, dedicated to distinguished and saintly figures from Bayanaūyl. The monument lists approximately 100 names, including *abyz, piradar, dīūana, molla, äülīe, baqsy, sopy, täūip, qazhy, emshi, synshy, Hazrat, qalpe, batyr, īshan, bī, myrza*, and others. Many of these individuals are buried within Bayanaūyl, reinforcing the sacredness of the landscape.

Mäshhūr Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine is one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in the region and is included in Kazakhstan’s official list of 100 nationwide sacred places. However, its importance does not exist in isolation, it is deeply interconnected with other shrines and sacred sites, collectively shaping the spiritual identity of Bayanaūyl. These interconnections manifest in multiple ways: through the historical relationships between prominent figures of the region, through the physical and memorial connections between their burial sites, and through official efforts to promote the spiritual significance of Bayanaūyl by including these sites in nationwide heritage lists.

One example of these interconnections is the mosque named after Musa Shormanuly, where various monuments tied to Bayanaūyl’s sacred heritage are located. Shormanuly, a regional governor, is historically linked to Mäshhūr Zhüsip; he was the one who gave him the title *Mäshhūr* (meaning “famous”) after hearing the young nine-year-old Adam Zhüsip recite

dastans and *qissa*. At the mosque's entrance, a plaque commemorates Kamariddin Hazrat, one of Mäshhür Zhüsip's teachers. The inscription states:

Qamariddin Hazrat, who received his education in the learning centers of the East (Mir-Arab, Kökiltash), was an educator, preacher of Islam, and researcher in the fields of logic, Islamic studies, linguistics, and Arabic and Persian languages. He served as the chief imam of this mosque from 1867 to 1889. 2012.

Additionally, the mosque's grounds contain several other monuments: a stone inscribed with details about Mäshhür Zhüsip, a memorial dedicated to sacred figures from Bayanaūyl, and another commemorating local people who have performed the Hajj, listing their names and pilgrimage dates. These monuments reflect the interconnected sacredness of the region, Mäshhür Zhüsip, Musa Shormanuly, Qamariddin Hazrat, and other figures are not only linked through history but also through their memorial sites, which continue to be visited by pilgrims who frequently incorporate multiple locations into their routes.

Thus, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine is both a reflection of the region's religious history and a testament to nearly a century of pilgrimage traditions. Its evolution illustrates the continuity of religious practices during the Soviet period, the coexistence of Muslim Kazakh and Soviet identities, and the strategies used to preserve sacred sites under state control. From 1977 onward, the shrine was officially framed as a monument of history and architecture, rather than a religious site, allowing it to survive in a secularized form. Yet, for Bayanaūyl and the greater Pavlodar region, Mäshhür Zhüsip remains a powerful symbol of cultural and spiritual identity, one that endured despite periods of repression and continues to be actively maintained by the state, his descendants, local communities, and pilgrims. The shrine is not merely a historical monument; it is a living, dynamic pilgrimage site. It also serves as an important space

for studying women's pilgrimage practices, offering insights into their role in sustaining and shaping the sacred landscape of Bayanaūyl.

Both figures and their respective shrines represent examples of contemporary processes of sacralization. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is venerated primarily as a saint, with his shrine regarded as an authentic burial place, while Qabanbay Batyr is more seen as a revered ancestor, and the authenticity and location of his shrine are debatable. While they do not align with traditional saintly models, particularly Qabanbay Batyr, or associate with traditional women's wishes, their roles in local and broader pilgrimage routes are significant. Both memorial complexes illustrate the combined interests and efforts of the state and local communities. They are integral to the sacred landscape and are embedded within broader religious and cultural networks.

Chapter II Inside the shrine, the actions and narratives

In this chapter, I examine the primary actions that occur during the pilgrimage, the motivations behind them, and the oral traditions that shape the pilgrimage experience, particularly storytelling, conversations, and the giving and receiving of *bata* blessings. I argue that pilgrimage actions and narratives are deeply influenced by cultural memory, identity, and personal contexts. Pilgrimage can arise from both positive and negative life experiences, whether undertaken with a clear goal or as an unintended journey. What binds these diverse motivations is the shared belief in the importance of sincerity and spiritual intention.

The pilgrimage and the respect for the ancestors traditionally play an important role in Kazakh society. Ranging from personal relatives to nationally recognized saints like Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, the pilgrimage *ziyarat* is a crucial part of national, cultural, and spiritual identities. Pilgrimage to the shrines reflects both individual devotion and collective cultural practices. I situate these motivations within the theoretical frameworks of the veneration of saints, drawing on historical and contemporary scholarship, as well as collective cultural memory, using the works of late historian Pierre Nora (1989) and anthropologist Bruce Privratsky (2001) in the Kazakhstani context.

The pilgrims I interviewed shared various reasons, but many agreed that the shrine is a place for those in need, with negative life events often serving as catalysts. Other purposes include spiritual, cultural, educational, and touristic ones. For some, the shrine is a place to seek healing, blessings, and family prosperity; for others, it is a space to gain knowledge, reconnect with history, or simply reflect. Pilgrims may actively plan their visits with a clear

intention *niyet* or interpret a spontaneous journey as a spiritual calling. Central to these journeys is the emphasis on sincerity, spiritual preparation, and physical cleanliness.

The common narrative is the special energy and aura of the place. For many, the pilgrimage is an opportunity to go from the profane, everyday world into a sacred space, as theorized by the late historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1963). The shrine becomes a transitional space where pilgrims seek transformation, renewal, or solutions to their problems. Additionally, energy theories help explain the universal appeal of sacred sites as places filled with spiritual power.

Although certain motivations and activities are common across shrines, local contexts shape distinct pilgrimage experiences. For example, while storytelling is central to pilgrimage at both Qabanbay Batyr's and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrines, the content and focus differ. At Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, narratives often center on national history, genealogy, *shezhire*, and cultural identity. Here, pilgrims frequently engage in lecture-like discussions, reflecting a collective interest and expertise in national heritage. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on nation-building and identity, such as those proposed by political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) and others.

In contrast, narratives at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine emphasize miraculous events and dream experiences, reinforcing the saint's spiritual authority and the shrine's sacredness. Drawing on scholarship such as scholar of religion John Renard's analyses of hagiographies (2008) and anthropologist Amira Mittermaier's work on dreams (2015) in religious contexts, I explore how these stories strengthen the pilgrims' connection to the site and its saint.

Among the most significant ritual actions at both shrines is the giving and receiving of *bata*. This practice illustrates the centrality of words, oral tradition, and the perceived *baraka* (spiritual blessing) of the buried saints. *Bata* simultaneously embodies a national cultural practice and a religious ritual, highlighting how pilgrimage intertwines cultural and spiritual dimensions.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. First, I outline common motivations for pilgrimage at both shrines and in Kazakhstan more broadly. Next, I examine how storytelling, although prominent in both locations, is shaped by local contexts, focusing on historical narratives at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and miracle and dream stories at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's. Finally, I examine the *bata* practice in the shrines as a national tradition and spiritual blessing.

Believing and testing: the motivations of visitors

People perform pilgrimage in all seasons, and the shrines are usually open to everyone from early morning until the evening (typically from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM). Despite the general accessibility, there are periods when the number of pilgrims increases. They are the weekends, the period from late May to early autumn, when the conditions (weather, roads, etc.) are more favorable and many people are on vacation, the religious celebrations such as *Oraza Ayt* (Eid al-Fitr), *Qurban Ayt* (Eid al-Adha), as well as on commemoration dates and anniversaries of the individuals buried there.

Pilgrims explained the role pilgrimage plays in their lives, answering why they visit these shrines. This seemingly straightforward question was for some pilgrims deeply personal, and tied to life's challenges, traumas, or, in contrast, celebrations. While some respondents shared their motivations openly, others prefer not to share the personal details, underscoring their journeys' sensitive and complex nature. Still, their answers collectively shed light on why

pilgrims, mostly my respondents, were women, undertake pilgrimages, and what the shrine and the saint mean to them.

The question, “Why are you visiting the shrine or performing a pilgrimage?” was the first I asked pilgrims, after greeting, introduction, and invitation to give an interview. The most common response was to read the Quran for the deceased, for the ancestors’ spirits (*arūaqs*). One interviewee explained, “Our Kazakhs come to this place to show respect for our forefathers, the ancestors”⁴¹. While some pilgrims gave brief answers, others shared more detailed reasons and opinions, but the prevalent theme was consistent: respect for ancestors and seeking their support.

This emphasis on ancestral reverence reflects a deep connection between collective memory and spiritual practices. Bruce Privratsky (2001) argues that “the saint (*auliye*) of the shrine is conceptualized within the same semantic and affective field as the ancestor-spirits (*aruaq*) of the home. The collective memory of the Muslim saints sacralizes the memory of the Kazakh ancestors” (181). This connection underscores the centrality of ancestor veneration in Kazakh culture and religion, where traditions such as knowing one’s seven ancestors (*Zheti Ata*), preparing seven flatbreads as offerings, and reciting specific prayers to ensure that food reaches the ancestors serve as tangible expressions of this reverence.

For pilgrims, the support of ancestors is an essential motivation for their pilgrimage. Privratsky (2001) further notes that “maintaining the honor of the Kazakh ancestors by means of an Islamic spirituality is also a cultural mechanism for maintaining Kazakh ethnic identity” (150). In this context, the distinction between ancestors and saints (*äülē*) sometimes blurs, as

⁴¹ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, October 29, 2023.

some pilgrims perceive them as the same. Pilgrimage, therefore, becomes a way to honor both familial and communal spiritual legacies, reinforcing cultural and religious identity.

Certain pilgrims believe that prayers offered at shrines reach God faster because saints act as intermediaries who can request divine favor on their behalf. Some respondents express this belief implicitly through their faith in the saints' support, while others openly articulate how they perceive the saints' intercessory role. One of my respondents, a female shaman at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, described this concept using the metaphor of a heavenly bureaucracy:

You see, they are all very close, like in the office. Allah can't do everything, and they sit in the office with papers. I am learning from Buryat shamans; they tell us, they sit in the office and pass on our requests to Allah Almighty, with papers, in the reception room. Our arūaqs sit⁴².

This viewing of saints and arūaqs as intercessors is a recurring phenomenon across the Muslim world. As Renard (2008) notes in his analysis of saintly hagiographies, “hagiographic accounts occasionally cast Friends indirectly in the role of intercessors” (278). However, this perception is controversial, and some scholars criticize the concept of intercession, arguing that it risks leading to practices prohibited in Islam. Renard observes, “Intercession, after all, implies the kind of mediation between God and his creatures that could (critics argue) lead to idolatry” (278). Thus, the relationship between Islam and the veneration of saints encompasses various dimensions, often reflecting tensions and contradictions. While this understanding of arūaqs having some power in the “divine reception” goes against Islamic orthodoxy, such views still exist among some pilgrims.

⁴² Interview with woman shaman, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 23, 2023.

I did not ask questions about the relation of the pilgrimage *ziyarat* to Islam specifically from my respondents, only the question of why they perform the pilgrimage. Nevertheless, patterns emerged in the pilgrims' responses, highlighting their views on the ancestor's cult and its connection to Muslim practices. Some people clearly distinguish the ancestor's cult and Islam and state that even if it is not strictly Islamic, they are Kazakhs, and it is natural to them. Some understand the question as some critique or testing, and highlight that they pray to Allah here. They emphasized that they are visiting to read the Quran for the deceased persons, but pray to Allah only. Meanwhile, others believe that it is a Muslim desirable practice, and they get the *saūap* (spiritual reward) because of visiting shrines and reading the Quran.

These different narratives reflect the complex relationships between religion and the traditions surrounding shrine visitation, shaped by the Soviet heritage, the different Islamic groups' opinions, and others. The question of ancestor cult and saint veneration in Central Asia has a long history, and in Soviet times, researchers viewed it as relics of the past, yet also provided rich ethnographic data and insights. So, late Soviet and later Russian historian, scholar of religious studies, and ethnographer Vladimir Basilov (1970, 90–91), referring to data mostly from Turkmens, demonstrates the transition of the ancestor's cult to Muslim sainthood, which correlates with later ideas, such as Privratsky's idea of a similar conceptualization of ancestors and saints *äülte* among Kazakhs.

The Islamic practices and shrine pilgrimage continued during the Soviet times, as could be seen in the examples of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine, which was destroyed in 1952 and opened in the 1970s, the holy spring Hazrat Ayub, transforming into the resort, but still welcoming pilgrims (Tasar 2018), the existence of the “grey zones” for rituals, the coexistence of the Muslim and Soviet identities (Abashin 2014). There were accusations of Islam in Soviet times as unofficial, parallel; however, more recent scholarship challenges these binaries,

recognizing the significance of practices like shrine pilgrimages in Central Asian Islamic traditions (Sartori 2019).

The pilgrimage practice in Central Asia met allegations from the Islamic groups as contradictory to religion, but contemporary pilgrimage in Kazakhstan is deeply embedded within Islamic practices and is generally seen as compatible with Islam. The Grand Mufti of Kazakhstan, as well as the expeditions of imams, visited prominent shrines like those of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly. It is documented on the official website of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan⁴³, and other Muslim sites, such as Muslim.kz⁴⁴. Such visits highlight the integration of these sacred sites into the broader framework of Kazakh Islam. Anthropologists Jesko Schmoller and Ulan Bigozhin (2022), analyzing Kazakh and Russian Sufi practices, note the opinion of the prominent religious leader in Kazakhstan:

For Qurban-Ali, as for many Kazakh Muslims, the Wahhabis are followers of the “non-Kazakh” religious path, which means that they reject the path of the ancestors, the key elements of which are the veneration and seeking support from the holy spirits of the ancestors (324).

So, Islam in Kazakhstan connects deeply with the traditions, and the pilgrimage *ziyarat* encompasses three movements, as Privratsky (2001) describes: “first to the mosque, second to the shrine, and finally to family graves” (115).

⁴³ “Verkhovnyy Muftiy Posetil Mavzoley Mashkhura Zhusupa (Video)” [Supreme Mufti Visits Mausoleum Of Mäshhür Zhüsip (Video),] muftyat.kz, 14 June, 2020, <https://www.muftyat.kz/ru/news/qmdb/2020-06-14/31836-verkhovnyi-muftii-posetil-mavzolei-Mäshhüra-Zhüsipa-video/>.

⁴⁴ “Imami stolici posetili mavzolei Kabanbai batira foto” [Imams Of The Capital Visited The Mausoleum Of Qabanbay Batyr (Photo),] muslim.kz, 14 December, 2021. <https://muslim.kz/ru/news/imamy-stolitsy-posetili-mavzoleyi-kabanbayi-batyra-foto>

Therefore, the pilgrimage to the shrine is an important part of the lived religion, the practical Islam in different regions. These notions of lived religions are important elsewhere, as Louw's research in Uzbekistan and Schmoller's in the Volga-Ural region. Anthropologist Maria Louw (2006) decided to step away from the idealized Islam and focus on “the ways in which Islam is lived and experienced in practice” (321), particularly the sacred spaces and pilgrimage in Bukhara. Schmoller (2022) argues about local Muslim pilgrimages in the Volga-Ural region: “It helps to manifest a lived Muslim culture threatened by both a more pervasive religious denomination and secular principles” (2). Similarly, the sacred geography of Kazakhstan reflects the richness of local Islamic traditions, with shrines like those of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip serving diverse purposes for visitors.

Mäshhür Zhüsip's reputation for religious devotion and miracles profoundly influences pilgrims' motivations, while Qabanbay Batyr's legacy as a revered commander batyr marked by divine favor inspires visitors to seek qualities such as leadership and strength. Pilgrims see these figures as protectors, visiting their shrines to seek support, guidance, and blessings for personal challenges and aspirations. Thus, asking for support and showing respect through prayers and other rituals remains a widespread and meaningful tradition, underscoring the enduring role of shrines in Kazakh spiritual life.

The reasons and needs

The primary reason for visiting a shrine is often rooted in a need for healing, guidance, starting a family, achieving success in significant events, expressing gratitude, or addressing various other life challenges. While both positive and negative life events can motivate pilgrimages, negative circumstances tend to dominate, and all unhappy pilgrims are unhappy in their own ways.

Many visitors come to shrines because of hardships or difficult circumstances. The majority of the respondents were women, and for them, visiting shrines, praying here is one of the ways to help their families and themselves. For some pilgrims, visiting the shrine represents a form of psychological support, a space where they can share their problems, whether with other visitors, shrine keepers, or through prayer with the divine, and seek comfort and help. Some openly share their struggles, while in other cases, their challenges are evident through observation; some individuals appear unwell or distressed. For instance, one woman approached the shrine keeper at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine to seek blessings (*bata*) for finding a job.

In Kazakh culture, the phrase *zhol ashy* (opening the road) signifies the belief that shrine visits can help overcome life's obstacles. As different authors have noted, when problems persist in someone's life, it is often seen as a sign that their "road" is blocked. Pilgrimage is believed to resolve this blockage, allowing success to flow once more.

Pilgrims often turn to shrines as a last resort, especially in cases of chronic illness, unresolved challenges, or impending loss. This is not only about seeking physical healing but also about gaining clarity or revelation. Many believe that hardships are tests from Allah, given to those strong enough to endure them. At Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, a woman in a group of pilgrims explained why she visited:

We are also lost in life. We stay here and pray to God, if our husband drinks, for them not to drink... we visit this place for all our wishes. My eldest son is disabled. There is no place I haven't been; I am there for a reason. People who are just having fun don't come to these places. People who are suffering come⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. October 29, 2023.

Similarly, a woman working at the hostel at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's complex, familiar with the pilgrims' motivations, shared her insights:

Not every person comes here, but those when it starts, how can I explain you... when it hurts, when life becomes painful. Allah, to come to Allah, gives in any way, he gives trials to someone, grief to someone, difficulties to someone, financial problems to someone⁴⁶.

As a result, for some pilgrims, life's challenges become an opportunity for self-reflection and spiritual growth, leading them to start praying *namaz* or strengthening their faith in Allah. The same woman expressed: "To find the road, to get on the path, people sometimes go through trials. Someone gets sick, someone ..., and they turn to God, to Allah. How do they turn to Allah? By visiting holy places"⁴⁷.

The visit implies a solution to a problem, healing, the birth of a child, finding a job, and other miracles. Or at least pilgrimage, for many, helps them confront serious issues such as health crises, family loss, or other adversities. It also provides a sense of peace and purpose. The journey itself, as well as the community at the shrine, reinforces the belief that life's hardships are tests from God, not reasons for despair. Visitors are often encouraged by others to see their challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth, to keep believing, and to remain resilient. This collective support brings comfort and hope to those in need.

The visiting of sacred sites because of illnesses and problems, and the hope for help and miracles, is common in different parts of the world, as Robert Scott (2010) demonstrates in the research of Western European Christianity's saints, sacred places, and miracles. He examines the role of belief in the visiting shrines for healing, showing how the ideas of placebo

⁴⁶ Interview with a woman worker, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. January 14, 2024.

⁴⁷ Interview with a woman worker, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. January 14, 2024.

effect and analgesia evolved with time. He concluded that the different factors in the shrines, such as the support of the caregivers, different rituals, and the storytelling about the miracles, made them “ideal therapeutic communities”. One of the explanations for the relief of the pilgrims after visiting the shrine is that “the mere expectation of relief would diminish the activity of pain receptors in the brain and trigger the signal to the body to begin manufacturing naturally occurring painkillers in the form of endorphins”. Similar emotions could be seen in the shrines in Kazakhstan, where pilgrims’ belief plays a crucial role. The saints’ and places’ power is important for people, and the miracles made by saints’ *karamat* influence the belief, as I will demonstrate in the further sections.

Not all visits to the shrine are connected to negative life experiences. For some pilgrims, the pilgrimage is a positive and joyful act of gratitude. Many people return to the shrine after their dreams and wishes have been fulfilled, feeling a deep sense of appreciation. They visit to thank Allah and the Ata, sometimes bringing their families or even newborn children they had prayed for. Others, after experiencing healing, continue to return and share their stories of transformation.

Thus, the shrine is not only a place for supplication and seeking assistance but also a space where people come to offer their gratitude for blessings received.

The importance of intention

People came here for different reasons, but what is significant is their intentions and motivation. As Privratsky (2001) writes, “pilgrimage requires an inner state having to do with the Islamic concept of spiritual ‘intention’ (173) *niyet*. The pilgrims’ opinions here demonstrate the contradiction, on the one hand, it is important to have the goal, the intention to visit the sacred place, and prepare yourself physically and mentally. On the other hand, it is also counted

or happens when the person does not have a clear plan to perform a pilgrimage, but the circumstances, the road itself, led them to the shrine, the sacred site. Many believe that Allah or saints themselves direct individuals to the shrine, viewing these events as a sign of spiritual purpose.

For instance, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, one couple shared that they had originally planned to fly to Pavlodar but missed their flight. Taking this as a sign of destiny, they decided to visit the shrine instead, as a place they had long wanted to see. Other women, too, believe that their purpose or even mission is to be in the shrine at this specific time. One respondent explained: "I can't say I set out with a clear intention to visit places like this. No, that wasn't the case for me. It's just that the road somehow leads me there, and I'm grateful that it does"⁴⁸. Another woman shared a similar sentiment:

You know, people usually don't go to places like that under some kind of compulsion, it seems like a random coincidence... You can't even explain it in one word; there was some reason, you just feel that... if there is a road, then the cards will always fall in your favor. Yes, you just feel that you need to go there⁴⁹.

This belief in divine or saintly intervention is also strong in stories about Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. Pilgrims often recount how the saint appears to influence events, ensuring they visit his shrine. For example, one family was traveling to the Abay and Shäkärım memorial complex on the advice of healers for their ailing daughter. They stopped at Mäshhür Zhüsip's shrine to ask for directions, where locals suggested they stay overnight, and that Ata help. Initially, they refused and left, but after hours of circling, unable to find the correct road,

⁴⁸ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. July 24, 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview with women pilgrims, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 29, 2023.

they returned and stayed at the shrine. Remarkably, their daughter's condition improved afterward.

Others, however, prepare carefully before visiting the shrine and believe that everyone should do it; otherwise, it will make the saints angry. For them, mandatory practices include performing ablution (*däret*), adhering to a strict dress code, maintaining appropriate behavior, and cultivating the right inner state. Some people believe that if you go to the shrine, you should go straight to it, without any distraction from other places and things. I met a woman at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine who underlined that she came from Almaty by train directly to this place. As she explained:

The most important thing is that a person's heart and intentions are pure when they come. I came here specifically, for example, from Almaty, without stopping at “anything else”, I just came here on a direct journey. Therefore, I think my intentions are pure⁵⁰.

Despite such perspectives, sacred tours that include multiple shrines remain popular, especially for those with limited time. Many pilgrims view this as a practical way to visit several holy places at once, balancing devotion with logistical considerations.

These accounts reveal the flexibility of pilgrimage practices, accommodating both meticulous preparation and unplanned visits. Ultimately, pilgrimage is deeply personal and shaped by diverse opinions, so there is no single “correct” way to approach it. Still, people criticize those, without proper intentions and preparations because such individuals are seen as disrespecting the sanctity of the place and potentially bringing harm not only to themselves but to the site as well. This criticism extends to the growing number of tourists at sacred sites,

⁵⁰ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. July 16, 2024.

which has sparked divided opinions. On one hand, locals express pride in the increasing popularity of these places. On the other hand, many disapprove of the masses of tourists who come unprepared or treat the pilgrimage casually, such as stopping at shrines while on their way to leisure destinations like the Bayanaūyl recreation area.

In general, the motivations of pilgrims can be varied and multifaceted, but what truly matters is their sincerity and genuine belief. While pilgrims may perform the same rituals and behave similarly, their intentions and faith significantly influence the outcome of their pilgrimage. As one woman explained, there is a clear distinction between those who *senip keledi* (come with true belief) and those who *synap keledi* (come merely to test the saint's powers). Those who tested it came with insincere motivation and had thoughts that if they spent 20000 tenge on the road and products *Atashka* should give them something instead, but this is not the right belief⁵¹.

For those who seek blessings or wish fulfillment, sincerity is essential. True blessings and positive outcomes are believed to come only to those who approach the shrine with pure intentions and genuine faith.

The energy of the place

Some pilgrims highlight the special energy of the shrine as a key reason for their visit. For them, it is an opportunity to recharge, absorb this energy, and leave feeling renewed. Pilgrims at both Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine frequently described these sites as places of power.

One pilgrim at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine shared her experience:

⁵¹ Interview with a woman worker, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. January 14, 2024.

When I come, I come to recharge, I come just to feel this energy, it seems to me that this energy remains anyway. And then, if I could absorb and keep this spirit at least to some percentage, it would be really amazing⁵².

Similarly, another woman at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine expressed her sensations, linking them to cultural and even genetic memory:

Well, for me, it's a place of power. My family and I often go to such sacred places. It seems to me that it's in our blood. It seems to me that in our blood there are still these genes that awaken exactly when we come⁵³.

Although the ancestor cult is more commonly associated with Kazakhs, people from different ethnicities and religious backgrounds also visit these shrines. For instance, a Russian woman at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine shared how important these pilgrimages are in her life:

I really like visiting this place because it is a place of power for me. And when I need to solve some issue in life, I come here, pray, ask God to forgive my sins, forgive my family, and give me strength and confidence in my intention to come true. Well, and at the same time, I let go, everything is God's will. Here, I am filled with some kind of power⁵⁴.

The concepts of energy and places of power have gained prominence due to new patterns and information about sacred sites introduced through contemporary spiritual frameworks. Terms such as *aura*, *energy*, and *place of power* have become common in describing the spiritual significance of these sites. As anthropologist Anna Fedele (2018) demonstrates, the notion of pilgrimage to sacred places to access sacred energy started at least

⁵² Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 23, 2024.

⁵³ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. April 20, 2024.

⁵⁴ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. November 12, 2023.

from the 1970s with the New Age religious movements and different terms for such pilgrims (115). She uses the term “energy pilgrims” to describe individuals who undertake such journeys, analyzing Catholic pilgrimage sites in France and situating them within a “worldwide web formed by energy lines spanning across the globe” (Fedele 2018, 112).

The shrines of Kazakhstan could also be understood within these networks of energy pilgrimages. Their appeal to people of various religions may be partly explained by the adoption of an “energy grammar”—a framework that does not strictly affiliate these sites with any single religious tradition. This *transnational language*, as Fedele (2018) notes, is widely acceptable across both religious and secular contexts because it employs terms that are not explicitly tied to any particular religion (128). The mention by different pilgrims at the shrines of the energy significance further supports this idea of transnational energy language. The act of “charging” with new and extraordinary energy at these “places of power” creates a space for spiritual transformation and renewal.

So, for many, the pilgrimage provides a transition from the mundane, everyday world to a sacred, transformative experience, which correlates with Victor Turner’s idea of liminality (1969) and Mircea Eliade’s on the profane and sacred geographies (1963). Victor Turner (1969) defines liminality as the ambiguous position “neither here, nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95). Furthermore, he lists several characteristics of liminal society, including “transition, homogeneity, equality, anonymity, minimization of sex distinctions, unselfishness, silence” (106) and others. While these experiences are not absolute for everyone, generally, the pilgrimage to the shrine mainly corresponds to this liminal state. Many respondents mentioned the equal status of the pilgrims, the need to be calm, reflective, open-minded, or rather open-hearted. The shrine itself is the place between the living persons and divine powers and

ancestors' spirits, where the shrine keeper is sometimes seen as the mediator. The liminal place helps people to go from one state to another, as in the case of *rites de passage*. The pilgrimage experience often helps people to go through something to the next life stages, as they describe it.

While shrines remain rooted in traditional practices, such as honoring ancestors, they have also acquired new meanings through the influence of diverse spiritual movements. The energy pilgrimage theories help explain why people from different cultural and religious backgrounds are drawn to these sites. Thus, for many visitors, the shrines are places of ancestral reverence and spaces imbued with broader spiritual significance, appealing to a modern, globalized understanding of sacredness.

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine: The storytelling and traditions

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine serves as a vital space where pilgrims engage with traditions, historical narratives, and communal memory. Central to this experience is the shrine keeper, who plays a key role as caretaker, narrator, and mediator of knowledge.

During their visits, pilgrims often spend time with the shrine keeper, discussing Qabanbay Batyr and his burial place, other sacred sites, and broader aspects of Kazakh history, culture, language, and local traditions. Their eagerness reflects a deep interest in history, which frequently extends to personal genealogies (*shezhire*), especially for those who claim ancestral connections to Qabanbay Batyr or regard him as a significant historical figure. This widespread interest in historical narratives and personal archives resonates with broader trends in Kazakhstan and beyond.

The shrine keeper stands at the heart of these interactions. Widely respected among pilgrims, he shares his extensive knowledge and facilitates discussions. His background as a journalist and researcher specializing in Qabanbay Batyr enhances his authority, as he often incorporates historical facts and scholarly perspectives into conversations. His dual role—as both a custodian of the shrine and a promoter of historical knowledge—attracts pilgrims and strengthens the shrine’s role as a center of cultural learning. Here, highlights the intertwined roles of pilgrims and the shrine keeper. Pilgrims, driven by a desire to explore history and traditions, form the primary force behind these interactions. Meanwhile, the shrine keeper’s expertise and narrative authority play a pivotal role in shaping pilgrims’ experiences and fostering the transmission of cultural memory.

In analyzing the key activities at the shrine, I apply theoretical frameworks of religion and collective memory in the Kazakh context (Bruce Privratsky 2001) as well as concepts of nationhood and imagined communities (Benedict Anderson 1983/2006). I see the language of traditions here, the storytelling as a performance, an instrument for constructing and enforcing identity, interest in history, culture, and genealogy.

The main actions in the shrine and traditions

Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine is a popular destination for pilgrims. During my 60 visits, each lasting about three hours, I counted approximately 1,298 visitors: 547 women, 554 men, and 197 children. While the shrine is open to everyone, and I observed people of different ethnicities, the majority of visitors were Kazakhs. The primary language spoken at the shrine is Kazakh, with most conversations conducted in it. Among the visitors, both Kazakh and Russian were used, depending on the context. Some pilgrims spoke Russian among themselves but switched to Kazakh when interacting with the shrine keeper or when I approached them.

Overall, the Kazakh language, along with national history, traditions, and memory, plays a central role and is actively promoted at the shrine.

The main activities at the shrine reflect traditional pilgrimage practices: praying, receiving blessings (*bata*), and bringing symbolic offerings such as seven flatbreads or a *qamshy* (whip), which are placed on the gravestone. Pilgrims also engage in conversations during their visits. However, some common practices found at other sacred sites are notably absent here. For example, there is no dedicated space for communal meals, although acquaintances may occasionally visit the shrine keeper's house. Similarly, there is no provision for overnight stays or animal sacrifices, as the existing buildings are occupied by shrine workers. Some pilgrims were interested in why there is no place for usual in other places having tea, and the shrine keeper explained that for this purpose, there should be permission from the sanitary and epidemiological station, as well as salaried workers to manage, resources that the shrine cannot afford. He doesn't even receive the salary from the state himself.

The typical route for pilgrims begins at the parking area, leading directly to the shrine. After visiting the shrine, they usually walk around the Pantheon, although some choose to visit the Pantheon first before proceeding to the shrine. Despite the absence of places for meals and sleep, the shrine is a comfortable place for pilgrims. There are heating batteries so that pilgrims don't freeze in the winter, and a fan in the summer. The shrine is open from 9 am to 6 pm, and during this time, everyone can go and stay at the shrine for any time as they want.

Inside the shrine, a clear gender division is observed from the moment of entry until departure. Women are expected to allow men to enter and leave the shrine first. Upon entering, women usually bow toward the gravestone, symbolically paying respect to the ancestors' spirits believed to reside there. Some men also bow, placing their hands on their chest as a sign of reverence. Seating arrangements inside the shrine also follow a gender division: women sit on

the left side and men on the right. The shrine keeper enforces this practice rigorously, but in his absence, visitors occasionally sit wherever they choose. During the visit, men usually recite verses from the Quran, most commonly *Al-Fatiha* and *Al-Ikhlās*, and give *bata*. In many cases, the shrine keeper leads these rituals, reciting various surahs and offering blessings. Alternatively, he may invite one of the male visitors to perform the recitation, following which he gives the final blessing himself.

Women also could read the Quran, if no men are present or if the men do not know how to recite the Quran. Women usually do it silently. Upon leaving the shrine, women are careful not to turn their backs to the gravestone, while men may do so. These distinctions highlight the gendered dynamics of ritual practices within the shrine. Although the main rituals are relatively brief, a wide variety of activities take place inside the shrine. These include storytelling, bringing offerings, bowing, touching the gravestone, performing additional personal actions, and taking photos or videos. Most of these practices align with tradition and are approved by the shrine keeper.

The center of the shrine is the gravestone. Many pilgrims kneel before it, touch it multiple times, usually three, and then place their hands over their faces as if performing a symbolic washing, known as *bet sīpaū*. One woman, while I was sitting on a nearby bench, encouraged me to touch the gravestone three times, saying it would bring me good fortune. In addition, pilgrims often circumambulate the gravestone in both directions, touching different parts of it as they go. They bow to it at various points along the way. Visitors also place a variety of items on or near the gravestone. Both men and women put personal belongings such as phones, keys, purses, and coins. Men tend to limit their offerings to these items and *misbaha* (prayer beads). Women, however, frequently bring traditional items like whips (*qamshy*), veils, and traditional food such as flatbreads (*shelpeks*) and fried dough (*baūyrsaqs*). These offerings

have different meanings, whip, for example, in many cases brought by women shamans *baqsy*, who use it as the instrument of their work. They believe that praying at shrine helps to clean the *qamshy* and gives it the energy of the place. However, not only *baqsy*, but different people could have and bring it, highlighting the importance of the whip in Kazakh culture, and claiming that it should be in every house.



Figure 10. Qabanbay Batyr's gravestone inside the shrine, October 2023, author's photo

Generally, this belief in transferring the energy and blessings of the sacred site to personal belongings is a universal phenomenon. At this shrine, we see how this belief adapts to both traditional items, like whips and fabric, and modern ones, such as phones and keys, all of which are thought to absorb the spiritual energy of the place.

The food offerings are also a part of the old traditions in the sacred sites. Women prepare food with the belief that it will bring positive outcomes. They bring these offerings to the shrine and distribute them among the people here. This act of distributing food is a common practice, and those who receive the food often express their gratitude and faith through words of blessing in return. Women play a central role in this tradition, as they are typically responsible for maintaining the household and ensuring the well-being of their families. They engage in these activities as part of their care for family and community, believing that they are fostering goodwill with the ancestors' spirits. The process of preparing this food, the seven *shelpeks* or *baūyrsaqs* and feeding the spirits with their aroma *īs shygharū* described by Privratsky (2001), who highlighted the communal character of this tradition (129–132).

In this context, women act as protectors of the family, both spiritually and practically. They seek to propitiate ancestral spirits, both in their homes and at the shrine, reinforcing their role as caretakers and guardians of family harmony. Thus, food is more than a simple offering; it serves as a means of supporting the family and connecting with the spirits. It is both a sacred act of devotion and a tangible expression of sharing and community. This dual purpose underscores its significance in both spiritual and social dimensions.

The storytelling and the shrine keeper

All these activities in the shrine occur with the silent approval of the shrine keeper, Kamal Äbdirakhman, who is the central figure of this sacred place. Kamal Äbdirakhman not only defends the claim that Qabanbay Batyr is buried here, as discussed in the first chapter, but also actively shares this position with pilgrims. He oversees the shrine's processes, assists visitors, and ensures the upkeep of the complex.



Figure 11. With Kamal Äbdirakhman, the shrine keeper, November 2023, author's photo

Both objects, the Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and the National Pantheon, are under the supervision of the shrine keeper Kamal Äbdirakhman, a journalist, historian, and researcher. He is the only shrine keeper since the construction of the shrine in 2000. I got acquainted with him on 16 July 2023, but saw him on previous visits to the shrine. Our first interview was on

19 July 2023. At that time, the shrine keeper told me about the history of the shrine, some activities, and advice on what to read about the Qabanbay Batyr. On October 27 and 29, I recorded other interviews with the shrine keeper, where he told me more about himself, his career path, and the skills needed to be the shrine keeper. Since this time, almost every visit I meet with him, have small talk or deeper conversations, listen to what he is saying to other pilgrims, and observe the activities.

The shrine keeper is usually present at the site, either inside the shrine or in the nearby house, allowing pilgrims to invite him to recite the Quran and offer *bata*. While his absence is rare, during such times, a woman working at the shrine assumes his responsibilities. She shared that she has worked at the shrine for several years, with her entire family, including her grandchildren, regularly visiting the site. In situations where no one in a visiting group can read the Quran, she assists by praying on their behalf, usually also surahs *Al-Fatiha* and *Al-Ikhlās* in Arabic and finishing with *bata* in Kazakh. Unlike the shrine keeper, she sits directly in front of the gravestone and prays in a whisper. Her actions, along with the behavior of others at the site, reflect the high level of respect accorded to the shrine keeper.

Kamal Äbdirakhman commands respect for several reasons. He is one of the key proponents of the idea that Qabanbay Batyr is buried at this site, a position he has defended in books, articles, and in conversations with pilgrims. He frequently demonstrates extensive knowledge of history, traditions, and cultural practices, which he shares during interactions with visitors. Despite not receiving a salary from the state, he remains deeply committed to his role, ensuring that the shrine is well-maintained, orderly, and welcoming for pilgrims. Äbdirakhman agreed to become the shrine keeper after the invitation, and before this, he many years collected information about Qabanbay Batyr and explored his heritage. Probably for him, the shrine keeper's position profits not in material terms, but spiritually, by sharing knowledge

and others. His efforts have led to tangible improvements, such as the installation of heating batteries this past fall, making the shrine more comfortable for visitors.

His authority extends beyond logistical oversight; he is also a key figure in the storytelling traditions that enrich the shrine. Many of the stories shared at the site gain popularity due to his extensive knowledge and ability to engage pilgrims. As the moral authority of the shrine, Kamal Äbdirakhman carefully monitors and guides activities. For example, he permits food offerings aligned with Kazakh traditions but encourages pilgrims to take the food back to their homes rather than leaving it at the site. On the other hand, he prohibits practices such as leaving white fabric on the gravestone, arguing that such actions are neither Kazakh nor Islamic in origin.

Kamal Äbdirakhman's personal background and life experiences further contribute to his respected position and influence within the shrine. To provide a fuller understanding of his role, I will briefly present his biography and examine how his actions have shaped the shrine's activities and traditions.

Kamal Äbdirakhman was born in 1949. After finishing school in 1966, he began working on a collective farm, taking on various roles, including driving a tractor and tending to sheep. At that time, admission to the Faculty of Journalism and Law at KazGU (Kazakh State University)⁵⁵ required two years of work experience. In 1970, he graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at KazGU. He later pursued further education, graduating from the Almaty Higher Party School and the University of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow.

During his student years, Kamal Äbdirakhman was actively involved in various activities. He worked as a combine harvester operator during the Virgin Lands Campaign. He

⁵⁵ Kazgu is the present days Kaznu, Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi

was also a member of the All-Union Komsomol (VLKSM) and was awarded a Certificate of Honor for his contributions.

After graduating from KazGU, his career progressed through a variety of positions. He began as a substitute responsible secretary in the Taldykorgan region and later became the head of the regional Kazakh language society. In 1992, he was appointed head of the Taldyqorghana Regional Department of Culture and Language. Following the dissolution of the region in 1997, he worked in the city government for three years. Since 2000, he has been serving as the shrine keeper at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine⁵⁶.

His diverse educational background and professional experiences, which involved significant public engagement, have greatly contributed to his communication skills and ability to connect with pilgrims today. This experience also shaped his worldview, knowledge, and position in promoting the national language and culture, which happens today in the shrine.

There are various other reasons for becoming the shrine keeper: some are motivated by a deep personal interest in the saintly figure and their heritage, others by familial connections, being from the same clan as the saint. Generally, the shrine keepers institute is not regulated yet and is a vocation rather than a profession. Some individuals are invited to take on the role, while others begin their work after experiencing prophetic dreams (*ayans*), often described as “callings from ancestors”. For instance, scholars of Cultural Studies Zhanerke Shaygozova, Rustam Muzafarov, and Sultanova (2019) investigated shrine keepers across different regions of Kazakhstan and found that all the keepers they interviewed had been “urged by a call in their sleep from Ancestral Spirits to look after the graves” (108).

⁵⁶ Interview with the shrine keeper, October 27, 2023.

Although shrine keepers are predominantly men, some women fulfill this role. For example, Sättigül Daūletova, the shrine keeper of the Domalaq Ana shrine in the Türkistan region, previously worked as a vendor and cleaner in her village before taking on the role⁵⁷. Similarly, Gulnar Sagyntayeva, the shrine keeper at the Oisylkara cemetery in Aktobe region, became a keeper after experiencing recurring *ayans* in 1997, in which a figure called her to Oisylqara⁵⁸. It is not always related to the sex of the saint, because in the case of Aysha Bibī's shrine, there are 3 shrine keepers, all of them are males⁵⁹.

In the case of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, the primary motivations behind shrine-keeping are research-driven, social, and symbolic. Kamal Äbdirakhman's path to becoming a shrine keeper did not stem from spiritual callings or blood relations, although his belonging to the Nayman tribe, the same as Qabanbay Batyr, could contribute to his interest and sense of responsibility, despite not being a direct descendant. Considering that he does not receive a regular salary, it appears that respect, symbolic capital, and the esteem of the community are also among the primary motivations for maintaining this role. Although some sponsors and visitors contribute financially, giving *sadaqah*, these donations are directed toward improving the shrine itself rather than personal income. Finally, beyond these social and symbolic incentives, the shrine keeper's genuine interest in Qabanbay Batyr and his legacy may also be a significant motivating factor.

Äbdirakhman started his work from an invitation, based on his extensive research into Qabanbay Batyr's legacy. He has been studying Qabanbay Batyr's heritage since 1979, when

⁵⁷ "Domalaq ana kesenesining shyraqshysy: Almaty äkimi äyelimen zıyarat etip, keyin uldy boldy" [The shrine keeper of the Domalaq Ana Mausoleum: Almaty äkimi visited the shrine with his wife and later had a son,] October 22, 2018, Sputnik.kz, <https://sputnik.kz/20181022/domalaq-ana-kesenesi-almaty-akimi-7720986.html>

⁵⁸ "Shyraqshy" [The shrine keeper,] June 23, 2023, Aqtobegazeti.kz, <https://aqtobegazeti.kz/?p=131077>

⁵⁹ Atikah Adzhar, 2022, *Female Shrine Pilgrimage In Contemporary Kazakhstan*, [Master's Thesis, Nazarbayev University], Nazarbayev University Repository.

the book *The Problems of Kazakh Historical Poems* was published by the Institute of Literature and Art of the Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences. This work first identified the burial site of Qabanbay Batyr as being located 30 km from Aqmola, on the territory of the Oktyabr State Farm⁶⁰.

Äbdirakhman recalls:

It was one institute of the entire Academy, and that institute said for the first time that Qabanbay Batyr's burial place is on the territory of the Oktyabr State Farm, 30 km from Aqmola city. Oktyabr State Farm is here—Qyzylzhar. [The place is called the mountain of Qabanbay.] Since then, we have been following the path of Ata. We really started in 1991, after gaining independence, when we had the opportunity to go to China, Russia, and Mongolia. What surprised me was that as early as 1962, it was written that Qabanbay Batyr was buried here. This was first documented by the scientist and professor Nabi Daulbaev, a resident of Kosshy and professor at KazGU. Later, professors Derīsh Baīshev, Mukhtarbek Kārim, and Bolatzhan Abylqasymov also wrote about it⁶¹.

Over more than 40 years, Kamal Äbdirakhman has dedicated himself to the study of Qabanbay Batyr's heritage, contributing to the establishment of *Qabanbaytanu*—the academic study of Qabanbay Batyr. He is the author of four books and the recipient of several awards. This extensive experience, combined with his research and education, has shaped his current role as a shrine keeper. His background not only influences the activities at the shrine but also facilitates the transmission of knowledge to pilgrims and the wider public.

⁶⁰ Present-day Qyzylzhar village.

⁶¹ Interview with the shrine keeper, October 27, 2023.

The pilgrims, in turn, respect and highly value the shrine keeper for his professionalism and extensive knowledge. This is evident from various interactions. For instance, when I approached some pilgrims with questions, they often suggested I speak with the shrine keeper, saying, “He knows best.” Some pilgrims appeared to know him personally, asking if there was any way they could assist with the shrine. While sitting on the left side with the women pilgrims, I overheard them praising him. They remarked on how he recites the Quran “the right way,” and some even shared that they listen to audio recordings of his recitations after their visits.

One memorable episode occurred when a family approached the shrine keeper to conduct a naming ceremony, *Azan shaqyryp at qoyu*, for their infant. That day, the shrine was full of pilgrims, and all of them witnessed this ceremony. The parents had decided to name their baby boy Erasyl after Qabanbay Batyr. The child, only a few months old, was held as the shrine keeper performed the traditional ritual: whispering a prayer into one ear and the father’s name and chosen name into the other. While this particular tradition was an exception rather than the norm, it highlighted the deep respect for the shrine keeper's knowledge and authority. Such respect is a common feature of interactions at the shrine.

Pilgrims often engage in conversations with the shrine keeper, viewing him as a respected and knowledgeable figure. First-time visitors typically ask two common questions: whether Qabanbay Batyr is truly buried at the site and if the shrine keeper can share information about Qabanbay Batyr’s life and legacy. Regular visitors, on the other hand, often approach him with a wider range of inquiries. These conversations naturally evolve, covering diverse topics such as topography, history, language, and traditions.

For some pilgrims, the shrine is a sacred place for prayer and receiving blessings (*bata*). For others, it also serves as a hub of historical and cultural preservation, identity, and education. So, many people see the shrine simultaneously not only as a religious place, but as a space that

is the center of the traditions and Kazakh identity. The shrine keeper highlighted the importance of knowing the traditions and their evolution:

The main task of a person sitting in such a place is to know the person buried here, his life history. That's why I need to know about Qabanbay Batyr ...This is the first, the second, one needs to know the history of that time, when the Kalmyk army came, how it started, and how it ended, you need to know the traditions of the Kazakh people at that time, and compare them with those we know today. Are they preserved until the present day? Or are they gone? Has their number become fewer? Have they improved? Have they worsened? ⁶²

So, the shrine keeper's background and expertise significantly shape the content and depth of these discussions. His responses are grounded in factual evidence and historical research, lending credibility to his explanations. While the topics of mystical experiences or miracles associated with the shrine were discussed, the majority of conversations focused on cultural and historical aspects.

Nationality and the Historical Interest Motives

National motives play a significant role in Qabanbay Batyr's shrine practices. Although the shrine is an inclusive place that welcomes individuals from diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds, the Kazakh identity is particularly prevalent. Pilgrims demonstrate this through their dominant use of the Kazakh language, frequent references to tribal affiliations (such as *shezhire*), and broader discussions focused on traditions and cultural heritage.

⁶² Interview with the shrine keeper, October 29, 2023.

Language plays a crucial role in shaping national identity, serving as one of the key components of nation-building alongside territory, elites, and culture, as outlined by historian Terry Martin (2001), with the example of the Soviet Union's policy (10). Kazakh is the official language of Kazakhstan, but Russian is also widely spoken due to historical and cultural factors. Shortly, during the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union pursued a policy of *korenizatsiya*, indigenization, aimed at promoting national languages. After the policy changed, and by the late 1930s, Soviet language policy shifted toward Russification. As a result, Russian became the dominant language in administrative, educational, and cultural spheres across the Soviet Union, including Kazakhstan. In independent Kazakhstan, there have been concerted efforts to reverse this legacy by prioritizing the promotion and revitalization of the Kazakh language.

At the shrine, Kazakh is the primary language, reinforcing a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. The shrine keeper encourages the use of Kazakh but is fluent in Russian and cites different documents by heart, including excerpts from Russian documents. He also conversed in Russian with two Russian women pilgrims during their visit. Some visitors are open to switching between languages, while others believe only Kazakh should be spoken in such a significant cultural space. Generally, pilgrims often use both languages. Some speak Russian within their groups but switch to Kazakh when addressing other pilgrims or the shrine keeper. My respondents usually indicated their language preference at the start of our conversations. While some exclusively used Kazakh or Russian, others mixed the two, speaking primarily in Russian with Kazakh phrases interspersed. The broader state efforts and societal movements to promote the Kazakh language are mirrored at the shrine, where discussions about language frequently arise.

Language at the shrine is not confined to ethnic boundaries; non-Kazakh visitors speak Kazakh, while some Kazakhs may not be fluent in it. However, one cultural element nearly all

Kazakhs are familiar with is their tribal affiliation, which remains a significant marker of identity and often comes up in conversations at the shrine.

When starting conversations, the shrine keeper often asks pilgrims where they come from and what their clan or tribe is. Pilgrims themselves frequently ask this question of one another. Many visitors show a genuine interest in history and *shezire*, often using this information to trace connections, origins, and shared histories. There are three Zhüz in Kazakhstan: Senior Zhüz, Middle Zhüz, and Junior Zhüz, each of which has numerous tribes and more minor subdivisions inside. While the total number of tribes may exceed 100, some people are familiar with them and can easily identify their origins based on a response, as well as recall prominent figures associated with the clan and other related details.

The interest in *shezire* and family history is a common motive for visiting the shrine, though it appears more prominent among men. While pilgrimage groups typically include both men and women, men seem more passionate about these discussions, often engaging in long conversations with the shrine keeper and with each other. Women, though attentive and occasionally participating in these discussions, appear to find the topic less central or engaging, at least based on my observations.

This difference may be rooted in the role of *shezire* in Kazakh culture. For men, their genealogy remains consistent throughout their lives. They are often the keepers of family history, passing it down to their children and grandchildren. Women, on the other hand, are generally not included in written *shezire* records and, upon marriage, become part of their husband's family. They are more likely to teach their children the *shezire* and clan affiliations of their fathers rather than their lineage.

The interest in clan affiliation was particularly evident in conversations with individuals connected to Qabanbay Batyr, as they often mentioned it themselves. Qabanbay Batyr

belonged to the Middle Zhüz, Nayman tribe, specifically the Qarakerey sub-tribe. During my fieldwork, I encountered pilgrims who claimed both direct and distant relations to the batyr. One group, for example, came from the Tarbagatay region in East Kazakhstan. They identified themselves as Nayman, Bayzhigit, positioning themselves as descendants of Qabanbay Batyr. They emphasized that visiting the mazar while in Astana was an obligation for them, as it allowed them to read the Quran and pay their respects. They also highlighted Qabanbay Batyr's significance as a national figure, transcending their specific lineage: "In my opinion, Qabanbay is not just our ancestor but the ancestor of the entire Kazakh nation, as there has never been a batyr among Kazakhs to match him. He was a true batyr of batyrs."⁶³

A woman from this group shared her personal experience as a descendant and a woman. She recalled hearing stories about the batyr during her childhood. Even though she is now married to a person from another tribe and her relatives are the maternal side relatives (*naghashy*), she continues to educate her children and grandchildren about Qabanbay Batyr, preserving his legacy across generations⁶⁴.

People generally show a deep interest in national and global histories, as well as in their family and personal histories. They often visit shrines with specific questions and demonstrate knowledge of history, topography, genealogy, and related topics. For example, one day, a group from the Qaraghandy region visited the shrine, expressing a connection to Qabanbay Batyr⁶⁵. There were two women and a man who shared a photograph of their ancestor Taraqty Tuyaq Sheshen's (1820–1890) grave (see figure 12). The gravestone featured an inscription listing the names of prominent figures, including the phrase, "He is also my *zhīen* nephew." The second

⁶³ Interview with a man pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's descendant, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. November 23, 2023.

⁶⁴ Interview with women pilgrims, Qabanbay Batyr's descendant, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, November 23, 2023.

⁶⁵ Interview with a group of pilgrims, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 6, 2024.

line specifically mentioned, “Qarakerey Qabanbay, he is also my nephew.” This group emphasized the importance of history and how their local and familial ties made it particularly meaningful. They also showed their political views and praised Nursultan Nazarbayev for his role in building the mazars. This respect to the First President from different groups also happened in the shrine, demonstrating the support of his activities in supporting sacred sites. Generally, their visit exemplifies how people engage with historical narratives through personal connections, blending general historical interest with pride in their local and ancestral heritage.



Figure 12. Tarakty Tyak Sheshen’s gravestone shown by the pilgrim, August 2024

There were other cases when pilgrims emphasized their tribal identities. For example, one group from the Abaq Kerey tribe mentioned their kinship with Qabanbay Batyr. Another group from Atyraū (West Kazakhstan) was from the Junior Zhüz and was primarily interested in both Qabanbay Batyr and Farīza Onggharsynova, who is from their region. However, these tribal and regional ties are viewed as a matter of tradition and interest rather than a harsh division. Pilgrims engaged in both sharing their stories, their genealogies, and their ancestors, and learning about others. So, pilgrims foster a sense of unity in the shrine by recognizing shared cultural values and national heritage. Despite regional variations, most pilgrims regard Qabanbay Batyr as a national figure whose legacy goes beyond local affiliations.

The dynamics surrounding Qabanbay Batyr's shrine reflect broader trends in the popularization of local and family narratives, which contribute to the construction of national identity. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities*, the shared stories, conversations, and genealogical discussions among pilgrims help create a sense of belonging that transcends individual and regional identities. Anderson (1983/2006) argues that nations are socially constructed through shared experiences and communication networks, and in this context, pilgrimage functions as a key mechanism for fostering national unity. As Bigozhin (2019), basing on the case of Aqkol shrine, argues, "shrines have become perceived as part of the Kazakh national historical and cultural heritage; they are 'essential pillars' of the 'Kazakh national spirit' that provide ties to an imagined past." (131), Qabanbay Batyr's shrine follows this trend. It serves not only as a religious site but also as a space where national identity is reinforced through collective memory and shared historical narratives. Pilgrims' engagement with the shrine, whether through discussions of genealogy, recounting historical events, or performing culturally significant rituals, reflects a broader process of nation-building in which sacred spaces play a vital role.

Still, the shrine is open for everyone, as well as the National Pantheon nearby, which serves the nation's different ethnicities. The shrine keeper usually cites the poem of Qabanbay Batyr (Sänik and Sadykhan 1991, 100), showing the openness of the place:

Alys tūys demeymin,

Käpir musylman demeymin,

Kim buryn atymdy atasa

Sony qoldap ketpekpin!

It is roughly translated as I don't say others or relatives, I don't say infidel or Muslim, whoever calls my name, I will support them.

While the shrine is open to all, its emphasis on Kazakh cultural traditions and language highlights the interplay between inclusivity and national promotion. This duality reflects the state's broader efforts to balance multiculturalism with the reinforcement of Kazakh identity. The activities at the shrine, from genealogical discussions to historical storytelling, reveal a tendency toward a more scholarly and reflective approach to heritage, promoting both local knowledge and national pride. Pilgrims visit not only to pay their respects but also to immerse themselves in the history, traditions, and cultural heritage associated with the site. They view the shrine as a communal space for acquiring knowledge, with the shrine keeper significantly contributing to these exchanges.

In sum, the pilgrimage to Qabanbay Batyr's shrine exemplifies how, through storytelling, shared histories, and cultural practices, the site facilitates the construction of imagined communities, reinforcing both local affiliations and a broader sense of Kazakh national identity. This is one of the sides of pilgrimage at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. Available

to everyone, seen by some as the healing place, and getting blessings, for others, is also the way to a deep connection with roots, reflecting on the history, heritage, and traditions.

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine: Miracles and dreams

The interest in national history and identity shapes pilgrimages to both shrines; however, miracle narratives are notably stronger at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. While both sites are associated with saints and attract pilgrims seeking blessings, healing, and spiritual experiences, the emphasis on miraculous events is more visible at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. Several reasons explain this distribution. Firstly, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is known as a healer and a seer, and this reputation also reinforces him as a saint. Secondly, unlike the Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, here there is the infrastructure enabling pilgrims to stay overnight, make animal sacrifices, and share meals. Some pilgrims stay for several days, and often recount dreams, healings, and personal transformations associated with their visits, further solidifying the shrine's connection to the miraculous. In contrast, while Qabanbay Batyr's shrine holds significant national and historical importance, the narratives there focus more on history, heroism, and cultural identity rather than supernatural phenomena.

Therefore, miracles and dreams are inseparable aspects of pilgrimage at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine, and become an integral part of local knowledge and oral traditions. These stories are widely known in the region and contribute significantly to the popularity and credibility of the shrine. In the case of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, miracles hold particular importance because his life and death were deeply intertwined with miraculous events.

I will rely on the theoretical frameworks of saints' hagiographies, dreams, and miracles (John Renard 2008), and the role and interpretation of dreams (Amira Mittermaier 2015). Miracles reflect some of the most common motivations for pilgrimage and serve as evidence of the saint's perceived spiritual power, *karamat*, which includes "gratuitous marvels, wonders;

saintly miracles as distinctive from prophetic” (Renard 2009, 267). So, the category of *karamat* is distinguished from the miracles performed by prophets as “proof of their divine mandate”, which are called “evidentiary miracles” (Renard 2008, 95). The *karamat* miracles are associated with the saints, Friends of god, “spiritually advanced individuals, second only to prophets” (Renard 2009, 90). During his lifetime, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly was reputed for performing miracles, including predicting his death and the incorruptibility of his body. After his passing, stories of miracles associated with him have grown in number. These narratives align closely with the reasons pilgrims visit the shrine and their aspirations. For example, when pilgrims hear of couples conceiving children or individuals experiencing healing after visiting the shrine, they are inspired to make the journey themselves. Thus, performing miracles is a key attribute of saints, and Mäshhür Zhüsip is no exception.

The miracle stories circulate widely among people, attracting new visitors to the shrine. As historian Ashirbek Muminov (2013, 33) notes, the miracles and myths narratives are crucial in the ideological legitimation of the saints. Women often play a central role in spreading these narratives, sharing their own experiences and those they have heard from others. At Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine, women working at the site are particularly knowledgeable about various miracle accounts shared by pilgrims. Through their interactions with visitors, they not only preserve these stories but also help prepare new pilgrims by recounting them, thereby reinforcing the shrine’s spiritual significance.

Dreams, as well as miracle stories, are significant aspects of pilgrimage and shrine traditions. While dreams are less likely to occur at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine because there are no guest houses for pilgrims to sleep, many pilgrims at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine stay overnight and report experiencing significant dreams. Additionally, at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, the limited time of pilgrims sometimes does not allow for establishing closer conversation and sharing intimate things such as dreams. While at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine, the joint

activities and more time together led to more open conversations, sharing different personal information, including having prophetic dreams. These dreams are considered one of the ways the saint communicates with individuals. Although I did not experience dreams during my visits, pilgrims often share their dreams or recount stories they've heard, creating an invisible network of shared narratives. Interpreting these dreams is also significant, as they rarely convey clear messages. Instead, they often have symbolic meanings that pilgrims intuitively feel and interpret. Dreams are thus a crucial element of the pilgrimage experience.

In general, many people who visit Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine are already familiar with these stories or learn about them during their visit. These narratives reinforce their faith and strengthen their belief in the shrine's power. Dreams and miracles are sometimes inseparable, and the pilgrim's stories could include both. I will start with the miracles and then continue with the dreams.

Miracles, the stories from the pilgrims

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine is a popular destination for both locals and visitors from distant regions. Its reputation is significantly shaped by mysterious stories, miraculous events, and the fulfillment of wishes, which contribute to its widespread appeal. While miracle stories are common to many saints and shrines, they are prominent at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. His life and death are deeply intertwined with accounts of miracles, as documented by his descendants.

The miracle stories surrounding Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, often referred to as Mäshhür Ata, have become an integral part of the region's cultural heritage. Pilgrims frequently share and spread these stories, making them well-known throughout the area. Even beyond the shrine, people discuss these narratives, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, for example, visitors mentioned Mäshhür Zhüsip's life, his death, and the preservation of his body. Similarly, in

Ekibastuz, taxi drivers were familiar with the most popular stories, which they often shared with passengers. These tales are passed down from generation to generation, as families bring children on pilgrimages, ensuring their continued significance and role as a cultural connector.

Before visiting the shrine, many pilgrims are already aware of these stories, including Māshhūr Zhūsip's supposed predictions of the future. At the sacred site, these narratives are shared in various settings—during meals, walks, visits to the shrine or museum, and informal conversations. Pilgrims recount what they have seen or heard from friends and relatives, creating a dynamic oral tradition. For many, these miracle stories are essential as they reinforce faith in the positive outcomes of their pilgrimage.

Miracle stories can be categorized in various ways, including by their topics, subjects, actions, and other criteria. Renard (2008) divides them into three main categories: scope of action, type of action, and subject or theme (91–92), each with further subdivisions. The scope of action focuses on who benefits from the miracle (whether the miracle serves the saint themselves or others). The type of action examines how the miracle is performed and the abilities required to enact it. Finally, the subject or theme category organizes miracles by what they address or their thematic focus.

These categories often overlap, as seen in the case of Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly. As discussed in Chapter 1, he was believed to possess the gift of prediction and control over jinn—attributes that fall into all three categories. Here, I primarily focus on the first category, miracles directed toward helping others, because this is the most common reason people visit the shrine and share stories about the saint's miraculous powers. These accounts form the foundation of believers' faith in the saint's assistance. As Renard (2008) notes, "Friends of God miraculously provide a host of needed services to a wide spectrum of people, from the destitute to the wealthy,

to both women and men, and even to non-Muslims (who rarely continue their misguided ways for long)” (101).

These stories often reflect the most common reasons for visiting the shrine, including seeking family blessings, the birth of children, self-development, and healing from diseases and bad habits, or addictions. Pilgrims find hope in hearing about others who achieved their desires through faith and prayer. These accounts suggest that if one believes deeply enough, similar miracles can happen to them. A recurring theme in these stories is that pilgrims pray to Allah at the shrine, sometimes asking Mäshhür Zhüsip to intercede on their behalf.

The miraculous power of Mäshhür Zhüsip began during his lifetime, as discussed in the first chapter, and continued after his death, with accounts of miracles related to visitors to his grave persisting to the present day. One of the earliest stories I heard about his miraculous power came from an elderly woman, Alūa Tate (tate here as aunt)⁶⁶, who was born as a result of her parents’ pilgrimage to Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata in 1952. Alūa Tate’s story is particularly interesting because her parents’ pilgrimage took place shortly before the mazar was destroyed, and they were possibly among the last visitors who saw the incorruptible body of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly. Moreover, this account encapsulates the common elements of miracle stories and the pilgrimage experience, including visiting the shrine, praying, making an animal sacrifice, staying overnight, experiencing a dream, and the eventual fulfillment of a wish.

I first heard her story directly from Alūa Tate herself and later from another woman who worked at the shrine. The narrative recounts how Alūa Tate’s parents, a young couple at the time, undertook a pilgrimage to Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine in 1952. They had already endured the devastating loss of six or seven sons, prompting Alūa Tate’s paternal

⁶⁶ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Alūa Tate, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine. October 21, 2023.

grandfather to bring them to the shrine to pray for a daughter. He instructed them to ask for a daughter, even if she was “weak, blind, or lame.” At that time, the shrine retained its original appearance. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s body was, as he wished, laid in a room dug below ground level, resembling a cellar, as per. His body was wrapped in a white shroud. There was no electric lighting at that time, and the young daughter-in-law, the future mother of Alūa Tate, was initially frightened. However, her father-in-law insisted they proceed, reminding her that if they wished to have children, they must go. Inside the room where Mäshhür Zhüsip’s body lay, the young woman was struck by a marvelous fragrance, which she described as the “scent of paradise.” They prayed at the shrine, and afterward, the grandfather performed a *qurmaldyq* (animal sacrifice) and advised them to spend the night there, as they might receive guidance through a dream. They also brought a white shroud, three or seven meters long, as an offering to the saint, symbolizing a *shapan* (robe) which is usually given as a sign of respect.

The following morning, the young woman shared her dream. In it, she asked Mäshhür Ata to help, and he smiled to her. Then, he handed her one owl feather. She asked for more, and he gave her two whips, followed by two more whips. She combined the whips, but they fell, so she asked again, and he gave her two additional owl feathers. The owl feathers symbolize daughters, as they were traditionally attached to girls’ hats and cradles, while the whips represented boys. After this pilgrimage, the couple’s prayers were answered. They gave birth to a daughter, Alūa Tate, followed by two sons, two more sons who passed away, and two additional daughters. Alūa Tate, now an elderly woman with children and grandchildren of her own, continues to visit the shrine and undertakes pilgrimages to other sacred places.

This story highlights the shrine's enduring popularity from its earliest days and illustrates the other traditional elements of pilgrimage, such as dreams and their interpretations. Miracles involving children are among the most popular accounts. One humorous story shared

by a local woman involved a mother who visited the shrine keeper with her child, saying, “Look, here is your child.” When the keeper, startled, denied any connection, she explained how she had prayed at the shrine and asked for his prayers. Thanks to this, she said, she was blessed with a baby. Stories like these reflect traditional values and the deep desire for children, emphasizing how women, both in the past and today, seek solutions to personal and familial challenges through pilgrimage.

Another common type of story revolves around overcoming bad habits and becoming a better person after visiting the shrine. These accounts often address societal issues such as alcoholism and gambling. Interestingly, the individuals seeking help are not always those with the bad habits themselves; instead, their family members, including wives, fathers, or other relatives, frequently take on the responsibility. Pilgrimage often becomes a last resort when other methods have failed, though it provides a glimmer of hope for families reluctant to pursue more extreme measures, such as medical interventions.

To the relief and joy of those suffering, many stories recount how visiting the shrine has helped people overcome their struggles. One notable example involves an elderly man who brought his son, a chronic alcoholic, to the shrine⁶⁷. The father declared, “The bones are mine, the flesh is yours. Do whatever you must, but help him.” Following this, the shrine keeper instructed the son to sleep in a nearby yurt. That night, the man was terrified by a vision of a white silhouette hovering above him. After this experience, he never drank alcohol again. It is widely believed that the apparition was Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata himself, intervening to scare the man into changing his ways. These stories demonstrate the different social problems and the role of believing in trying to resolve them.

⁶⁷ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine. January 14, 2023.

Other stories, particularly those where individuals impose hardships on themselves, illustrate the belief that personal challenges are necessary to atone for guilt. One account involves a man from the nearby city of Ekibastuz, located 87 kilometers away, who undertook a pilgrimage to Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata on foot. This man was a gambler and lost a significant amount of money, which led to a conflict with his family. He then regretted his actions and decided to perform the pilgrimage on foot to demonstrate the sincerity of his actions, the desire to stop the game addiction, and ask for help from Mäshhür Zhüsip. As my respondent told me, this man stayed for a night and prayed, and the next day went to Ekibastuz again on foot. There is no information on whether this pilgrimage indeed helped him to stop the addiction. However, the story illustrates the broader belief that suffering and effort purify one's motives and strengthen the likelihood of a saint's help.

Many pilgrims believe that blessings and miracles require sincere intent and, in some cases, personal sacrifice or hardship. As Renard (2008) writes: "Some stories focus on the pilgrim's intent, reporting that he or she needs to refine the motive for pilgrimage through lengthy suffering" (193). It highlights how individuals willingly endure physical and emotional challenges to seek forgiveness and demonstrate their commitment to change. These acts of self-imposed hardship reflect a profound belief in the transformative power of pilgrimage and the possibility of redemption.

Another popular wish among pilgrims is to seek healing and improved health. Numerous stories recount how visitors felt better after visiting the shrine, ranging from relief from minor issues like bad dreams to more serious problems, such as protection from the "evil eye" or shayatins, evil spirits. It is significant both for pilgrims and the healers as the way to get the sacred power here, or to impress the pilgrims. As anthropologist Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2001) describes Uyghur healers' experience:

Occasional pilgrimages to shrines helped her gain strength through the blessings of the saints, ... generated a great deal of 'symbolic capital' for the healer, i.e. religious prestige that enhanced her credibility, especially when the party of pilgrims could relate miraculous events occurring during the journey (86).

So, here is the continuation, and 20 years ago, as well as today, people see these places also as the symbolic power places.

Interestingly, the miracles associated not only with the positive but also with the negative consequences exist in different shrine traditions. At the shrines dedicated to female saints, there are wishes not only for traditional marriages but also to diminish the husband and family. So, Päivi Miettunen (2018) writes how women pilgrims asked the saint to get rid of their husbands: “a woman who was unhappy in her marriage could visit Umm Jadi‘, brush the surface of the stone clean, and beg the saint to take away her husband” (49). While I had not heard the stories like this at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine, pilgrims could wish silently for what they wanted.

The perceived source of these miracles is attributed to Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s profound religiosity and the positive aura or energy of the shrine. Many pilgrims believe that the continuous recitation of the Quran enhances the sacred atmosphere, said to take place 24 hours a day at the site. While the stories of miracles emphasize the power of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, shrine keepers often remind pilgrims that all blessings come from Allah. The saint is sometimes seen as an intermediary whose prayers carry special weight. Some pilgrims believe that faith in Allah, combined with the saint’s intercession, can bring about miraculous outcomes. Generally, through these stories, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is celebrated not only as a spiritual figure but also as a symbol of hope and divine connection

Sharing miracle stories is a common practice among pilgrims and plays a crucial role in shaping the image of Mäshhür Zhüsip as a powerful saint who can assist those in need. Over time, these narratives have become part of local folklore and the region's spiritual heritage.

Miracles when Ata is angry

Not all miracle stories are tied to positive events or wish-fulfillment, and miracles often demonstrate the saint's power, which manifests as punishment for those who disrespect the saint or desecrate sacred places. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is believed to possess the ability to see and sense people at the shrine, understanding their intentions. A common story, not only at this shrine but also at others across Kazakhstan and the world, emphasizes the importance of showing respect when passing a sacred site. Pilgrims believe that one must stop to visit or at least offer a prayer. Neglecting this can lead to various misfortunes, such as getting lost, flat tires, or even car accidents.

The most severe punishments, according to local accounts, were inflicted on those who desecrated Mäshhür Zhüsip's mazar in 1952. When the shrine was destroyed and his body was reburied, it is said that the first six individuals tasked with the act were unable to complete it. Those who eventually succeeded reportedly suffered greatly afterward. Many experienced mental illness, early death, or infertility, and their descendants—children and even grandchildren—were also said to suffer. Pazylov (2022) writes: “They destroyed it, but all who participated in this 'action' faced severe punishment: early death, illness, infertility” (28).

These stories underscore the need for reverence and preparation, both physical and mental, when visiting sacred places. It is not the usual travel or entertainment activity. Even though people perform different activities, including sometimes jokes, arguing with each other, and others, the general intentions and the rules should be respected. Otherwise, the saints,

ancestors could be not happy but angry with the person and send them not positive events but punishments.

Miracles, in this context, are not only blessings but also tools of the saint to protect their legacy, their families, and their communities during hardships. As Frank (2019) argues, miracles during the era of repression “challenge Soviet depictions of their holy ancestors, and Islam in general; they maintain social bonds within and between kinship groups, and they reinforce collective ethical norms” (40–41). The narratives surrounding Stalin and Soviet repression remain deeply intertwined with the shrine's history, with some people believing that Stalin himself ordered the shrine's destruction and Mäshhür Zhüsip's burial, claiming that only Lenin should remain unburied after death. These stories reflect a negative attitude among some pilgrims toward Soviet power and, particularly, Stalin, as the personification of the policy, which is seen as an affront to sacred traditions.

These accounts also reveal the agency and character of saints. Saints are perceived as autonomous figures with the power to act, protect, and punish. Such narratives emphasize the importance of respect and resonate with national themes, portraying saints and ancestors as protectors of the land. Miracles remain central to the shrine's significance, showcasing the saint's abilities and power. While the well-known miracles from Mäshhür Zhüsip's life are familiar to most, newer miracle stories occurring at the shrine continue to reinforce his influence and fulfill people's desire to believe. These narratives inspire faith in pilgrims that their wishes may come true.

During the fieldwork, I heard from the pilgrims many stories about the ways they believe they should act to make their wishes true. Some of them believe that one group should make the collective wish, others that pilgrims should pray at sunrise. Some people circumambulated the shrine or the gravestone inside, brought the white fabric, and performed

other actions. However, the shrine keeper reminds people that the magical rituals are forbidden here, and the main action is sincere praying.

Dreams

Miracles are often intertwined with other traditions, such as staying overnight at the shrine in hopes of receiving a prophetic dream. Dreams serve as a significant means of connecting with pilgrims, providing them with guidance, advice, or warnings. As seen in the miracle accounts, visits from saints frequently occur through dreams. In the Islamic tradition, dreams have long functioned as a vital channel for spiritual connection, facilitating communication between teachers and pupils and enabling the transmission of knowledge. Saints, in particular, are believed to appear in dreams to offer guidance, protection, or counsel, further reinforcing their presence in the lives of the faithful.

This tradition is happening and popular here, in contrast to Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, where there is no place to stay for a night. At the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly memorial complex, there are 2 places for staying, a paid hotel, and a free guesthouse. Staying for a night is particularly common among pilgrims traveling from other regions. Many visitors choose to stay for several days to deepen their spiritual connection. During the summer, the shrine becomes so crowded that there is often no availability in either paid or free accommodations. Pilgrims often arrive with extended families, including elderly members and children, or as part of larger groups. Many share their experiences of having meaningful dreams during their stay, and some of these dream accounts have become part of local folklore, along with miracles, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the shrine.

Anthropologist Amina Mittermaier (2015) identifies three types of dreams in Islamic traditions: "(a) *hadith nafsi*, dreams that originate in the dreamer's self; (b) *hulm*, dreams (often nightmares) inspired by a jinn or evil spirit; and (c) *ru'ya*, a divinely inspired dream-vision or

waking vision that offers prophetic insight” (110–111). Most pilgrims report experiencing the third type (*ru'ya*), though some encounter the second type (*hulm*), in which Mäshhür Zhüsip is believed to help them overcome their fears or challenges.

Interestingly, dreams connected to Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly are not limited to those experienced at the shrine itself. They are seen as evidence of the saint’s ability to reach out to individuals wherever they may be. One widely known story from the shrine illustrates this belief. It recounts the experience of a local man from Bayanaūyl, a famous coach, who had a dream *ayan* in which Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly called him to the shrine. Motivated by the dream, he and his friends started a pilgrimage. At the time, the man was 63 years old. When they began ascending the steps to the shrine, he stopped on the 63rd step and told his friends to go ahead, assuring them he would follow shortly. His friends went to the shrine, prayed, and waited, but he never arrived. When they returned to check on him, they found that he had passed away on the 63rd step. Symbolically, he was unable to ascend to the 64th step, marking the end of his 63rd year of life. Out of respect for the dream and the saint’s apparent request, the man was buried near the shrine. This act reflects the deep reverence for Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly and his perceived ability to influence the lives and deaths of those connected to him.

Other dream stories have more positive outcomes. As previously described, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is believed to help individuals by offering symbolic items, such as those representing children, or by frightening them to prevent harmful actions. It seems that almost anyone working at or regularly visiting the shrine has experienced a dream connected to Ata. One woman, who frequently visits the shrine, shared her experience during a mealtime gathering. She recounted how she and her husband were driving past the shrine when she dozed off briefly. In her short sleep, she saw three figures dressed entirely in white. She recognized

one of them as Ata and woke up abruptly. Feeling a sense of urgency, she asked her husband to stop the car, and they prayed by the roadside.

Particularly significant dreams often occur when pilgrims sleep within the shrine itself, though this is rare. During my fieldwork, I never witnessed anyone sleeping inside the shrine, as it is typically closed at sunset. However, locals shared accounts of exceptional cases where pilgrims were allowed to stay overnight. One such instance involved a mother and her son, who was suffering from a *jinn*-related illness. They were permitted to sleep inside the shrine, and during the night, the mother had a vision, possibly a dream or a real encounter, of the door closing and a silhouette appearing. The next day, her son's condition improved, and they believe it was Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata himself who helped them.

Pilgrims also visit the shrine seeking relief from sleep-related problems or disturbing dreams. One man shared how he had been plagued by recurring nightmares of a dog biting him. After spending a night at the shrine, the nightmares ceased entirely. The practice of staying overnight at the shrine is popular, even among those who do not experience dreams. Many pilgrims share that their sleep at the shrine was peaceful and that they felt a sense of relief and renewal afterward.

Dreams are often viewed as irrational phenomena, requiring no justification, yet people place great faith in them. Many pilgrims hope to find solutions or guidance in their dreams, further reinforcing the significance of this practice. Interpreting dreams is considered an art form among the pilgrims. People often find personal meaning in their dreams, believing they have seen a saint or received a sign about future events. Even if the dream's symbolism is unclear to others, those who experience it often feel deeply connected to its message, reinforcing their faith in the power of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly.

Overall, narratives about miracles and dreams play a vital role at the shrine. Storytelling frequently centers on the miracles of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly—those that occurred during his life and after his death, as well as those experienced by pilgrims. These stories significantly contribute to the shrine's reputation as a powerful and sacred place, spreading its influence beyond the local community to the whole of Kazakhstan. These stories demonstrate the struggles that people face in life, their desires, and wishes. The sharing of these stories among pilgrims contributes to the networks around the region and beyond, with miracles becoming part of the collective memory and oral heritage.

The language role – *bata*

A key shared tradition at both shrines is the practice of *bata* giving and receiving blessings, which combines national motives, the belief in miraculous words, and the common purpose of pilgrimage. I argue that *bata* is a performative act that strengthens spiritual connections, reinforces cultural identity, and shapes the pilgrimage experience through language.

Bata is the practice of offering words of blessing, often given after significant events or before important endeavors. The contexts for *bata* vary, but at shrines, it is typically offered after prayers as a general blessing for all present. During this ritual, people traditionally run their hands over their faces as if to physically receive the blessings. This practice is common at both Qabanbay Batyr's and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrines, although the specific contexts and settings may differ. *Bata* could be seen as a performative act, and there are different cultural aspects to it. As linguistic anthropologist Eva Marie Dubuisson (2017) demonstrates, *bata* is an important part of the life cycle, a “regular feature whereby elders can impart wisdom and thereby bless younger persons”. Generally, *bata* could be given in different

contexts, and at pilgrimages this also has relations not only with the person who gives *bata*, but the all the power of the saint in the place.

Furthermore, language plays a crucial role in shaping the experience of pilgrimage. As anthropologist Webb Keane (1997) argues, language serves as a medium that makes spiritual forces tangible and accessible:

Language is one medium by which the presence and activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presuppose, even compelling, in ways that are publically yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups (49).

In the context of *bata*, language is not just a tool for communication but an essential vehicle through which pilgrims connect with the divine, their ancestors, and their community. For Kazakh and Russian-speaking pilgrims, the nuances of language influence their perception of the sacred experience, highlighting different dimensions of faith and belonging.

Starting with the context, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, *bata* is usually given inside the shrine after prayers. The shrine keeper, often an elderly and respected figure, leads the *bata*. Even when other men recite the Quran, it is the shrine keeper who delivers the blessing. At Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, *bata* is similarly given after Quran recitations inside the shrine, but it is also offered in other locations, such as the hotel dining area or at the site of Mäshhür Zhüsip's house, particularly after meals.

In addition to the general *bata* offered to all, individuals often request personal blessings. The reasons for seeking personal *bata* vary widely. Some pilgrims request blessings to overcome obstacles, find new jobs, or pass exams, while others choose not to disclose their reasons. These requests are typically made after the communal part of the ritual has concluded.

At Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, pilgrims frequently ask the shrine keeper for individual *bata*. Groups of women, for example, may request blessings one by one, or parents may seek blessings specifically for their children. After receiving *bata*, pilgrims often give donations, either handing them to the shrine keeper or placing them directly into an alms box.

The personality of the *bata* giver is important, and while they are usually the shrine keepers, there could be others as well. At Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, alongside the shrine keepers, pilgrims often seek *bata* from the saint's descendants. Some descendants work at the museum or reside at Mäshhür Zhüsip's house, where pilgrims visit specifically to receive blessings. The pilgrims themselves may give *bata* to one another. There is also some hierarchy in giving *bata* among pilgrims, for example, elderly persons give it to the younger ones. *Bata* from pilgrims is particularly common after meals or in other informal settings. Both men and women can give *bata*, though the context often determines who participates. While men predominantly lead blessings within the shrine, women are also active in giving *bata* in other settings, such as dining areas or during group gatherings.

Pilgrims often exchange blessings and kind words with one another, such as *Qabyl bolsyn* ("May your wishes come true"). *Bata* formalizes this sentiment, offering a collective way to extend good wishes to everyone present. Kindness and mutual support are common among visitors to the shrine; for instance, many of my respondents wished me success with my dissertation after our interviews.

Bata holds great significance as it represents the culmination of kind and meaningful words exchanged among pilgrims at the shrine. While not everyone may fully understand the Quranic *ayat* recited during these visits, *bata* is typically delivered in the Kazakh language, making it accessible and transparent to all.

Generally, *bata* is not specific to Kazakhstan only; it is popular throughout Central Asia, where people give it in their languages. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, *bata* is also significant in sacred places, where people receive it when they seek healing (Aitpaeva 2013, 197), make animal sacrifices to God (102), and others. There are also special terms characteristic of Kyrgyz *bata*, for example, *batakoi*, the person whose wishes and blessings came true, so others ask blessings from them (232).

Bata plays a central role in the pilgrimage experience, not only in traditional contexts, but also in religious movements, such as the *Ata Zholy* one. It is the New Age religious movement, which positioned itself as a combination of traditional beliefs and Islamic ones. The movement was banned in Kazakhstan in 2009 over allegations of a security threat, but remains active in pilgrimage sites. I analyze *Ata Zholy's* activities at the shrines in the 3rd Chapter. Scholars such as Sarsambekova have analyzed the evolution and significance of *bata* in Kazakhstan, highlighting its cultural and spiritual importance. She analyzed the *bata* from the members of the *Ata Zholy* religious movement, who identify as mediums *aqqu* (women) and *sungqar* (men), and attribute even deeper meaning to *bata*. They believe that saints speak through the blessings, sometimes offering predictions or guidance (Sarsambekova 2021, 136).

The pilgrims I talked to also shared how they received *bata* from the *Ata Zholy* members. They highlight the specific nature of this kind of *bata*. *Aqqu*, who gave them *bata*, believes that the special saint, ancestral spirit, one or several speak through them and give people predictions. The pilgrims could record them and share that the language they used in these *bata* could be elusive, using archaic words. The women pilgrims share how these predictions came true generally and how they respect those who can give this kind of *bata*. This kind of *bata* also exists in the *Ata Zholy* movement gatherings in other regions of Central Asia. Anthropologist Nestor Manichkin (2020) describes different features of *bata*, the common wishes, and the ancestors from whom they asked *bata*. He also writes about the difference between *bata beru*,

the traditional *bata*, and *bata shygary*, the term for *Ata Zholly* members (Manichkin 2020, 62). However, not all people believe in the first one; only the traditional ones do. Generally, in both countries, the usual *bata*, when people also believe in the support of ancestors, but not that they speak through them, happens mainly in the shrines.

To illustrate the characteristics of *bata*, I will present two examples: one is a communal *bata* given at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine by the shrine keeper after prayers. It is concise and resonates with the shared intentions of the pilgrims. The second *bata* is a personal blessing I received from a woman after our interview. She offered it with heartfelt sincerity.

Both examples highlight the dual nature of *bata*: as a communal ritual that unites pilgrims in shared faith and as a personal act of kindness and encouragement. At Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, the communal *bata* reinforces the collective spirit of the pilgrimage, while at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, the personal *bata* underscores the interpersonal connections fostered during the sacred journey.

Bata at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. This *bata* may be varied, but in general has the same structure. I asked Kamal Äbdirakhman to record this one before the group of pilgrims went in, and after recitation of the Quran, he told me that I could start recording. This *bata* was recorded on August 2, 2024, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine as an everyday, usual *bata*.

Kazakh (Original)	English translation
O Zharatūshy ĩem, Tängirim Alla	O Creator, my God,
Osy oqyghan Quran ayattary	These verses of the Quran that I have read
Özining rızashylyghyn [unclear]	Accept for contentment [unclear]
Qabył ete kör	
Saūabyn payghambarymyz Mukhammed	The reward of our Prophet Muhammad
Sallallahū alāyhī ũā sallām	Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam

Barsha payghambar, äülīe, [unclear]	All the prophets, saints, [unclear]
Qabyl etkeysing	Accept
Qozhaqululy Erasyldyng,	The honorable ancestor spirits Qozhaqululy
Qarakerey Qabanbay Batyr äülīening	Erasyly,
arūaghyna	Qarakerey Qabanbay Batyr
Qabyl ete kör	Accept
Bizding ärqaysymyz	For all of us
(Däm ötken?) arūaqtargha	(Passed away?) spirits
Oyymyzda, kökeyimizde zhürgen	Those are in our minds, those are now
Qazir ishimizden qaytalap aytıp otyrghan	repeating in our hearts
Barlyq marqumdardyng (rūkhyna?)	To the (souls?) of all the deceased
Qabyl etkeysing	Accept
O Zharatūshy ĩem, marqumdardyng zhanyn	O Creator, grant the souls of the deceased
zhannatqa	to Paradise (may faith pass?)
Zholdasyn (ĩman ötkeysin?)	
Bilip-bilmey istegen künäsin	And forgive the sins committed knowingly
Ghafū etip	or unknowingly
(Aldyn zhumaq?) (Qyrsyq kisi ötpeysing?)	(Future Paradise?) (The dishonest person
	will not pass?)
O Qudayym, bizding bilip-bilmey istegen	O God, forgive our sins committed
künämiz	knowingly or unknowingly
Osy ayattardy oqūynan ketken qate bolsa,	If there is a mistake in reciting these verses,
ony da	
Ghafū etkeysing	Forgive it also
Īem, suraghangha shīpandy	O Lord, heal those who ask for healing

Kömek suraghanda zhärdemdi bergeysing	You provide help when they ask for help
Är shangyraqa Erasyl dayyn perzent bergeysing	You give every <i>shangyraq</i> ⁶⁸ a child
Tängirim Alla, bizding ärqaysymyzdy [unclear] ashyp	O God, protect each of us [unclear]
zholdymyzda qorghaysyng	And grant us the good of both worlds
Bizge eki dünïening zhaqsylyq (zholdaysyng?)	
Allahü äkbar	Allahu Akbar

So, he mentions Allah and the Qabanbay Batyr's spirit here, to ask for help for everyone. This also shows how people continue to respect their ancestors. This also correlates with the general reasons of the pilgrimage, to the healing, for those in need, children, to their families, and the protection in both worlds.

The 2nd example is the individual *bata* from Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine. The elderly woman Alüa Tate, who told me about her parents' pilgrimage, and herself frequently visited this shrine, gave me this *bata* at the end of the interview, when we sat at the table. Unfortunately, she passed away last January. Alüa Tate was an open and kind person, and what I heard is that she gave *bata* blessings to different people, and it helped; they thanked her later. This *bata* was recorded on October 21, 2023, at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine.

Bata at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine:

Kazakh (Original)	English translation

⁶⁸ *Shangyraq* is the part of the traditional Kazakh dwelling yurt, having different symbolic meanings, here as the family.

Sen özing Mäshhür Zhüsip turaly (zhazayn?) dep zhatyrsyng [unclear] qabyly bolsyn Mäshhür Zhüsip rükhy seni qoldasyng Bükten kör Basyna baq bolsyn Astyna taq bolsyn Gaükhar tastay, Alla Taghala saghan medal' bolsyn Sol dässertatsiyany zhazyp, birinshi orny alyp, qüany, bükten körinüge närselerin (näsip?) Basyna baq bolsyn Astyna taq bolsyn Gaükharday tek Alla Taghala (zharqyrap?) Elding aldyna, khalyq aldyna qyzghaldaq bolsyn Mäshhür Atanyng rükhy Sen ömir (baqı?) zholyna Allanyng nury, baqytyn, qüanyshyn Sen üshin shashün tölegen näse Äke, sheshe bäri aman bolsyn densaulyq bolsyn Tüysqangdaryn aman bolsyn	You yourself are going (to write?) about Mäshhür Zhüsip [unclear] be accepted May the spirit of Mäshhür Zhüsip support you See from above May there be happiness on your head May there be a throne beneath you May God throw a gold medal at you To write that dissertation, take first place, rejoice, and be seen from above, things (fate?) May there be happiness on your head May there be a throne beneath you Only God Almighty (shine?) like a diamond May you be a tulip in front of the country, in front of the people The spirit of Mäshhür Ata You are on the path of life (eternal?) May God's light, happiness, and joy In every thing which will be for you in life May father and mother be safe May their health be good May your relatives be safe
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Osý dīssertatsīyany zhazyp,	Write this dissertation,
Osý dīssertatsīyamen birinshi oryn alyp	Take first place with this dissertation
Alla Taghala dünīe älemge äygili bolsyn	May God Almighty let you be famous in the
Māshhürdiki rükhy saghan marapattaū	worldMay the spirit of Māshhür reward you
(nāsip etsing)	(fate)

Bata is more than a blessing—it is a performative art form deeply embedded in Kazakh tradition, spirituality, and religious practice. When the woman gave me *bata*, she improvised by incorporating details about me, such as my dissertation work. This adaptability highlights *bata*'s dynamic and personalized nature.

The ritual of *bata* embodies several layers of cultural meaning. First, it reflects deep respect for elders and the spiritual authority of those who deliver it, including shrine keepers and descendants of revered figures like Māshhür Zhüsip. Pilgrims often visit specifically to receive *bata* from these individuals, believing that their words carry symbolic and spiritual capital. This belief underscores the community's trust in the spiritual lineage and the significance of verbal blessings in everyday life.

Beyond personal blessings, *bata* plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge and collective memory. In the shrine context, it connects individuals to their ancestors, local traditions, and the broader national identity. People often request *bata* for deceased relatives, sometimes providing names for specific prayers, while simultaneously seeking blessings for their own lives and the country's well-being. This dual focus emphasizes the interconnectedness of the living and the dead, the personal and the communal, and the present and the future.

The concept of *bata* is inherently liminal. It operates in the transitional space between two worlds, *eki dūnīe* (“both worlds”), bridging earthly life and the afterlife. This liminality is especially pronounced during pilgrimages, where rituals like Quran recitations and *bata* mark key spiritual transitions. People frequently bring children to receive *bata*, symbolically extending blessings to future generations and reinforcing the continuity of cultural and spiritual heritage.

Language plays an essential role in the *bata* ritual. While many pilgrims may not fully understand the Arabic verses of the Quran, *bata* is always delivered in Kazakh, ensuring that the blessings are accessible and meaningful to everyone present. This linguistic choice reinforces Kazakh identity and highlights the role of language in sustaining cultural traditions.

In sum, *bata* is an indispensable element of pilgrimage practices at shrines both at Qabanbay Batyr’s and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrines. It embodies liminality, ancestral connection, national identity, and the transmission of collective memory, serving as a vital link between the past, present, and future.

Conclusion

To analyze shrine visitation, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach, as these sacred sites hold multiple meanings and attract people for various reasons. While the primary motivations may include reverence for ancestors or seeking solutions to life’s challenges, other purposes, including cultural, educational, and recreational, also play a significant role.

Many people visit shrines to deepen their knowledge of history and traditions. For some, it is an opportunity to connect with their roots, feel their Kazakh identity, and experience the vast steppes, authentic rituals, and cultural practices. Respondents frequently highlighted the

unique energy of the sites, deriving from both the natural environment and the spiritual atmosphere created by continuous prayers and Quran recitations.

Shrines are also a means of cultural and religious transmission for younger generations. Parents often bring their children to introduce them to cultural traditions, religious practices, and patriotic values. For example, visiting the graves of prominent historical figures in the Pantheon fosters an understanding of Kazakhstan's heritage. At Qabanbay Batyr's complex, some visitors come specifically for the Pantheon, where their relatives or acquaintances are buried. The sacred sites are often visited before significant events, such as sports competitions or university entrance exams, as a way to seek blessings and strength. Additionally, these sites are popular destinations for hosting visitors from other regions, blending spiritual journeys with social and familial interactions.

The majority of my respondents were women, and they shared how the pilgrimage played an important role in their lives, providing travel opportunities, communication, family problems solution, and in general, the spiritual reboot.

In the Central Asian context, saints are sometimes associated with specific forms of assistance, and this tradition continues today. Ethnographer Raushan Mustafina (1992), for instance, has written about saints as patrons of various professional activities such as music, healing (shamanism), agriculture, and sheep breeding (101–102). Some respondents shared similar beliefs, suggesting that certain shrines are suited for specific desires. For instance, Abay and Shäkärim's shrines are considered ideal for seeking knowledge or career success, while Aghyntay Batyr is believed to assist those aiming for military achievements. One woman noted that she sought qualities like bravery, leadership, and analytical skills from Qabanbay Batyr. However, usually, the shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly are regarded as general helpers rather than being tied to specific goals.

The shrines are places where people seek help and solutions for various life circumstances. These sites are believed to possess a unique atmosphere, distinct from the busy routines of daily life, offering visitors a chance to relax, recharge, and draw spiritual power. While motivations for pilgrimage may vary, proper preparation, clear intentions, and sincere belief are universally considered essential for a successful experience, if not in achieving external goals, then in fostering personal growth and inner peace.

Overall, various factors motivate people to visit shrines, reflecting the diverse nature of pilgrimage. For many, it is an opportunity to connect with their culture, while pilgrims often express interest in broader historical narratives alongside family and local histories. Although the primary motivations are similar across different shrines, the topics of conversation are shaped by common activities, the role of the shrine keeper, and other contextual factors. Both miracle stories and historical or scientific accounts hold significance for visitors, and what unites all pilgrims is the practice of receiving *bata* and the belief in its healing and blessing power.

In the next chapter, I will examine the specific narratives, motivations, and activities of women at the shrines.

Chapter III The women's experience

In this chapter, I examine women's presence in pilgrimage, the role pilgrimage plays in their lives, and the diverse networks they build through these journeys. I explore how their participation is shaped by a distinct spiritual worldview and embodiment practices, engagement with New Age religious movements such as *Ata Zholy*, and their experiences as women at shrines not typically associated with female pilgrims.

The chapter is structured into four sections. In the first section, I discuss how women historically act as preservers and transmitters of religious and cultural knowledge, and how pilgrimage provides them with an opportunity to share, learn, express devotion, travel, and engage in spiritual communication. The second section explores how women actively participate in shaping sacred landscapes, mapping spiritual territories, and integrating Qabanbay Batyr's shrine into newly emerging pilgrimage routes. The third section examines how female pilgrims negotiate traditional gender roles within these religious spaces. Finally, in the fourth section, I analyze the pilgrimage as an act of embodied spirituality of women at these shrines.

The theoretical framework of this chapter draws on key concepts such as liminality and *communitas* (Victor Turner 1969), agency (Saba Mahmood 2005), embodiment (Thomas Csordas 1990), women's status and authority (Inga Stasevich 2011, Aksana Ismailbekova 2015), theory of gender performativity (Judith Butler 1988), female religious specialists (Marianne Kamp 2006, Rozaliya Garipova 2021, Habiba Fathi 2006), and historical perspectives on gender and religiosity (Lale Can 2020, Agnès Kefeli 2014, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Daniel Majchrowicz, and Sunil Sharma 2022).

This chapter thus focuses on women's experiences at these shrines, highlighting how they navigate gendered spaces, negotiate religious norms, and contribute to the sacralization of these sites.

Pilgrimage as part of life

Pilgrimage is not a one-time event for most women I encountered, but an integral part of their lives. I argue that women's participation in pilgrimage is widespread in Kazakhstan and beyond, serving as a traveling, communicating, and spiritually enriching opportunity. Historically, women have played a crucial role as mediators of religious knowledge (Kefeli 2014, Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004) within their families, and pilgrimage provides them with a space to sustain and expand this role in contemporary society.

Through pilgrimage, women establish large, interconnected networks of sacred sites, reinforcing spiritual traditions and contributing to the growth of internal religious tourism. Many of the women I interviewed have been traveling to shrines for years, with some engaging in pilgrimage since at least 2007 or earlier. Some undertake their journeys for the first time, while others return repeatedly, forming strong connections with fellow pilgrims and organizing further pilgrimages themselves. Generally, the pilgrimage is simultaneously a personal and communal activity for women.

I will begin by examining traditional beliefs that portray women as transmitters of knowledge, providing historical context for this role. Then, I will explore how these beliefs are understood today, particularly in the context of pilgrimage as an opportunity for women to travel, communicate, and express their spirituality. Next, I will discuss women's perspectives on gender differences in pilgrimage, highlighting their mixed views, both acknowledging and challenging such distinctions. Finally, I will conclude by demonstrating how pilgrimage

remains a deeply embedded and continuous practice for many women, emphasizing how they perceive themselves as equal participants at these sacred sites.

Women are historically believed to be the majority in the pilgrimage places, visiting them for different reasons and mostly for traditional family-related related such as marriage, asking for healthy children, and resolving other family problems. Their presence is significant because women often serve as mediators of religious and traditional knowledge, transmitting information about saints, mazars, rituals, and other spiritual practices. So, they share their knowledge both in the domestic sphere and the pilgrimages.

Generally, women have been agents of this cultural education while men were engaged in work, sometimes traveling for extended periods. However, the different sources show ambiguous assessments of religious literacy among men and women in different periods, including pre-Soviet and Soviet ones. On the one hand, men had greater access to formal religious education, such as madrasas, visiting mosques, and opportunities to perform Hajj. For example, we see that the most *hajjname* were authored by men, even though women performed the pilgrimage as well, they were mostly not registered or fully recorded. As historian Lale Can (2020) writes, in the Russian Empire context, the common practice was to keep information about women in relation to their male relatives:

While boys such as Bekir were given their own entries, women and girls were only recorded in the notes section and described as mothers, wives, or daughters of male guests. There was seldom information about women's ages and no entries for single women (78).

During the Soviet period, limited opportunities for Islamic education and Hajj were primarily available to men as well. For example, anthropologist Habiba Fathi (2006) writes about the official education institutes in the whole USSR for preparing the religious grandees,

“the Mir-i Arab madrasa of Bukhara (middle level) and the Imam Ismail al-Bukhari madrasa in Tashkent (upper level)” (32), which were open exclusively for men. So, the institutional religious education and recognized religious leadership remained largely male-dominated.

On the other hand, the women played a primary role in saving spiritual values the religious knowledge by keeping it in the domestic sphere, where such traditions were less visible and, therefore, harder to suppress. In the context of Imperial Russia, historian Agnès Kefeli (2014) argues that many women among the Krashens demonstrate deeper knowledge of Islam than men. It was observed by missionaries, who explained it by the women’s opportunity to have one teacher (141), allowing for more sustained religious learning. Kamp (2010) also writes about how Islam was gendered in the 1930s: “the mosque and maktab were formal, male institutions, while women’s practices took place in shrines, or in domestic spaces, led by women who were not officially recognized and were not paid by institutions” (526). Because these domestic religious activities were considered less significant by Soviet authorities, they were subject to less state control. As a result, women were able to continue transmitting religious knowledge, ensuring the survival of Islamic practices within private and informal spaces.

In general, both men and women had distinct advantages and limitations in religious education and the spread of knowledge, but here I focus on the crucial role women played, particularly in domestic and local religious practices. However, even though women were often associated with informal and clandestine forms of religious transmission, their influence extended far beyond the private sphere. Kefeli’s (2014) research provides an example that can be applied to other societies as well. She discusses the practice of exogamy among Tatars and Krashens, where marriage facilitated the exchange of religious knowledge across communities. As she notes: “The wife served as a link between her native village and that of her husband. Often, information and rumors about apostasies spread from village to village because of these

links” (159). Additionally, local festivals known as *jüyins* played a significant role in fostering religious and communal networks (159). These gatherings, which brought together large numbers of people, were often organized with the involvement of mothers-in-law who saw them as opportunities to find Islamized wives for their sons (159). Thus, women were not confined to private spaces but actively contributed to strengthening communal ties, maintaining religious traditions, and shaping sacred networks across different regions.

One of the ways women transmitted knowledge was the education, and female teachers were common, instructing both boys and girls and helping the adults. Some women possessed specialized religious education, such as those who could read the Quran or had deep knowledge of religious traditions. In different societies, these women were known as *abıstay*, *otin*, *bibi-khalfa*, and others. They held considerable authority, not only in religious matters but also in social and even political spheres. So, historian Rozaliya Garipova (2021) in her interview, article with Rashida Ishaki *abıstay* from the Volga Ural region, highlights the role of *abıstay* in education: “They taught girls at informal school for girls in their houses, and they played a central social role for womenfolk in the mahalla” (42). And also demonstrates the authority of Rashida Ishaki, her activities in mosque movements, and her influence on the religious sector in Tatarstan. Generally, the women teachers and experts in religious knowledge were respected by society.

However, women did not need to be religious specialists or possess formal training to transmit cultural and religious knowledge. Gradually, during their lives, they collected wisdom and experience, as well as authority. This is evident in Central Asian communities, where women initially have to gain respect within their families as young daughters-in-law. Gradually, as they establish themselves by being friendly and hardworking, maintaining good relationships with family and neighbors, and raising healthy children, they gain respect and

influence (Stasevich 2011, Ismailbekova 2015). Eventually, as mothers and later grandmothers, they become key figures in cultural and spiritual life, wielding significant social authority.

The role of the grandparents in Kazakh society is pivotal. Often, parents are preoccupied with work, leaving grandmothers and grandfathers as primary guardians of children. In many families, grandparents played a fundamental role in teaching children cultural traditions and the basics of religious practice. They are caregivers and key figures in the spiritual education of younger generations. Traditionally, it was primarily the paternal grandparents who took on this responsibility (Stasevich 2011, 47), but today, both maternal and paternal grandparents may be involved. The practice of entrusting the first (or sometimes another) child to be raised by grandparents (*baūyryna salū* or *nemere alū*) further reflects the deep respect for elder generations and their significant influence on child-rearing.

To demonstrate the role of the grandparents, particularly grandmothers, I will take examples from Kazakh literature highlighting two famous historical grandmothers: Zere, the grandmother of Abay Qunanbayuly, Kazakh writer, poet, and philosopher, and Qyztūmas, the grandmother of Baūyrzhan Momyshuly, Soviet officer, Hero of the Soviet Union, and writer. From them, we can see the role of women in the children's perception of the world and domestic education.

Zere and Ulzhan (Abay's mother) are described by the writer Mukhtar Äuezov (1897–1961) in his biographical novel *Abay's Road*, which consists of four parts, the first was published in 1942, and the fourth in 1956. While the book explores their deep familial bonds, one particularly significant episode occurs when Abay falls ill and receives a wealth of knowledge from his mother and grandmother. Despite being illiterate, these women kept in memory a rich oral tradition, preserving legends, poems, and local histories, which they passed on to Abay. Äuezov contrasts this vernacular, Kazakh oral heritage, transmitted by his mother

and grandmother, with the formal education Abay received in madrasah, which included Persian, Arabic, and other classical works. This episode highlights the role of women in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Abay lived from 1845 to 1904, and Äuezov's book provides insight into the role of women in 19th-century Kazakh society.

Baūyrzhan Momyshuly (1910–1982) shared memories of his grandmother, Qyztūmas, portraying her as a strong and influential figure within the family in the autobiographical book *Our Family* (1986). She played a central role in raising children, balancing kindness with strict guidance. Momyshuly recalled how she, along with his father, Momysh, shaped his upbringing through storytelling and traditional knowledge. His grandmother Qyztūmas explained the structure of the world to the children using legends and stories, making complex ideas accessible. One such tale described how animals earned their places in the 12-year zodiac cycle, while another explained why the swallow's tail is split and why the mosquito has no tongue. These stories, recounted by Momyshuly, include cultural and religious themes, incorporating Allah and Suleiman. For example, one of the grandmother's stories started as: "When Allah created the world, the sun, the moon, day and night, He was so exhausted that He forgot to name the days, weeks, months, and years" (Momyshuly 1986, 23). Through these narratives, Kyztummas provided both cultural and religious education in a way that was engaging and understandable for children. Momyshuly deeply respected his grandmother's wisdom and influence, later reflecting on her absence in his own children's lives: "Now that I have become a father myself, and my children ask me naive, simple yet deeply meaningful questions, I sincerely regret that they do not have a grandmother like her" (22). His reflections highlight how grandmothers in the 20th century continued to play a vital role in shaping the cultural and moral upbringing of their grandchildren.

This pattern continues today. The grandmothers and mothers significantly shape the cultural knowledge and the religious understanding of the world of children, remembered well into adulthood. This influence extends to shrines and pilgrimages as well. Some of my respondents shared how their grandmothers told them about the saints, sacred places, history, and religion, and how it influenced their lives.

So, one of them, a woman in her 40s, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, recounted how her grandmother told her about the significance and help of the sacred places:

My grandmother always said that - don't go to a fortune teller, go to the holy place, whatever you want to ask, whatever you want to see, whatever you don't know, tell there, meaning, if you want to know the future, that is, you ask Allah, he will show you, through some prophetic dreams, signs which the Almighty gives⁶⁹.

As a child, she did not fully understand why her grandmother discouraged fortune tellers. However, as an adult, she came to appreciate the wisdom in seeking guidance at sacred places, spaces marked by divine presence and a connection to the cosmos. Another woman shared how her mother told her about the sacred sites, saints, and Mäshhür Zhüsip's miracle. "My mother told me that his body, until he was 40 years old, did not decay, and even white materials started later by his daughter-in-law, it was in the last years that he was buried"⁷⁰ Some other women I interviewed similarly recalled their grandmothers' or mothers' words about the power of sacred sites, highlighting how these teachings continue to shape their spiritual lives.

This tradition is evident at both shrines today, where grandmothers visit with their grandchildren, guiding them and explaining the significance of these places. While young

⁶⁹ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. July 24, 2023.

⁷⁰ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. April 14, 2024.

children may not immediately understand the importance, these early experiences often leave lasting impressions. During one of my interviews, I spoke with a grandmother who visited Qabanbay Batyr's shrine with her granddaughter, emphasizing her desire to pass on this knowledge. Generally, in both shrines, the presence of grandmothers who visit with their grandchildren is a frequent sight.

Overall, women continue to play a significant role in religious and cultural education through different means, including pilgrimage. Pilgrimage sites remain spaces for intergenerational knowledge exchange. Women's groups actively share information, reinforcing their role as knowledge transmitters. Although this transmission is not exclusively a women's activity and families often visit shrines with both grandfathers and grandmothers, women remain central figures in preserving and passing down spiritual knowledge. Not all of them have this knowledge, and some would rather visit to gain it. Nevertheless, the majority of pilgrims educate the younger generation and strengthen communal ties, ensuring the continuity of these traditions.

Pilgrimage as an opportunity for travel.

For many women, pilgrimage, in addition to being a spiritual journey and sharing knowledge, is an opportunity to travel and engage in social interactions. It is often seen as an affordable, culturally acceptable, and safe way to journey beyond their daily routines. Unlike recreational travel, which is primarily for leisure, pilgrimage is considered meaningful, offering both spiritual and cultural enrichment.

Over the years, pilgrimage has provided one of the few acceptable avenues for women to travel, a trend that continues in many communities. This is particularly evident in the case of the Hajj for Muslim women, as demonstrated by Lambert-Hurley et al. (2022) through their analysis of Muslim women's pilgrimage diaries (*hajjnames*), from different cultures, including

Iranian, Indian, etc., and different periods. These accounts reveal that, for many women, the Hajj was often a once-in-a-lifetime journey (as well as for men, probably), one of the few occasions when they could travel beyond their immediate social and familial spaces. This phenomenon of pilgrimage is observed across various cultures, as noted by social and cultural geographer Avril Maddrell (2021) in both Muslim and Roman Catholic traditions “For many devout and/or impoverished women, pilgrimage is the only justification for travel and deprioritising material service to family, albeit they are enacting spiritual service for their families” (268). Thus, pilgrimage historically was not only a spiritual journey but also a socially sanctioned opportunity for women to travel.

Although the Hajj is the most significant pilgrimage in Islam, it was not commonly mentioned among my respondents. Given the importance of pilgrimage in their spiritual lives, I found it notable that none of the women I interviewed spoke about having performed the Hajj. If they had undertaken the journey, they likely would have mentioned it while discussing their pilgrimage experiences. The only person I encountered who mentioned that he completed the Hajj was Kamal Äbdirakhman, the shrine keeper at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine; he made the pilgrimage twice. However, among my respondents, Hajj appeared to remain primarily a male-dominated practice.

While women today have more travel opportunities, local pilgrimage remains the most accessible and feasible option for many. In financial terms, the Hajj or Umrah can be quite expensive for women, requiring not only substantial savings but also an additional effort to find a trustworthy travel agency, navigate language barriers, and manage the challenges of long-distance travel. In contrast, local pilgrimages are more affordable and logistically convenient. Many women travel together in groups by bus or train, making the trips less expensive and more socially enriching. One woman at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine,

who visited various sacred places all over Kazakhstan, shared that a pilgrimage to distant regions (she is from Pavlodar region) cost her around 70,000 *tengge* (approximately 142 dollars). The pilgrimage to the nearby places costs even less with travel and donation expenses. Another woman recounted how she began her pilgrimage journeys even without sufficient savings, often relying on the help of Allah, and on the kindness of taxi drivers who sometimes offered her free rides. Believing and starting pilgrimages, she later found unexpected ways to cover her travel expenses. So, here women could rely on traditional help from people as well.

The internal local pilgrimage is very popular among people, and almost every woman I have spoken with shared that they regularly visit multiple sacred sites across different parts of Kazakhstan. Several factors contribute to this popularity. Some of the key reasons include the accessibility of these sites and their religious and cultural significance, as well as the influence of external factors such as the state, religious organizations, and the increasing number of sacred tours.

One of the significant influences comes from state initiatives. Programs such as *Tūghan Zher* (Homeland) and Sacred Geography, introduced as part of the *Rūkhanī Zhangghyrū* (The Spiritual Modernization) project in 2017, played a role in shaping public interest in sacred sites. This project was first mentioned in Nazarbayev's article (2017) "Course Towards the Future: Modernization of Kazakhstan's Identity". Some of my respondents, primarily Kazakh-speaking ones, referred to *Rūkhanī Zhangghyrū* in their interviews. It is possible that this project had a stronger impact on individuals working in specific fields such as education or public service, where people are more likely to know about the program. Generally, these state initiatives contributed to recognizing sacred places by providing funding opportunities and making lists of regional and national sacred sites with their descriptions and locations.

New Age Religious organizations also play a role in shaping pilgrimage practices, particularly *Ata Zholy* (or *Orda*), also known as the Ancestor's Road. Although *Ata Zholy* is officially banned in Kazakhstan⁷¹, it remains active at sacred sites. I will explore this movement further in the next section, focusing on Qabanbay Batyr's shrine as part of the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route. What can be noted here is that this movement primarily promotes pilgrimages to ancestral graves and contributes to their popularity.

In addition, sacred tours and the digital presence of the pilgrimages have gained popularity in Kazakhstan. Numerous individuals on Instagram and other social media platforms organize group trips to multiple sacred sites. Many online reviews and recommendations highlight these experiences. As I observed, people often take photos and videos, likely sharing them on social media or within their social circles. Among pilgrims were the bloggers who documented their pilgrimages and shared on their social media pages. While some prefer to keep the information within their communities, many people share photos, experiences, and advice with others, contributing to the awareness about different sacred sites.

Ultimately, the most significant influence on women's pilgrimage practices comes from the women themselves and the networks formed at these sacred sites. Once a woman embarks on a pilgrimage and encounters other pilgrims, whether individuals or groups, she learns about many other sacred sites through conversation. This form of knowledge exchange is often the most trusted and effective way of discovering new pilgrimage destinations. Some travel with close friends, while others join larger groups, strengthening their social connections. These

⁷¹ "O likvidatsii i zapreshchenii na territorii Respubliki Kazakhstan okul'no-misticheskikh religioznykh techeniy "Allya-Ayat" (farkhatovtsy) i "Ata Zholy" [On the liquidation and prohibition on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the occult-mystical religious movements "Alla-Ayat" (Farhatovites) and "Ata Zholy,] 17 March 2009, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30392344&pos=4;-100#pos=4;-100.

women actively create and maintain pilgrimage networks, with many of them already knowing each other or sharing previous pilgrimage experiences.

For example, at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, I became acquainted with two women who were frequent visitors, as the locals recognized them. These women, Ayzhan and Raūshan, both in their 50s, were working professionals with families, yet they still found time to perform on pilgrimages to various shrines across Kazakhstan. They shared stories of their past experiences at these sacred sites and how these visits had profoundly influenced their lives⁷².

One of the stories they recounted took place at Bayanbay Ata's shrine in Semey (East Kazakhstan), where they witnessed the fire. They also mentioned visiting Qongyr Äülīe cave, another sacred site in East Kazakhstan, South Kazakhstan's famous sites, the capital's Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, Qaraötkel graveyard, and others. Their journeys extended beyond the country, as they had also traveled to Uzbekistan to visit the Emir Timur complex and other revered locations. While engaging in conversation with them, it became evident that they were not only devout believers in the power of these sacred places but also saw pilgrimage as an opportunity for travel, exploration, and personal growth.

Such friendships formed through pilgrimage are common. For many, these journeys became a source of mutual support, where they could discuss personal challenges, exchange knowledge, and strengthen their bonds with one another. It happens among women's groups in pilgrimages in general. So, Donna Honarpisheh (2013) described her experience in the Iranian shrines and the friendly atmosphere among women, highlighting the importance of pilgrimage as a communal activity: "The women gathered together are likely to include a group of friends, all contributing to a social and supportive atmosphere" (398). Many women also meet

⁷² Mäshhür Zhüsip's shrine field notes, October 20-21, 2023.

companions at sacred sites and continue their journeys together, building strong spiritual and social networks. They usually share phone numbers, social media profiles, or other contact information, which helps them continue to communicate, creating messaging groups. I also maintained different contacts with women who worked at the shrines, who performed pilgrimages, and also with the healers and shaman women.

One of the women I met at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, Gülzhan, revealed that she had been undertaking pilgrimages for four years. Gülzhan was in her late 50s, and she was from Aqsū city in Pavlodar region. She shared that she started to perform pilgrimages almost by accident, and during one of her visits to this very shrine, she met another woman, who later became her close friend, and together, they traveled to many different sacred sites. Gülzhan was a widow and had children and grandchildren, whom she also often brought to the sacred sites, to introduce them to the traditions. However, mostly she performed pilgrimages with her women friends. Generally, even within structured pilgrimage groups, where practices were observed and controlled, women found space for personal expression, solidarity, and self-discovery.

Women's experiences in sacred places vary, but for many, their sacred journeys began long ago. One woman at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine told me that she had been undertaking pilgrimages since 2007. She emphasized the difference between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, saying that engaging in pilgrimage since 2007 had profoundly shaped her understanding and feelings about it. Another woman mentioned that she had been making pilgrimages since the early 2000s, and many others shared that they had visited Qabanbay Batyr's shrine since its emergence in 2000, as well as other shrines. The frequency of visits varies among pilgrims. Some women aim to visit sacred places at least once a year, while others undertake pilgrimages monthly.

These women actively support internal pilgrimage and take pride in Kazakhstan's sacred landscape, frequently highlighting the abundance of saints within the country. Many pilgrims assert that Kazakhstan's land is so sacred that visitors from other countries come to experience its spiritual power. Some even claim that with such a high number of saints, medical treatment is often unnecessary, as spiritual intercession provides healing. In general, most women I spoke with had visited well-known sacred sites across Kazakhstan. Mapping these pilgrimage routes could illustrate the most frequently visited places. Some women even advised me to focus on the shrines in South Kazakhstan, arguing that the region has more visitors and clearer, more visible traditions and rituals.

Among the most frequently visited pilgrimage destinations are Türkistan and Sayram (the residential area in Shymkent⁷³), with almost all pilgrims mentioning the shrine of Qozha Akhmet Yasaūi. In Sayram, the popular destination for women is the Qarashash Ana shrine. Other significant sites in South Kazakhstan include the shrines of Domalaq Ana, Aysha bībi, and Ükasha Ata. In the Qyzylorda region, Begim Ana is another popular site. Western Kazakhstan is home to the revered shrines of Beket Ata and Shopan Ata, while in the east, Qongyr Äülīe Cave and the grave of Bayanbay Ata, a healer and *baqsy*, attract visitors. The memorial complex of Abay and Shäkärim is also a notable pilgrimage destination. In Northern Kazakhstan, the most frequently visited shrines are part of interconnected sacred networks. They include the Bes Ata pilgrimage route and the shrines of various batyrs, such as Qarasay and Aghyntay. The shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, as well as the tombs of his spiritual teacher, Īsabek Īshan, and venerated religious figure Ghabdül-Üakhīt Khaziret, constitute a significant part of the sacred landscape of the region.

⁷³ Sayram (Īsfīdzhāb) was a city on the Great Silk Road in the past, later until 2014 it was a village and then became part of the city of Shymkent

Women have played a significant role in shaping Kazakhstan's sacred landscape by creating and sustaining networks through shared experiences and knowledge. Pilgrimage serves multiple purposes, not only as a spiritual journey but also as a means of travel, promoting tourism, enhancing accessibility, and contributing to the mapping of sacred territories.

The gender difference and the spiritual devotion of women

One of the important questions was whether women themselves perceive a gender difference in pilgrimage. To explore this, I asked whether they saw distinctions between men's and women's pilgrimage experiences. The responses varied: many women stated that there was no significant difference, while others pointed to traditional roles, biological factors, and differences in energy. Some even interpreted the question as one of gender equality. Overall, most women today do not see themselves as having a unique or exclusive role in pilgrimage. It is possible that my question itself prompted them to reflect on gender differences in a way they had not considered before. The customary respect for men at shrines, such as allowing them to enter first, sit in higher places, or take precedence in rituals, was rarely mentioned, perhaps because it is viewed as a natural and traditional norm. Women's involvement in activities like cooking and serving was similarly overlooked, reinforcing the idea that these roles are simply part of the expected social structure. While some respondents framed their answers in terms of equality, others did not, suggesting that perspectives on gender in pilgrimage are diverse. For the majority, gender differences exist but are not seen as particularly significant.

While mosques were primarily male spaces, and sacred sites were more closely associated with women, this notion does not fully reflect contemporary practice. Many women regularly visit mosques, particularly in times of personal distress or anxiety, or for educational purposes, while men also actively engage in pilgrimage. In fact, their numbers are

approximately equal, and at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, men may even slightly outnumber women. Nevertheless, shrines continue to serve as significant places of worship and spiritual refuge for women.

The question of equality and status appears to be closely linked to perceptions of gender differences in pilgrimage, with respondents offering varied perspectives, the majority seeing themselves as equal in front of God, while others highlight certain social inequalities. When asked whether there were specific actions or features unique to women's pilgrimage, a common response was that gender makes no difference. One of the women at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine stated, "Both can be foolish or wise, both can be righteous or religious, what does gender have to do with it? I don't see any difference at all."⁷⁴ This sentiment was shared by both men and women. So, one male respondent at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine expressed that women in Kazakh society actually have a great deal of freedom but may not fully recognize it. His wife remained silent, possibly agreeing with him. Others also emphasized equality in pilgrimage while acknowledging broader gender roles in society. For instance, one interviewee explained:

Pilgrimage itself is not divided; everyone here is equal. But the only thing .. man was created by Allah because he was created first. And a woman was made from Adam's rib. That is why man should be placed a head above, and woman should support him⁷⁵.

The majority of women indeed see no gender difference in pilgrimage and accept it as an equal opportunity, and perhaps it is this sense of spiritual equality that makes pilgrimage so appealing to women.

⁷⁴ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. July 24, 2023.

⁷⁵ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 23, 2024.

However, not all respondents viewed gender relations as equal, either in pilgrimage or in society at large. Some saw existing traditions as limiting women's status rather than ensuring equality. One interviewee drew a historical comparison, stating that Kazakh women, like Amazons, were once respected and had a strong social position, but today, that respect has diminished:

They treated women with respect, even poems about Batyrs, love, if you read everything, specifically Kazakh, then the son, after the wars, would come and greet his mother first and only then his father, and accordingly, they treated women with more respect. Not like now, when they cover themselves with a scarf and say that a woman should be silent and do nothing, know their place⁷⁶.

While similar answers were not frequent, there were some. The women also sometimes were not happy with the domestic chores at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, not openly criticizing it, but with a laugh, saying that here too they do the housework.

Some women highlighted the different statuses and responsibilities of men and women, emphasizing that a woman's traditional role in the family and domestic sphere grants her an advantage in the eyes of God. As one woman explained, "Why do the majority of pilgrims tend to be women? Because women's prayers reach God faster. Allah does not burden us—He created women from a man's rib."⁷⁷ During meals at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, elderly women often reinforced the idea that it is natural for women to care for men and for men to occupy positions of power, describing this as a necessary balance.

One of these conversations was over breakfast at the dining room, where we were sitting around a table, five women, one of them sat initially and then left. There were my friend

⁷⁶ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 29, 2023.

⁷⁷ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 23, 2024.

(woman in her 30s), two more older women in their late 50s, 60s, Dīnara and Saltanat, and one woman in her 40s (who left earlier). We started the conversation over the gender differences, and Dīnara and Saltanat (one of them was retired, and the other worked at the hotel) told us different stories on women's need to respect men and occupy more traditional women's duties. They criticized the presence of women in the political sphere. However, it is hard to say that it is a present-day problem because, according to them, the beginning of the violation of traditional roles started from Mōngke bī (1630–1684). Mōngke bī had a dream and could not understand its meaning, and went to his daughter-in-law (they told his granddaughter, but the usual version is daughter-in-law), who was a smart woman. She not only explained the dream but also regretted that he had asked her while he was older and wiser, but still asked her, a woman, and that it would lead to negative consequences⁷⁸. As Dīnara and Saltanat said: “Men will be at the cauldron, and women will be in power. A cow becomes a bull and a bull becomes a cow”⁷⁹. So, they, as well as some other women at the shrine, highlighted the need to maintain traditional roles.

A similar narrative of the importance of the traditional roles is seen in both shrines. The woman at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine also referenced customs and forms of respect: “Men are our protectors, while we, as women, are the keepers of the hearth.”⁸⁰. They also mentioned the traditional women's role as mothers and the respect for them, which can be seen through the proverbs: “Even if you carry your mother to Mecca three times, you will not be able to satisfy her pure milk. Isn't the Prophet also born from a mother?”⁸¹ These ideas seem to be common across Central Asian societies with the similar historical and cultural background. As sociocultural anthropologist Svetlana Peshkova (2013) shows in the example of Hafiza opa,

⁷⁸ Various sources provide information about Mōngke bī 's dream, but there is usually no criticism of the fact that the daughter-in-law interpreted the dream.

⁷⁹ The field notes, Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly's shrine. August 23, 2025.

⁸⁰ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. November 12, 2023.

⁸¹ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. September 8, 2023.

the prominent woman from Tashkent, the defender of women's rights, the common narrative is that men and women are equal, but we have to take into account the biological features and men usually breadwinners while women have natural duties as mothers and wives (687).

Another common response focused on differences in actions, behavior, dress codes, and spiritual energy. The concept of energy was also central to many responses, with several women describing fundamental differences in the spiritual energies of men, women, and sacred spaces. One interviewee explained, "Male energy and female energy are different. That's why, for example, men are always allowed to go first—they are supposed to initiate things because their energy flow is downward, while women receive this energy and distribute it⁸²". For some respondents, the energy was also connected with the ways of dressing:

Of course, women should develop as women and carry feminine energy because Mother Earth is also female. Ideally, women should wear skirts and headscarves, as was traditionally accepted, because this clothing helps us embrace and express our femininity. That is our role as women.⁸³.

The topic of women's clothing and veiling remains highly debated, especially in contrast to men's attire. Generally, however, women dress differently in the shrines. Some women visit in elaborate, traditional clothing adorned with jewelry and ornamented veils, emphasizing the importance of the occasion. Others wear dresses or skirts more out of necessity, layering them over pants or donning robes over their usual clothes. Some arrive in clothes considered inappropriate for a sacred site, such as shorts, or come without veils but put them on upon entering the shrine.

⁸² Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 29, 2023.

⁸³ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. November 12, 2023.

While most women dress in a way that feels comfortable to them, some insist that dresses or skirts are more appropriate for pilgrimage. Men, too, are sometimes advised to cover up; for instance, those wearing shorts may be asked to wear robes over them, but discussions around proper attire predominantly focus on women. The woman at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, who was dressed casually in a sports suit but veiling, noted regional differences in expectations for women's dress at pilgrimage sites:

Regarding gender distinctions, there isn't much of a difference. The main thing is that in some places, women are expected to cover up more. The closer you are to central or northern regions, the less strict it is. But the further south or west you go, the more you are required to cover, to the point where only your eyes may be visible.⁸⁴

Closer attention to women's clothing in pilgrimage reflects broader discussions about veiling, women's status, and the legacy of Soviet policies such as *Hujum*, the unveiling campaign (Northrop 2003, Kamp 2006). In pilgrimage practices, traditional veiling, rather than the hijab, is generally encouraged, reflecting the ambivalent portrayal of veiling in society. This pattern is common across Central Asia. As anthropologist Julie McBrien (2017) notes in the context of Kyrgyzstan, veiling is often stereotyped as symbolizing "the apparent oppressive, backward, and fanatical nature of Islam" (119). However, it is also perceived as a sign of piety. Nozimova (2018), for example, describes how the hijab, as a relatively new phenomenon in Tajikistan, quickly became a symbol of religious devotion and adherence to Quranic gender norms (260).

Questions surrounding women's clothing in pilgrimage reveal not only an interest in their practices but also broader attitudes toward Islam and its evolving role in society. As Vincent Artman (2019) discusses in the context of Kyrgyzstan, the concept of national theology

⁸⁴ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. April 20, 2024.

has led to a reinterpretation of veiling: “The hijāb was thus subtly reimagined as part of Kyrgyz Islam; meanwhile, ‘traditional’ Kyrgyz styles are being reimagined as part of the broader Islamic cultural heritage” (1749). While contemporary perspectives on veiling have become more open, traditional Islamic styles remain deeply rooted in cultural and religious identity.

In general, the majority of women, even those who spoke about inequality, tend to feel neutral about it or do not perceive a significant gender disparity in pilgrimage. This may be one of the reasons why pilgrimage remains so popular and meaningful for women. Their answers vary, but the most common perspective is that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. One woman, at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, even remarked that men are given precedence at pilgrimage sites, which she saw as a sign of respect rather than subordination: “We say, at least in the presence of these ancestors, women let’s show respect to men. Men should go first, then we follow behind them, ensuring that our hair remains covered”⁸⁵. So, pilgrimage is generally seen as an activity open to everyone, without rigid gender distinctions, even though women still acknowledge certain external and internal differences in their experiences.

Here, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity (1988) is particularly relevant. As Butler argues, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). Generally, at the shrines, women, as well as men, perform their gender roles more traditionally than in their usual lives. While both men and women behave in more pious ways, for women, it also means more visible practices such as wearing modest clothes, the headscarf, letting men go first, sitting in the higher positions, and generally demonstrating respect to them. The women’s answers also show this; in some cases, different behavior is expected from them in the shrines. Butler warns that gender should not be reduced only to individual experience, the body, or the entirely imposed (526); rather, it is

⁸⁵ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine. October 29, 2023.

constituted through repeated performances. The women's responses sometimes mention similar sentiments about their roles, actions, and expectations, illustrating how gender performance is maintained through repetition. Thus, their conduct at shrines can be understood as a form of gender performance, ritualized actions shaped by cultural and religious norms.

Overall, we can say that women and men are not always equal in pilgrimage practices. Women face greater attention regarding their behavior and dress code, and they are often expected to carry out traditional chores. However, they actively negotiate these expectations and demonstrate their agency, as I explore in 3rd part of this chapter. Despite these differences, most women agree that either there are no significant gender disparities in pilgrimage or that any differences do not infringe upon their participation. This is one of the reasons why pilgrimage remains a popular activity for women. They feel protected and equal in these sacred spaces.

Pilgrimage fulfills multiple needs for women, reflecting their religious devotion, social connections, and search for meaning. Historically, pilgrimage provided women with an opportunity to travel, pray outside their homes, and transmit knowledge to larger communities. Today, it continues to serve as an important means of spiritual enrichment and personal growth. Women maintain their traditional roles as knowledge bearers and transmitters, bringing their families, children, and grandchildren to these sites. They also actively develop internal tourism, creating networks between sacred sites by visiting them and connecting with fellow pilgrims. The pilgrimage with friends and large groups also enforces their sense of community and contributes to the spread of information about the sites, practical knowledge, and oral narratives. For many, pilgrimage is not just an important part of life; it is a place where they can seek solutions to personal and family problems, reinforcing its role in their spiritual and everyday lives.

In the next parts of this chapter, I will elaborate on these themes. I will examine new religious movements and women's roles in them, using the example of Qabanbay Batyr and the Bes Ata pilgrimage sites. I will also discuss the interplay between tradition, authority, and patriarchy at Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing how pilgrimage serves as both religious devotion and a unique spiritual worldview at both shrines.

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine as part of the *Bes Ata*

I argue that pilgrimage offers women an opportunity to explore their spirituality in diverse ways, including participation in New Age-inspired religious movements, such as the *Ata Zholy* movement, which remains popular within pilgrimage practices. Through the example of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine's one dimension - its integration into the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route, I demonstrate how this movement continues to shape the sacred landscape. While women are not the primary organizers of *Ata Zholy*, they play a vital role both as spiritual guides (*aqqu*) and organizers of pilgrimage tours, as well as active participants who engage in its practices and rituals.

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, from the very beginning in 2000, became an integral part of the sacred landscape and the spiritual networks around it. While the state contributed to constructing this landscape, for instance, by establishing the National Pantheon nearby, other aspects, such as its inclusion in the *Bes Ata* religious route, were created by pilgrims and the *Ata Zholy* movement. During my fieldwork, many respondents referred to the term *Bes Ata* (Five Ancestors), a pilgrimage route that includes the graves of Berdibek Khan, Ormanbet Bī, Qyryqbay Baqsy, Niyaz Bī, and Qabanbay Batyr, all located around Astana. This designation was first introduced by members of *Ata Zholy*, a new religious movement that emerged in the late 1990s.

However, in 2009, *Ata Zholy* was officially banned in Kazakhstan by a ruling of the Specialized Interdistrict Economic Court of Almaty (05.02.2009), which ordered the liquidation of *Ata Zholy* LLP and prohibited any activities related to the movement, including its promotion in the media⁸⁶. The court justified this decision by citing the movement's financial pyramid-like structure, its manipulative influence on people's minds, and most notably, its alleged negative impact on public health and national security. According to the ruling, "The activities of these movements negatively affect the social protection and health of citizens and pose a real threat to their well-being, which is prohibited by national legislation, as such activities undermine state security."⁸⁷

Despite this legal ban, *Ata Zholy* remains influential at pilgrimage sites, including Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. Its influence is evident in ritual practices, terminologies (e.g., *Bes Ata*, *Aqqū*), and the organization of pilgrimage tours, many of which continue to be facilitated by movement members and particularly by women who serve as spiritual intermediaries, organizers, and active participants.

Naturally, the processes at the shrine and its integration into the sacred landscape are not limited to the *Ata Zholy* movement alone; it is one side of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine pilgrimage, whose influence remains significant and worth acknowledging. Moreover, while *Bes Ata* emerged within *Ata Zholy*, it has since evolved into a recognized pilgrimage route, shaped by the interplay of ritual practices, mythmaking, pilgrim participation, shared beliefs, and expanding sacred networks.

To analyze the phenomenon of *Ata Zholy* in shrines, I will draw on Victor Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, as well as Vincent Artman's (2019) concept of national

⁸⁶ "On the liquidation and prohibition on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the occult-mystical religious movements "Alla-Ayat" (Farhatovites) and "Ata Zholy". 17 March 2009, Online.zakon.kz. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30392344&pos=4;-100#pos=4;-100.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

theology, which explores the coexistence of Islam and local traditions in Central Asia. Additionally, I will incorporate postcolonial perspectives (Madina Tlostanova 2018), previous analyses of Ata Zholy's influence and activities (Pawel Jessa 2006, Wendell Schwab 2012), and works on women's experience.

I begin with a general overview of the *Ata Zholy* movement and its significance at shrines, then examine the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route and its key features, before turning to interviews with women and their role in shaping this sacred landscape.

Ata Zholy in the pilgrimages

Ata Zholy, also known as *Aq Zholy* or *Orda*, is a religious movement that emerged in 1997 and centered on spiritual revival and reverence for ancestors, promoting pilgrimage to sacred sites and engaging in rituals meant to honor ancestral spirits. *Ata Zholy* is perceived as a combination of tradition and religion, aiming to “preserve and reinvigorate a distinctly Kazakh tradition of Islam” (Schwab 2012, 180), and incorporates “both scriptural and Sufi elements of Islam” (Jessa 2006, 362). However, official Islamic institutions in Kazakhstan reject *Ata Zholy's* claims to Islamic and Kazakh traditional legitimacy. They characterize the movement as occult-mystical rather than religious, as Chief Imam of Zhambyl Region Beybit Älipbekuly (2023) states: “In reality, the organization's occult-mystical practices have no connection to either Kazakh traditions or Islamic Sharia law.” Still, the movement is considered religious and gained popularity in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries such as Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

Ata Zholy has different distinctive characteristics, one of the defining features of the movement is the role of spiritual guides, *Sungqar* for men and *Aqqū* for women, who are believed to possess the sacred gift (*qasīet*) and maintain a spiritual connection with ancestral spirits. These guides receive and convey divine messages, advice, and recommendations

through a practice known as *bata*. The organization initially aimed to promote respect for *Atalar* (ancestral spirits) and encouraged pilgrimage to ancestral graves, where adherents performed various rituals such as sacrifices, *bata* recitations, and the symbolic act of hanging white fabric.

When discussing *Ata Zholy*, pilgrims frequently mention Qydyrālī Tarybaev, the founder of the movement, who is revered as the initiator of Kazakhstan’s spiritual revival and recognized for his *qasīet* (sacred gift). Tarybaev became popular in 1997 when he began actively reviving the tradition of ancestral veneration and organizing pilgrimages and rituals aimed at awakening ancestral spirits. According to a memorial video dedicated to him, he was originally educated as a mechanical engineer and later held various positions, including canteen manager and deputy director, before becoming the spiritual leader⁸⁸. However, most pilgrims are unaware of his detailed biography. One respondent described his early activities as follows:

This is the one I was talking about, Qydyrālī Tarybaev. He started after her, went for treatment, took a blessing ... and she says, ‘You need to raise the people, go gather your friends. We have holy ancestors lying near Almaty—Tüktibay Ata, Süyinbay Ata, Zhambyl Ata, Qaynazar Ata, Sarybay Bī. These are the five ancestors; you must take the ram there and do the *Qurban*⁸⁹. He gathered his friends and did the *Qurban*. But this guy also didn’t know that he had a gift for this. He also worked as a caretaker and so on, well, as I heard and saw him.⁹⁰

Providing context for the emergence of the movement, pilgrims commonly describe the difficult conditions in Kazakhstan during the post-Soviet period, following seventy years of state-imposed atheism. This period can be understood as an attempt to reinterpret and process

⁸⁸ Qydyrālī Mombay, 2019, June 23, “Eske alū- Qydyrālī Mombay Tarybaev” [To the Memory of Kydyrali Mombay Tarybayev,] Video, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYbk1SMpVCs>.

⁸⁹ Sacrifice.

⁹⁰ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine. April 14, 2024.

post-socialist trauma, a concept explored by scholars like Madina Tlostanova, who examines the colonial impact of Soviet modernization. As Tlostanova (2018) argues, post-Soviet societies faced a difficult choice between different modernities, neither fully Western nor a return to pre-colonial national traditions: “They had to reorient themselves to someone else’s modernity or go back to national modernities” (26). In this context, Tarybaev and the *Ata Zholy* movement sought to bypass Soviet modernization entirely, envisioning a return to an earlier, possibly imagined, time when Kazakhs were at their cultural and spiritual peak, honoring their ancestors before the various waves of foreign influence. From this perspective, Tarybaev's mission was about the survival of Kazakhstan’s cultural and spiritual identity. Many pilgrims believe that his revival of ancestral veneration helped “save” the country at a time of existential uncertainty.

The *Ata Zholy* movement remained popular until its official prohibition in 2009 due to accusations of causing harm to public health and security, as well as a scandal involving the suicide of a female follower of the movement⁹¹. However, my research indicates that the movement is still active and influential at shrines, with many pilgrims mentioning it and integrating pilgrimage practices associated with it. Despite its official prohibition, *Ata Zholy* continues to operate, sometimes under different names, in countries such as Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and even the United Kingdom (as noted by one respondent). This is also evident in its online presence, members continue to post videos and other media despite the legal restrictions.

The movement remains particularly vibrant among pilgrims, who continue to uphold its beliefs, visit sacred places, and promote its values. My fieldwork suggests that *Ata Zholy* is especially popular among women, who frequently visit *Bes Ata* shrines in groups led by an

⁹¹ “On the liquidation and prohibition on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the occult-mystical religious movements “Alla-Ayat” (Farhatovites) and “Ata Zholy”. 17 March 2009, Online.zakon.kz. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30392344&pos=4;-100#pos=4;-100.

Aqqū spiritual guide. While not all references to the *Bes Ata* graves are explicitly tied to *Ata Zholy*, the widespread recognition of these sacred sites demonstrates how the movement's ideas have become deeply embedded in contemporary pilgrimage practices.

Bes Ata

Bes Ata is a construct of *Ata Zholy*, referring to five figures united in a pilgrimage route, where pilgrims visit all five to receive blessings. Originally, the concept was tied to five graves in the Almaty region: Tüktibay Ata, Süyinbay Ata, Zhambyl Ata, Qaynazar Ata, and Sarybay Bī Ata, all from the Shapyrashty clan of the Senior Zhüz. These figures, often considered saints, have recognized pilgrimage sites, promoted through tourism and social media, though *Ata Zholy* played a role in popularizing and formalizing their inclusion in a sacred route.

There is no clear documentation on why these particular figures were grouped as *Bes Ata*, aside from Qydyrālī Tarybaev's claim that he "awakened" them. The group includes Batyrs and poets, such as Zhambyl Zhabayev, who is primarily recognized for his poetry, and participation in aitys, rather than for religious significance. Their unity likely went from their perception as saints and respectable ancestors, as well as the location, within one area.

Beyond Almaty, the *Bes Ata* framework has expanded, with various figures being incorporated into the system. For instance, Medeuova and Sandybayeva (2018) describe how Qarasay and Aghyntay Batyrs, whose memorial complex is located in the North Kazakhstan region, were presented as part of another *Bes Ata* grouping, alongside Mendybay Ata, Zhanabī Ata, and Naūan Khaziret Ata (441). Their research notes that shrine practices, such as tying white fabric, are common in *Ata Zholy* pilgrimages, despite state and official Islamic criticism of the movement.

The formation of *Bes Ata* follows broader processes of mythmaking and ritualization in constructing sacred sites. As Golovneva and Shmidt's study (2015) of Okunevo village in

Russia shows, sacred places are often “social products” shaped by mythology, tourism, religion, and archaeology (57). Okunevo became a pilgrimage site through narratives of its uniqueness and sanctity, reinforced by rituals such as drinking special water.

Ata Zholly similarly uses traditions and myths to establish itself. From Tarybaev’s prophetic dreams to miracle stories shared by pilgrims, the movement frames *Bes Ata* figures as powerful spiritual entities. It merges ethnic and religious identities, framing itself as a Muslim movement while portraying pilgrimage as a Kazakh tradition. This aligns with broader post-Soviet trends, such as in Kyrgyzstan, where a semi-official “national theology” is supported by the state and promoted by religious authorities (Artman 2019, 1736). Rituals foster a sense of unity among pilgrims, aligning with Turner’s (1969) concept of *communitas*, a temporary, unstructured community bonded by shared spiritual experiences (96). These interactions create sacred networks, expand pilgrimage routes, and embed new sites into Kazakhstan’s religious landscape.

While the *Bes Ata* concept first appeared around Almaty, this idea of five ancestors protecting the land and giving blessings later emerged in other regions as well, for example, the North Kazakhstan region. Moving to the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route in the Aqmola region, it includes the graves of Berdibek Khan, Ormanbet Bī, Qyryqbay Baqsy, Niyaz Bī, and Qabanbay Batyr. This *Bes Ata* route is less known than Almaty’s one, and remains underrepresented on social media. While the individual shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Niyaz Bī are well-known sacred sites, the route as a whole lacks dedicated studies, appearing only in articles on *bata* (Sarsambekova 2021), private social media posts, and pilgrimage videos on the Baytasov YouTube channel⁹². I learned of this route through pilgrims who listed it as a sequence for visitation. Below is an overview of these figures and their significance to pilgrims.

⁹² Tokbergen Baytasov's channel [Kanal Tokbergena Baytasova] UCG3yvnpQHkPb4WX9fHZ6_9A.

Berdibek Ata (1310–1359)

Berdibek Khan, a ruler of the Golden Horde from 1357 to 1359, is buried near Aqmol village, though the authenticity of his grave remains unverified. Historical accounts depict him as a violent leader who eliminated rivals, yet he is venerated as a common ancestor and a Muslim ruler. Pilgrims honor him despite uncertainties about the grave's legitimacy. One respondent emphasized his historical significance, stating, "Berdibek Khan is one of the last khans of the Golden Horde."⁹³ While he was not the final ruler, he was the last from Uzbek Khan's dynasty, as portrayed in Esenberlin's *Nomads* (1976). Pilgrims provided little additional information on his significance.

Ormanbet Bī (approximately 1871–1945)

Also buried near Aqmol village, Ormanbet Bī's grave features two tombstones: an older white tombstone and a newer vertical one. The latter is made by *Ata Zholı* members, which is clear from the inscription: from *Aqqū* Nurgul. The inscriptions identify him as a descendant of Sengkibay Batyr and a victim of Soviet repression. His grave has become a pilgrimage site, with offerings of white fabric, stones, and coins. One respondent described him as a "shrine keeper,"⁹⁴ though it is unclear whether he guarded Berdibek Khan's grave (which is relatively new) or another ancestral shrine. His family's lineage, including a father who performed Hajj, and his martyrdom during Soviet purges, may contribute to his veneration.

Qyryqbay Baqsy (17–18 centuries)

Qyryqbay Baqsy, buried near Zhangazhol village, is among the most revered figures on this route due to his reputation as a healer *baqsy* and spiritual figure of the 17th-18th centuries. His grave is also marked with white fabric, and *Ata Zholı* members have contributed to its

⁹³ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 21, 2024.

⁹⁴ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 21, 2024.

preservation. Pilgrims attribute miraculous healings to him, with shamans visiting to receive energy and perform rituals. One woman shaman described using a whip (*qamshy*) to cleanse pilgrims of negative energy at Qyryqbay Baqsy's grave before ritually purifying the whip at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine⁹⁵. Another pilgrim recounted healing experiences after lying on the ground at the site⁹⁶. Observations of ritual practices, including fire offerings (*shyraq*), further illustrate the shrine's significance. The absence of a shrine keeper allows for a broader range of spiritual practices here than at more regulated shrines like Qabanbay Batyr's.

Niyaz Bī (1741–1790)

Niyaz Bī, an influential judge during Abylay Khan's reign, is buried near Taytobe village. Some of my respondents presented him as the founder of the Aqmola region⁹⁷, linking the name "Aqmola" (meaning "white grave") to his burial site. His shrine, unlike others on this route, is state-supported rather than maintained by *Ata Zholy*. The site features a structured white shrine where pilgrims can enter, pray, and leave.

Qabanbay Batyr (1692–1770)

Finally, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine is the most prominent and state-supported one on this route. The National Pantheon. The shrine keeper, Kamal Äbdirakhman, is here every day, looking after the shrine and the National Pantheon, and not allowing *Ata Zholy's* rituals here, such as the *aqtyq*, white material, lighting candles, etc. The shrine is open to all pilgrims, but with the right behavior. This shrine is not associated with *Ata Zholy* activities or their support, although being inside, we see the popularity of the place as part of the *Bes Ata* itinerary.

⁹⁵ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 23, 2023.

⁹⁶ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 21, 2024.

⁹⁷ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 23, 2024.

The *Bes Ata* route around Astana illustrates the ongoing sacralization of the land through myths, rituals, and the integration of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine into a broader sacred network. Collectively, these graves constitute the concept of *Bes Ata*, but the reasons behind the selection of these people and this particular order were not explained to me. This was partly due to my primary focus on Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and partly because the respondents usually were in a hurry and explained everything to me briefly, as it was not the first time they repeated these words. Further research yielded no definitive reason beyond geographic proximity; these graves are the closest to Astana, making it possible to visit them all in a single day. The first three are along Qorgalzhyn highway southwest of Astana, while the others are southeast of Astana

Ata Zholy followers played a key role in establishing the *Bes Ata* concept, as evidenced by their inscriptions on the first three gravestones. In addition to location, spiritual revelations also influenced the formation of the route, the dreams, or signs instructing people to mark these sites. One respondent credited Ana from Zerendy with "awakening" the *Bes Ata* of Astana. Although local stories of miracles may also contribute to their sacred status, my fieldwork was limited to Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, leaving other *Bes Ata* sites less explored.

Despite controversies over the authenticity of some graves, pilgrimages continue, demonstrating the persistence of sacred traditions even after the official prohibition of *Ata Zholy*. The sacred landscape of Astana has long been in flux, evolving from ancient burial mounds to historical shrines like Niyaz Bī's and later, to scriptural sites such as mosques. Bigozhin's research highlights this transformation through figures like Qozha Faizolla, an imam who ran a mosque in Tselinograd (Astana's name from 1961 to 1992). Initially operating a small mosque, he later secured approval to start building a new one in 1991, funded by private donations (Bigozhin 2023, 50).

Following Kazakhstan's independence, the number of mosques surged from 46 in 1990 to nearly 2,700 in 2021 (Kikimbayev 2023, 67). In Akmolinsk, mosques were built in 1838–1842, 1895, and 1943, with a major expansion in the post-Soviet era. By the time Astana became the capital, it had only one major mosque, “Sadūaqas Qazy Ghylmanī” (1996). Later other major mosques were opened, such as “Nur-Astana” (2005) and “Äziret Sultan” (2012), which became defining elements of the city's architectural landscape, alongside other mosques as “Tölebay” (2004) and “Äl Ghanī” (2006), and others (69–70).

Mosques and sacred sites coexist in shaping Astana's religious landscape. Generally, mosques have become both religious and cultural places, where various courses are held, such as reading the *Quran* or teaching sewing for the poor. For example, the Äziret Sultan's Mosque in Astana is large, convenient for believers, which holds conversations about religious issues, including some controversial ones like polygamy, the relationship between religion and traditions (Bissenova 2016, 215). The mosque also conducts sermons on important holidays, teaching how to pray according to the Hanafi madhhab, although some parishioners do not like such ideological work of the mosque (217-218). In these cases, in addition to communication in the mosque, there are a large number of opportunities for religious learning and conversations, including online, groups, and chat rooms for believers.

However, despite different opportunities for visitors, the mosques, as state-sanctioned institutions, are highly visible and regulated; while some pilgrimage sites, particularly those associated with *Ata Zholy*, remain largely clandestine, absent from mainstream media, and relatively uncontrolled. The authenticity of some locations remains debated, yet their sacred status persists through pilgrim devotion and religious movements.

These informal sacred spaces hold particular significance for women, offering them opportunities to express spiritual beliefs that may not align with official Islam, even though my

respondents always highlight that they pray only to Allah, the rituals of purifying through whip, putting the fire, *shyraq*, and white fabric may be seen as controversial. Though men traditionally dominate mosque leadership, *Ata Zholy* provides women with greater agency in shaping sacred spaces. While the movement was formally organized by Tarybaev, its origins are linked to influential women, such as Aq Ana, identified as Bayzhanova Zeynīkamal Karzhinbaevna, a pivotal figure in guiding Tarybaev's mission. Jessa (2006) describes how Aq Ana helped Tarybaev to solve some problems, and at that time he had a dream *ayan*, about the *Bes Ata*, and later he made a pilgrimage to Türkistan and founded *Ata Zholy* (360). One of my respondents also credited Ana from Zerendy with inspiring the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage around Astana. Based on my observations, women play a dominant role in this space, likely because it provides them with an opportunity to express their spirituality in alternative ways. They take on both active roles, such as organizing pilgrimage tours as *Aqqū* guides, and receptive roles as pilgrims seeking spiritual experiences.

Although the *Bes Ata* route originated within *Ata Zholy*, it now extends beyond the movement. Many pilgrims familiar with the route have direct or indirect connections to *Ata Zholy*. My fieldwork suggests that most women undertaking these pilgrimages seek spiritual solutions to personal hardships, consulting *aqqū*, *sunkar*, shamans *baqsy*, and healers *emshi*. For them, pilgrimage offers a rare space to express spirituality outside the framework of official Islam.

Despite its association with masculinity, Qabanbay Batyr and all figures in the *Bes Ata* route are male; women remain central to the practice. The continued veneration of these sites reflects both their spiritual needs and their active participation in shaping contemporary religious movements. While mosques dominate the visible religious landscape of Astana, sacred sites like *Bes Ata* persist through grassroots devotion, demonstrating the evolving, contested, yet resilient nature of sacred space.

Women and rituals

Most of my information about *Bes Ata* and *Ata Zholly* comes from women pilgrims at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, though both men and women participate in these pilgrimages. My fieldwork (July 13, 2023 – August 11, 2024, with 60 visits) recorded approximately 547 women and 554 men. Respondents emphasized that there is no distinction between men and women in these pilgrimages and that both are usually present, yet I primarily engaged with women, who also shared knowledge about rituals at other shrines, such as Kyrykbay Baqsy. Their active role in rituals contributes to the sacralization of these sites and the popularity of *Ata Zholly*.

Applying Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, which emphasizes pilgrims' shared experience and equality, *Ata Zholly* fosters a strong communal atmosphere through ritual purity (*daret*), animal sacrifices, shared meals, almsgiving (*sadaqah*), and receiving blessings (*bata*). Although these are common pilgrimage practices, *Ata Zholly* pilgrims perform them with strict adherence and a collective spirit.

Ata Zholly groups typically have one female organizer who speaks on behalf of the others. When I approached groups, most women remained silent and deferred to the leader, possibly due to uncertainty, unwillingness to share personal experiences, or group dynamics. These leaders, known as *aqqu*, were positive and open to conversations and served as informal religious guides, akin to traditional *otin*, *abistay*, or *dastarkhanji* in Central Asia. They mediate religious experiences, ensuring ritual observance, offering Quran recitations, and sometimes facilitating financial arrangements for pilgrimage expenses (sacrificial animals, meals, and transport). Despite *Ata Zholly*'s prohibited status, these women openly shared their experiences and even referred me to senior mentors (*ustaz*).

The religious authority of women in sacred spaces is crucial to understanding their role in contemporary pilgrimages. Historically, as Kamp (2006, 77) notes, Uzbek women did not

attend mosques but instead gathered for prayer and Quran recitation under female religious leaders (*otin*). Similarly, Kandiyoti and Azimova (2004, 329) describe *otin* and *dastarkhanji* as key figures in life-cycle rituals and religious observances. In the past, female religious guides organized women's pilgrimages, reinforcing the tradition of seeking spiritual support outside formal religious institutions.

While men also participate in these pilgrimages and there are male specialists, women tend to approach female guides. This preference likely stems from emotional comfort and the ability to discuss intimate topics such as family issues, career struggles, or personal problems. From the observation and conversations, it is seen that many women visit shrines specifically to seek solutions for problems related to marriage, children, or misfortune, reflecting a continuity of traditional beliefs. Aksana Ismailbekova (2015, 5) describes a similar pattern in which women turn to fortune tellers or authoritative female figures, such as a husband's mother, to resolve personal and family matters. Thus, these pilgrimages are more than religious journeys—they are spaces where women navigate spirituality, social networks, and personal struggles, blending traditional and contemporary spiritual practices.

One of the significant rituals in the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage is bringing white fabric (*aqtyq*) to the graves. This practice has deep roots among Turkic peoples and carries various symbolic meanings. Suraganova (2019) examines fabric-related rituals in Kazakhstan, such as *tabaryk*, “a thing at a wake in memory of the deceased” (242), including pieces of fabric, *zhyrtys*, “the scraps of fabric at funerals as an opportunity to gain longevity, social status of the deceased” (242), and *tuq*, banner. According to her, *aqtyq* serves as an umbrella term for all fabric-related offerings at sacred sites, including bedspreads, scarves, stoles, and fabric scraps (246), left as acts of worship or wish-making. Shrine keepers often redistribute fabric left by previous pilgrims, believing it absorbs the site's sacred energy, transforming from *aqtyq* to *tabaryk*. This also helps manage the accumulation of materials that could otherwise litter the site (246–247).

Historically, tying fabric to graves, trees, and sacred sites was common in Central Asia, and general in the USSR. However, today they are not always welcomed, for example, in Uzbekistan, this practice is discouraged or explicitly prohibited, with signs at shrine entrances stating: “Do not tie scarves or cloth strips on trees” (Abramson and Karimov 2007, 326), already in 2007.

Three of the *Bes Ata* graves that I visited have white fabric on them. Digital ethnography, including an analysis of *Ata Zholy* representative Baytasov’s YouTube channel (*Kanal Tokbergena Baytasova*), with approximately 72,000 followers, confirms this continuing tradition. Videos of pilgrimages to Qyryqbay Baqsy, Niyaz Bī⁹⁸, Berdibek Khan, and Ormanbet Bī⁹⁹ show pilgrims tying fabric, holding it in their hands, or encountering fabric already placed there. Even cemetery entrances are often adorned with white fabric. In contrast, at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine, this practice is strictly prohibited. The shrine keeper actively removes any fabric left behind, asserting that this tradition is neither Islamic nor Kazakh¹⁰⁰. As a result, *Ata Zholy* pilgrims typically do not perform rituals common in other *Bes Ata* places like fabric offerings, because they know the shrine keeper’s attitude towards it.

⁹⁸ Tokbergen Baytasov's channel [Kanal Tokbergena Baytasova], 2019, August 15, A tribute to the Qyryqbay Baqsy, Niyaz Bī Ata-3, [Video], YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZS_AvRLz3M.

⁹⁹ Tokbergen Baytasov's channel [Kanal Tokbergena Baytasova], 2019, August 14, A tribute to the graves of Berdibek Khan and Ormanbet-2, [Video], YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4puEHIFgDo>.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with the shrine keeper, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine. August 6, 2024.



Figure 13. White fabric brought by pilgrims to Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, September 2023, author's photo



Figure 14. The white fabric *aqtyq* on the Ormanbet Bī's grave, part of *Bes Ata*, October 2024, author's photo

Beyond fabric offerings, donations play a crucial role in maintaining shrines and supporting their upkeep. Other rituals include the animal sacrifice *Qurmaldyq*, sharing meals, and receiving blessings *bata*. While I've heard about these rituals but didn't see them in Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. As I understand, the pilgrimage fees include the cost of an animal

for sacrifice. After the sacrifice, pilgrims share the communal meal *dastarqan*: “Usually we make a big Qurban, slaughter a camel and set a *dastarqan* for the saints, all 99 angels, well, that's where they read prayers, and that's why they make a big *dastarqan*”¹⁰¹. Later, they receive *bata* in more private spaces, probably houses of Orda. One of the key attractions of the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage is the opportunity to receive individual blessings from the ancestors, which enhances the route's popularity.

Although I didn't make pilgrimages with the caravan *keruens* of the *Bes Ata* followers, those who did described the distinctive *bata* practice there. The usual *bata* is given to all listeners of the Quran inside the shrine, for the prosperity and peace of the whole country (although sometimes people ask for the individual *bata* from the shrine keeper, or the descendant of Ata, or other elderly people). However, in *Ata Zholy* organized pilgrimages, there is a belief that the spirits of the ancestors communicate through the organizers of the pilgrimage, such as *aqqu* or *sunkar*. These organizers act as spiritual intermediaries, delivering blessings directly from the ancestors to each pilgrim. Pilgrims could record the *bata* given to them on the Dictaphone and relisten to it. This deep personal connection, where pilgrims receive specific words and guidance from ancestral spirits, plays an important role in unifying the group and reinforcing their shared beliefs.

While the concept of *communitas* in pilgrimages is not universally accepted, *Ata Zholy* successfully creates a sense of unity through the rituals, narratives, and shared experiences. During the fieldwork at both Qabanbay Batyr's and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrines, I never heard about the negative experience with *Ata Zholy* from the women I spoke with. They did not associate *Ata Zholy* with being a sect or view it as a group that somehow profited from

¹⁰¹ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. April 14, 2024.

the pilgrimages. Instead, they mention the help and genuine belief they experienced, the miraculous healings and spiritual benefits that followed their pilgrimages.

One woman respondent is particularly interesting to me as I had the longest interview with her, about 20 minutes, and she started “this road” (the usual expression among the members) in the early 2000s. The woman came alone and started to pray. While I was waiting for her to finish, she suddenly approached me and asked about the mosquitoes flying around. We started to talk, and she told me the whole story about pilgrimages, *Ata Zholy*, and their role in her life. I think this story could demonstrate the general way of becoming a member of *Ata Zholy* and its practices.

Her own story started at the end of the 90s, the time she took this path. It started with an illness that was so strong it prevented her from working. Looking for treatment, she met a woman who told her that she had *Orda* and would give her blessing. This woman told her to go to *eren qyryq shelten*¹⁰² in Türkistan, where 41 saints were waiting for her. Located in Türkistan, this sacred site consists of two rocks with a narrow passage between them. It is believed that only those with a pure and virtuous soul can pass through.

The origins of this site trace back to pre-Islamic beliefs among Kazakhs and other Turkic peoples. According to Raushan Mustafina (1992), the term “*Ghayyperen Qyryq shilten*” refers to forty invisible spirits, also known as “*chiltans*”. Mustafina notes that Kazakhs sometimes called them *gaiperen*, meaning “hidden friends” (152). These spirits were believed to take various forms, such as a dog, child, or old man (152). Typically, the terms *Gayyp Eren* and *Qyryq Shilten* were used together, signifying not just a specific site in Southern Kazakhstan but also the general spiritual protection these unseen entities provided (153). These spirits were often associated with shamans. Soviet ethnographer Olga Sukhareva (1974) describes a female

¹⁰² *Ghayyp Eren Qyryq Shilten*, the sacred place in the Türkistan region.

shaman who performed rituals involving 41 lamps dedicated to the *Chiltans*, reinforcing their connection to shamanistic traditions (62). Some elements of the *Ata Zholy* pilgrimage and practices also incorporate these shamanistic influences, blending them with Islamic traditions.

Returning to my respondent's account, at that time, she had no money to afford such a trip. However, later her condition worsened, and medics found stones in her lungs. She was in the sanitary-epidemiological station and met another woman, who also gave her blessing, and told her to open her heart and go to sacred places. After the pilgrimage, the stones miraculously disappear. The woman was very happy and continued to go on this road.

As anthropologist Pawel Jessa (2006) writes: "The pilgrimage is a 'one-way ticket'. Aqjol's activists emphasize that one is obliged to change the former style of life after participation in the pilgrimage" (367). It also means the obligation to do pilgrimages regularly. According to my respondent, caravan *keruen*, the pilgrims' group usually goes twice a month. She has already visited different sacred places in Kazakhstan, she mentioned Türkistan, Beket Ata, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrines, and others. She even continued pilgrimages in the COVID-19 era, although there were different prohibitions (she was not alone; respondents at another shrine also mentioned how they went on pilgrimage during the pandemic). This woman seems to have the longest experience with *Ata Zholy* from all other respondents, starting in the early 2000s, she continues to do it.

The shrine keeper's perspective and the commercialization of the pilgrimage

The shrine keeper, Kamal Äbdirakhman, remained neutral toward the *Bes Ata* religious route, expressing no personal belief in it. A specialist on Qabanbay Batyr, Äbdirakhman has published numerous works defending the scientific legitimacy of the Batyr's burial site. In contrast, *Ata Zholy's* proponents emphasize spiritual revelations and ancestral visions guiding the selection of sacred sites. Äbdirakhman said the number 5 was never as sacred in Kazakh

culture as numbers 3,7, or 9¹⁰³. The shrine keeper, answering the question about *Bes Ata*, claimed that it is neither good nor bad, there is no benefit from this, but there is no harm either. During his experience since 2000, he has seen many religious movements and is now neutral about them. While the shrine is open to all, he strictly prohibits certain practices, such as *aqtyq* (fabric offerings), magical rituals, and business here.

Beyond spiritual revival, the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route also serves as a sacred tourism business with certain economic profits. From its inception, *Ata Zholy* has been criticized for its commercialized nature, with Wendell Schwab (2014) even describing it as an “officially registered business in Kazakhstan that ran pilgrimages” (32). One of the accusations was the financial structure of the movement. As the official prohibition documents state:

The country's law enforcement agencies have established that the main sources of funding for the *Ata Zholy* and *Alla Ayat* movements are mandatory monetary contributions from the followers themselves. The principles of funding are similar to “financial pyramids”, since each member of the movement must bring with him an even greater number of new followers to increase his level in the structure of the movement.¹⁰⁴

Sacred tours are increasingly popular in Kazakhstan, with numerous social media pages dedicated to them, and *Ata Zholy's* ones as well. One of the respondents told me there are around 80 people in the Astana vicinity who organize such tours. “All travel to the *Bes Ata*, here are several, here I think there are about 80 women, women and men who are engaged in guiding between the living and the dead. They organize caravans like this”¹⁰⁵. The pilgrims do

¹⁰³ Interview with the shrine keeper, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. August 6, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ “On the liquidation and prohibition on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan of the occult-mystical religious movements “Alla-Ayat” (Farhatovites) and “Ata Zholy”. 17 March 2009, Online.zakon.kz. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30392344&pos=4;-100#pos=4;-100.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. June 21, 2024.

not mind paying some money as the pilgrimage fee and they do not think that organizers have any financial profit from it, because it usually covers the transportation to the sacred place (usually by bus), the animal for sacrifice, the place for night standing (if the pilgrimage runs several days), the information, guided pilgrimage. However, business opportunities likely exist, including arrangements with suppliers, livestock sales, and logistical partnerships. In addition, the narrative among *Ata Zholy* followers is that once pilgrims start a pilgrimage route, they have to maintain it regularly. Despite potential commercial motivations, my respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. It seems that for the pilgrims, these Bes Ata and conducted rituals are part of the right pilgrimage, which organizers do properly, and the better chance that their prayers will be heard and fulfilled.

Conclusion

So, Qabanbay Batyr's shrine does not exist alone but is integrated into the multilayered sacred landscape that reflects both traditional pilgrimage and new religious movements. The shrine's inclusion in the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route, despite variations in ritual acceptance and restrictions, illustrates how pilgrims themselves, particularly women, contribute to sacralizing these spaces. Despite state regulations and religious controls, pilgrimage remains a dynamic and largely independent phenomenon. The graves of Berdibek Khan, Ormanbet Bī, and Qyryqbay Baqsy are more open to ritual practices, while Niyaz Bī and Qabanbay Batyr's shrines enforce stricter boundaries against such practices. Yet, all sites remain accessible to people of various religious backgrounds, demonstrating the fluid and inclusive nature of pilgrimage culture.

In conclusion, pilgrimage provides women with a significant space to explore and express their spirituality, whether through personal devotion, communal rituals, or participation in movements like *Ata Zholy*. The integration of Qabanbay Batyr's shrine into

the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route illustrates how such movements continue to shape and expand the sacred landscape. Women, as spiritual guides (*aqqū*), pilgrimage organizers, and active participants, play a vital role in shaping and sustaining the sacred networks. Their contributions highlight the dynamic nature of pilgrimage, where spiritual traditions are continuously reshaped through shared experiences and evolving religious practices.

Women's agency, authority, and traditional values in Māshhūr

Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine

In this part, I will demonstrate how women's roles in the Māshhūr Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine reflect the general values of traditional society, while also accommodating supplementary aspirations, such as career and education. The main values for women are being good wives, mothers, homemakers, and generally good people. I argue that the shrine promotes traditional values, and the women's actions in the shrine, including their voluntary participation in the chores, help to raise their status and gain approval both from other pilgrims and later from God, as these deeds are seen as *saūap*, the reward for good actions.

In the shrine, traditional values are prevalent, and people behave in more modest and pious ways than they do in everyday life. The shrine activities also contribute to gender division and promote traditional values. For women, it means the special dress code and the behavior, engaging in supportive roles such as cooking, cleaning, and helping others. These actions are meant to be volunteer and altruistic, but in fact, performing them, women know that it will influence the attitude towards them in the shrine, particularly from other women, and will be rewarded in the afterlife, seen as *saūap*. Here, I apply the late sociologist Saba Mahmood's concept of agency (2005) as theoretical framework to demonstrate that women perform these traditional gender roles not out of mere conformity but as conscious, agentic choices. By

engaging in these roles, they reaffirm their identities and values while gaining both social and spiritual recognition.

The shrine is simultaneously a place of relative spiritual freedom and a space where patriarchal traditions continue to shape women's behavior. While miraculous events of pilgrims, such as women conceiving children or finding spouses after visiting the shrine, are important here, the shrine is mostly known for its association with Mäshhür Zhüsip's political and social prophecies, as well as his miracles associated with the preservation of his body. Nevertheless, the common reason for visiting the shrine is to pray for family, a partner, and healthy children. These desires are responses to general human needs, but they are particularly important for women in traditional society as the main opportunities to raise their social status and gain authority. Drawing on the works of anthropologists Inga Stasevich (2011) and Aksana Ismailbekova (2015), I demonstrate how women's family situation reflects their status and authority. While traditional values are dominant in the shrine, others, such as education and career achievements, are also preferable for women. As historian Zhanat Kundakbayeva (2017) shows, the Soviet projects of women's emancipation shaped the expectations of the ideal soviet woman, and this legacy influenced modern women's roles too. Today, women combine family and work even though the traditional values are preferable.

In general, women's behaviors and actions at the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine emphasize the importance of traditional gender roles while also demonstrating their agency and ability to adapt these roles to contemporary contexts.

The shrine and traditional values, marriage, and healthy children, authority

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine helps me to see the more intimate relationships between people and to have more private conversations because of its location and pilgrimage activities. The shrine is located in the steppe, 87 km from the nearest city, Ekibastuz. The close-

in settlement here is the village of Mäshhür Zhüsip (former Zhanga-Zhol). So, people who visit this place are predominantly the locals from the Pavlodar region and nearby villages. Many of them visit the shrine frequently and know well the shrine keeper, the shrine workers, and, in some cases, fellow pilgrims. Even though it is popular among people from other regions too, the core community is composed of the locals and contributes to the sense of familiarity.

The other reason for the more informal behavior and deeper conversations is the closeness from the common work, and staying together for some time. Visitors often stay overnight, or at least have meals together, especially during the warm weather, and if they travel long distances. This shared experience of doing the work, eating, and sleeping sometimes in one room creates a joint atmosphere and more personal interactions. So, people discuss more private matters and share the experience than, for example, at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. Therefore, people more often and openly talk about family issues, especially marriage and children.

For many people, especially women, the very reason for visiting a shrine is the desire to fulfill the traditional activities such as marriage and childbearing. Even though these events are universally valued, in traditional societies, they significantly influence women's status. As Inga Stasevich (2011) writes, in traditional societies, women's status was determined both by their inherited power (ascribed status) and their own life decisions and achievements (achieved status) (5). Achieved status was highly influenced by marriage, the place of a woman in her husband's kinship, which she occupied with her personal qualities and abilities. So, the main occasion in Kazakh women's lives was marriage and its consequences. If there were any problems with fertility, one of the solutions for women was visiting the shrines and praying, as we see in different poems (Alpamys Batyr). Today, with the blessing to have the couple and the children after every prayer from the shrine keeper, we can see that this reason and the event are still major for the women and men.

The women's status and authority depend significantly on their marital status, children, and grandchildren. In Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, it is especially visible. The question about marital status is the common one as the starting point of conversation. If someone is unmarried, people could ask the reasons and even suggest potential candidates. For those who are married, the discussion often shifts to their children, family life, and related topics. The most respected women in the shrine are usually senior women who visit regularly, have established families, know traditions, perform namaz, and are seen as role models. The situation is similar in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as Ismailbekova (2015, 9) demonstrates with the cases of respected elderly women, who are involved in education, transmitting knowledge to the younger generations, and advising in the feast organization. In the shrine, too, these women often occupy a position of guidance rather than active involvement in the shrine's chores, offering advice and support instead. Their younger relatives, daughters, and daughters-in-law help them. Senior women are expected to treat everyone equally and maintain peaceful relations within their families and in general communities.

Even though women generally have the desire to find a partner and produce healthy progeny, there is also no doubt that there is pressure and control from the state and society. As sociologist Anna Temkina (2008) writes, analyzing the women's sexual behavior in post-Soviet Tajikistan, Armenia, and the Russian Federation:

A woman is responsible for the biological and cultural reproduction of the state, nation, community, it is her sexuality that is associated with the reproductive behavior that ensures this reproduction. Therefore, it is the woman who is primarily controlled by the state, community, family, and group (24).

Consequently, the marriage here presents as “the main mechanism for regulating (hetero)sexuality” (24). Indeed, from the conversations in the shrine, it is seen how for women

having children without marriage and cohabitation without marriage are rather exceptions than norms; people encourage marriage.

The role of marriage and fertility is shaped by the general values of the family institute in Kazakh society, later Soviet politics, and post-Soviet politics, supporting families with many children.

The work in the shrine

Along with marriage and children, the general feminine qualities and activities are valued in the shrine. The work here is usually gender divided, and doing the chores for women is important both for having the approval of other women and earning spiritual merit *saūap*, for the future, the afterworld.

Since Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine is located on the steppe, certain work here is expected to be carried out by the pilgrims. While there are workers in the shrine, museum, and hotels, many communal tasks such as the general cooking and cleaning after themselves are done by visitors. There are two hotels, paid and free, and for visitors, the responsibilities are similar and include preparing food, *dastarkhan*, cleaning, and general help in the shrine if needed.

The labor division between genders follows the traditional lines, with men usually occupied with slaughtering animals, preparing meat (especially outdoors), setting up the samovar, and others. Women usually do cooking, serving at the table, washing dishes, and other. The line between these gender works is blurred and there are cases when men help the women with cooking, bringing something to the table, decorating, and women assist with the butchering and other outdoor work. Nevertheless, some divisions are more firmly; I have not observed a man washing dishes, or a woman slaughtering animals, although such cases may exist.

For women, performing the traditional tasks allows them to demonstrate qualities associated with the ideal homemaker, such as neatness, cleanliness, diligence, and piety. Their willingness to work without expectation of direct compensation reflects their devotion to the shrine. In practice, however, this work is far from unrecognized; it is highly valued by the shrine community, particularly by other women, and is believed to be counted in the future.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005), in her discussion of agency, writes:

bodily acts-like wearing the veil or conducting oneself modestly in interactions with people (especially men)-do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self. Rather they are the critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious (158).

She analyzed the women in the mosque movement in Egypt, but a similar dynamic could be seen in the shrine, where women's actions are not only performed in the presence of men but are also deeply significant in the way women present themselves to other women. Some women usually observe the right behavior, proper dressing, and helping with the tasks, and others know that for approval, they should behave a certain way. However, this does not invalidate the sincerity of their piety. Here, Mahmood's arguments that the acts of piety also mean training and cultivating the inner moral self are applicable. So, for women, their actions, including modest behavior, participating in chores, or adhering to traditional roles, are not simply external performances but reflect a conscious choice and a personal commitment to embodying piety and virtue.

To demonstrate the system of observance, approval, and conscious choices, take the example of the usual chores in the shrine. The work distribution depends on the age and status of women. Middle-aged, married women are usually responsible for the cooking, while

younger women often handle the additional work, such as cleaning, preparing products, serving food, and washing dishes, although the work could be combined among women. Elderly women may contribute by helping with light chores or offering advice, rather than actively participating in the work.

The usual activity for me and generally for younger women was washing dishes, and this minor activity turned out to be meaningful in other women's eyes and influenced women's attitudes towards you. Washing dishes in the complex is not a hard activity, but it is often tedious and unpleasant, especially given the volume of dishes and the greasy residue from meals prepared for large groups. Plus, water at the shrine is delivered and should be carefully rationed. As the administrator of the hotel explained, washing dishes requires conserving water efficiently, and using it sparingly and methodically to ensure cleanliness without waste. It is usually a boring activity, but the desirable behavior for a woman here is to take the initiative and start to wash the dishes on her decision.

For instance, on one occasion, I was washing dishes when the elder woman started to do it nearby, and I politely assured her I would handle it, and she stepped back. Later, she and her friend turned out to be my roommates, and they praised me for washing the dishes silently after all, which presents me with the good side. To my response that it is not a "big deal," they told me that it is important because not everyone will do it, some will just leave it, and nobody will notice. After these words, I understood that if my actions were noticed and praised, a lack of action would surely also be observed and judged.

This moment turned into the whole lecture about the importance of helping others and doing things without expecting anything. These women told me the story of how one grandmother kept her money in the locker, and she forgot to close the door. The passing man saw the money in the locker and stole some of it. Another man walked nearby and saw the

money, but he added his own, out of concern for the financial situation of the grandmother. The women concluded by asking, who was happier, the man who stole the money or those who gave it? Of course, it was the man who added money because by helping others, we feel better ourselves. The telling of such instructive stories is found in the mazar.

This episode correlates with the long history of the Kazakh traditional institute of housekeeping, when senior women share their experiences and educate younger ones on how to do the chores, and other things, in general, life experience. So, it is happening commonly in the shrine, from mothers to daughters, from mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law, and from more experienced women to others. As Stasevich (2011) writes, the Kazakh girl from an early age was involved in women's work by helping firstly through the games, observing the actions of the elderly members, and copying them (43). In the new families, the mother-in-law became the teacher and a kind of conductor for their daughter-in-law, *kelin* in Kazakh. The shrine activities continued this educational chain and also allowed one group to help and give advice to another. So, the women's actions here are subject to approval or disapproval, which may be expressed directly or indirectly in conversations among women or within the broader community. Generally, men are less involved in or concerned with such evaluations. They are unlikely to notice or care about who washes the dishes, for instance, whereas among women, these seemingly minor actions carry significant social weight.

In this context, domestic chores such as washing the dishes, cooking, and cleaning transcend their mundane nature to become symbols of generosity, kindness, and the attainment of *saūap*. The connection between small actions and great values was highlighted by the woman working here. She shared her frustrations and observations about pilgrims' behavior, how one group left the dirty dishes and even hid them, so she had to wash them later. It is an especially tough topic for her because, as an administrator, she is responsible for keeping the

hotel clean. In contrast, she mentioned the positive behavior of pilgrims who approach their duties with sincerity:

Women come here, prepare the *dastarqan*, drink tea. Those who come with all their heart, they don't look, your dishes are dirty, my dishes, they wash all the dishes, they tell me, we need to, they say, take *saūap* from Ata, *saūap* is gratitude, receive grace. Grace of Ata, grace from *atashka*, they feel that he will help them with all his heart because they came with all their heart. They can wash dishes, cook food, and feed a poor person. Here, we are all travelers in this world¹⁰⁶.

The concept of *saūap* is central to the shrine's environment. It encompasses any virtuous act, and for women, helping others and doing chores is a readily available and socially approved means of collecting it. On my first day at the shrine, an elder woman explained the proper way to perform *daret* (ablution), and when I thanked her, she responded by saying it brought her *saūap*. On another occasion, my colleague and I were asked to assist with cleaning and vacuuming the shrine, explicitly framing it as an opportunity to gain *saūap*.

The recognition of women's work in the shrine is important, but it also leads to the reinforcement of traditional gendered expectations by framing these tasks as beneficial for the spiritual and social future. The continuation of domestic work in the shrine happens ubiquitously in pilgrimage. So, Miettunen (2018), analyzing the women's pilgrimage in Jordan, writes how the participation in the annual pilgrimage to Jabal Harun and following events gave women more work, such as preparing large amounts of food and new clothes for the family (46). However, she disputes the arguments that "women's 'spiritual journey' does not take them very far from the domestic sphere" (48). She demonstrates rather that this additional work

¹⁰⁶ Interview with a woman worker, Māshhūr Zhūsip Köpeyuly's shrine. January 14, 2024.

is not a burden for women, but the positive and anticipated part of the pilgrimage, which “forms an important part of the women’s communal experience” (48) along with the spiritual one.

Similar processes could be seen in the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine. While sometimes women may express frustration over chores, for many, the work itself is not a burden but an opportunity to form connections, exchange experiences, and build bonds. The tasks rarely dominated the women’s time, except for the large events, and after work, women enjoyed the joint meals and conversations. Their interactions often foster what Victor Turner (1969) describes as *communitas*, a sense of social unity and solidarity. Shared work provides a natural setting for conversations, enabling women to talk openly about personal matters. Through these discussions, ranging from family and financial issues to broader life challenges, women create informal support networks. These exchanges, which are similar to therapeutic sessions, allow participants to seek advice, share similar experiences, and gain a sense of emotional relief.

However, the pilgrimage sense of *communitas* is not always a universal experience. Religious studies scholar Jacob Kinnard (2014) gives some criticism to the concept of *communitas* “pilgrimage places present opportunities not just for what Turner frequently refers to as 'ludic communitas' – and here may lay the real 'magic' – but also for open confrontation and physical violence” (7). He gave the events in Ayodhya (an Indian town), where the mass violent confrontation between Hindus and Muslims happened in 1992 (Renard 2014, 7). However, Renard also accepts that Turner focused mostly on the context of the Ndembu of Zambia (8). Still, these concepts are applicable and significant to understanding pilgrimages in different societies. In the case of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine, there were also not always equal, positive communities, but if no open conflicts, then the disagreements between pilgrims and/or workers. They could argue sometimes on work duties, differing views, or interpersonal matters. Nevertheless, despite these disputes, pilgrims were generally friendly to each other.

In general, women's behavior and activities in the shrine have different meanings. On one hand, women know their deeds will be noticed by other pilgrims and, ultimately, by Allah. On the other hand, the expectation is that these acts should be done with pure intentions and performed without the expectation of recognition or reward. While these practices are voluntary, they are also culturally and spiritually desirable. So, the duties for the majority of women are a mix of voluntary and compulsory actions, and they are not always a burden but rather relatively agentic choices. They are expected to be voluntary with clear intentions, but even if not, the women in the majority of cases should do these duties. The choice here is often whether to do it of your own will or to do it anyway. Applying Mahmood's concept, such actions can be seen as expressions of agency, where women consciously engage in socially and religiously meaningful practices. Rather than viewing these chores as mere impositions, women embrace them as part of their commitment to faith and community, illustrating how the agency operates within the framework of tradition and piety.

Other values and women's work together

Whereas the traditional values are deeply significant in the shrine and Kazakhstani society broadly, other aspects of women's identities, such as education and career, also matter, albeit to a lesser extent. The majority of women in the shrine have higher education and work in different spheres. Women often shared stories with pride about their daughters and granddaughters pursuing different degrees, receiving promotions at work, purchasing their own homes, or even achieving success as single mothers. Many of the respondents also mentioned their self-learning activities, applying to different courses, learning Arabic and Quran in mosques, and referring to various books and podcasts. All of this also creates respect for women, but ideally, combined with marriage and children.

The ideal of balancing family life with a career has become a common aspiration, shaped in part by Soviet-era gender norms. The Soviet authorities viewed women of the Soviet East as oppressed and subjugated, undertaking activities to liberate them with the Hujum campaign and the prohibition of different traditional practices (Northrop 2003, Kamp 2006). Different actors participated in these campaigns, including feminists, and women's departments *Zhenotdels* with their desire to help the women of Central Asia not only free themselves from old customs but also take their role in a progressive society. Among the prerequisites for the Hujum campaign were the activities of Russian feminists such as Inessa Armand and Aleksandra Kollontai, and their ideas, "these feminists argued that women should be equal members of society and drawn fully into the public sphere" (Kennedy-Pipe 2004, 93). In 1919, *Zhenotdels* were created and became an important tool for the emancipation of women in the East. The activities of *Zhenotdels* include organizing rallies and meetings, publishing campaign materials, and others.

the task of the women's departments for work among women of the peoples of the East is to take the initiative, that is, to raise and put before the party and the Soviets various questions and tasks in connection with the emancipation of women and their participation in the development of new laws. (From the resolutions of the I All-Russian Conference of Communist Women - Organizers of the Women of the East, April 5-7, 1921)

For the Soviet government, it was necessary that the ranks of the party be replenished by national cadres, women of Central Asia. Historian Zhanat Kundakbaeva (2017) demonstrates how the Bolsheviks created and promoted the construct of the ideal soviet woman in Kazakhstani society, the woman who steps away from the old traditions, chooses her partner and profession, uses other hygienic norms, and follows the Communist ideology (226). Some women became more famous, took seats in the party, and worked on projects of modernization

and emancipation. Among them was Alma Urazbayeva (1898-1948), a teacher who is considered the first Kazakh woman to join the Bolshevik Party. She received her primary education at the school of the Bukey Horde, then studied in Simbirsk and spoke Kazakh, Russian, Tatar, and Chuvash. Alma Urazbayeva was one of the initiators of the creation of the Red Yurts to eradicate illiteracy and participated in the preparation of the text of the Decree on the abolition of qalyng mal, polygamy, and ämenggerlik¹⁰⁷ in Kazakhstan (Zhumalieva 2016). However, the example of Alma Urazbayeva was an exception rather than the rule, since not all local women had the opportunity to get an education, join the party, or generally realize themselves in the public sphere.

Gradually, with the more work opportunities, the women were often experiencing dual expectations “on the one hand, compliance with Soviet norms (mandatory work and social activity), and on the other hand, compliance with traditions” (Shchurko 2016, 199). The double success is still expected from women in general.

Within the context of the shrine, family often takes precedence over professional achievements. However, it would be an oversimplification to assume that women come to the mazar only for the sake of traditional milestones, to pray for marriage and children. The majority of women are already happily living with their families and professions. Others visit for different purposes, such as learning. For example, one of my respondents was a woman psychologist from Almaty, who came here alone, despite some suggestions that women should travel to the sacred sites with accompanying persons. Her main purpose was to unleash potential, and get the other from the academic part of knowledge, reading the books here:

Coming to a place like this, I saw books, for example, when I entered the museum yesterday. There are so many books that I haven't even opened yet. We didn't study

¹⁰⁷ The tradition whereby a widow marries the closest relatives of her deceased husband.

this in school, but later, as we grew, we sought it out ourselves. Consciously, as they say, we began looking for it and now must start reading it.¹⁰⁸

Another woman, my colleague, visited to investigate whether the predictions of Mäshhür Zhüsip, widely discussed online, were indeed made by him.

Overall, people often have multiple motivations for their pilgrimage, simultaneously praying for their private life, getting new knowledge, and seeking spiritual healing is normal. Nevertheless, the main ideals and motivations for women are traditional ones. For example, when people knew I'm doing my PhD they praised me but emphasized the importance of marriage, even suggesting potential suitors. On one occasion, when matchmaking me with someone from a nearby village in Bayanaūyl, they asked if I knew how to milk cows. As they put it, pursuing a PhD is great, but woman must know how to do more practical things.

Authority

Generally, the authority in the shrine is gained for the people regardless of their gender, but rather their achievements. While men usually have higher status in the mazars, entering and leaving first, sitting in the higher positions, it is seen as tradition, and in everyday interactions, the people act equally. Here, the men, particularly the descendants of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly, occupy the highest position in the authority system, Aset Pazylov, and Abay Sharapiev. Both are occupied with the research of their ancestors' heritage, published books, and often communicate with pilgrims, sharing the knowledge with them. Generally, the traditional respect for elderly persons is present in the shrine.

The women, who historically have the highest status and authority, are those who fulfill the traditional obligations, have special knowledge, and coordinate women in rituals. There are

¹⁰⁸ Interview, with a woman pilgrim, Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, July 16, 2024.

otin and *dastarhanji* in Uzbekistan (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004), *abistay* among tatars (Garipova 2021), *kindik sheshe* in the Kazakh context (Stasevich 2011, 59) and others. These women are particularly respected because of their knowledge, ability to help others during festivals and important events, reading the Quran in the women's communities, and transmitting knowledge to the next generations.

In the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine, there are women who visit regularly and share their experiences with others. There are women who conduct the pilgrimages for other groups and gain respect from it. The elderly women also gave a blessing *bata* at the end of the meal, if there were no men, or the men were young. One of these women was Alūa Tate, who is visited regularly, prays namaz, and has a large family. Others are also women, working here in the hotel as they usually meet the pilgrims, help them, and share the experience. In my case, the woman administrator helped a lot as the gatekeeper and introduced me to the different audiences in the shrine.

The women from the Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly family also possess the authority in the shrine. There is not much information about his wife, but there is some information about two daughters-in-law, Nürilä Tashqyzy apa (1918–2008), and Aqzeynep Ysqaqqyzy apa (1892–1984). Nürilä apa was the wife of Mukhammed-Fazyl, the youngest son of Mäshhür Zhüsip. She died in 2008, and there are still pilgrims who remember and respect her. Once, me and 2 women pilgrims were searching for her grave among those around the shrine and read the Quran on every grave. She was kind of the shrine keeper and contributed to the construction of the mazar in 1972. The present shrine keeper Aset Pazylov (2022) wrote that she encouraged him to become the shrine keeper: “My grandmother used to take care of everything, and when she got old, I took over. I spent two years learning how to greet and see people off, and now I explain to them how to worship properly” (191).

Aqzeynep apa was the wife of Mukhammed-Sharapī, the eldest son of Māshhūr Zhüsip. She died earlier in 1984. Her son, another grand-grandchild of Māshhūr Zhüsip, Abay Sharapīev, in his book (2023), wrote about her as a good example for future daughter-in-laws (364–366).

Overall, while all visitors are considered equal in the shrine, certain roles and actions, such as regular participation, guiding others, and fulfilling traditional or familial responsibilities, can elevate women's authority within this sacred space.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's presence and actions at the Māshhūr Zhüsip Köpeyuly shrine highlight a delicate balance between traditional values and their agency. While the shrine predominantly reinforces ideals of family, motherhood, and homemaking, it also provides a space for women to express independence and adapt these values to their contemporary lives. Through their voluntary participation in tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and other communal responsibilities, women demonstrate their piety, reinforce their social status, and gain approval from their peers and spiritual reward (*saūap*).

The women, who meet the traditional requirements, possess a higher status and authority, even though there are shifts and different ideals. One of the women I met at the shrine encapsulated this sentiment through a lighthearted joke. As we said our goodbyes, she asked me, “What is the best *VUZ vyssheye uchebnoye zavedeniye* (higher education institute) for a woman?” Before I could respond with suggestions, she laughed and said, “*VUZ — (Vyiti Udachno Zamuzh)* (to marry successfully). The joke relied on the shared abbreviation in Russian, but its deeper implication was clear: a good marriage is often considered more significant for a woman than the education or career she pursues. After sharing the joke, the woman confessed that she had never used her university diploma, which remained forgotten at

the bottom of a chest. Another woman immediately reassured her, praising her instead as a wonderful mother and wife. This exchange highlights a pervasive belief that even if education and professional achievements are valued, they are secondary to the roles of wife and mother. Or, ideally, the women should combine these roles to achieve not only happiness but the status and authority.

Pilgrimage as embodied experience

I argue that pilgrimage is particularly significant for many women, as their spiritual worldview, belief in signs, and embodied practices shape it into a profoundly personal and transformative experience.

Building on anthropologist Thomas Csordas' concept of embodiment (1990), I demonstrate how women's bodily interactions with sacred spaces do more than symbolize devotion; they produce and reinforce the religious experience itself. Rather than relying solely on doctrine or intellectual reasoning, women describe pilgrimage in deeply sensorial terms, emphasizing feeling over thinking, the heart over the mind. This embodied engagement not only strengthens their connection to the sacred but also legitimizes their spirituality outside rigid dogmatic norms, making the personal experience the relative authority.

This embodied dimension of pilgrimage is closely tied to women's historical and cultural roles. As Inga Stasevich (2011) notes, women have long been associated with liminal spaces, acting as mediators between life and death, the material and the spiritual through rituals of childbirth, caregiving, and mourning (173). Their emotional and spiritual sensitivity, combined with cultural traditions emphasizing protection from harm (with praying, amulets, and pilgrimage itself), shapes their unique interpretation of pilgrimage as both a sacred duty and a form of personal empowerment.

To analyze this phenomenon, I draw primarily on Thomas Csordas' paradigm of embodiment (1990), alongside Donna Honarpišeh's research (2013) on women's embodied spirituality in pilgrimage in Shiraz, which provides valuable insights within an Islamic context. Additionally, I incorporate Inga Stasevich's work (2011) on women's roles in life-cycle rituals and Amina Mittermaier's research (2015) on anthropologists' encounters with religious worldviews, particularly about dreams and divine signs. By integrating these perspectives, I aim to demonstrate how women's pilgrimage experiences are shaped by both their spiritual mindset and their embodied interactions with sacred spaces.

Embodied Practices in Pilgrimage and Women's Spiritual Experience

The place of pilgrimage itself, the space of the shrine, influences the embodied experience of pilgrims. Here, I apply Csordas's (1994) understanding of embodiment as "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (12). The spiritual expression in sacred sites is different from those in mosques or houses, as Honarpišeh (2013) writes "The act of pilgrimage is embedded in the idea of taking a journey to reach a place, a place that is sensed, where senses are placed, and where senses can make place" (390). This is particularly evident in the shrines I studied, where physical location and landscape contribute to the spiritual experience.

Both Qabanbay Batyr's shrine and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine are situated outside urban areas, on elevated land, enhancing pilgrims' perceptions of isolation, reflection, and sacred presence. Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, though near the capital, still offers a vast steppe view, while Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, farther from any settlements, is surrounded by an open landscape. Pilgrims frequently describe how the journey itself enhances their spiritual mindset, no matter whether they are from nearby villages or distant regions such as Türkistan (South Kazakhstan) or Atyraū (West Kazakhstan). People share how the nature and atmosphere

in the shrine positively influence them. For instance, one woman noted feeling as if they had wings, the couple described being in the shrine as at home, and generally, many people share the emotional and bodily connection to the sacred site. So, the shrine itself and the road to it already influence the sensory experience of people.

It is especially true for women, as a pilgrimage has long provided them with an worthy in the eyes of society opportunity to travel, and today it remains a popular avenue for both travel and spiritual exploration. Women find at shrines an environment where they can express their faith more openly, even though certain practices may not be fully accepted by shrine keepers or religious authorities. For example, leaving *aqtyq*, the white fabric, or touching the tombstone, or participating in banned religious movements such as *Ata Zholly*, even though people continue to do it. The relative freedom is natural to many shrine communities across cultures and one of the reasons for its popularity among women. So, Honarpisheh (2013) mentions that pilgrimage is perceived by women in Shiraz “Wailing, weeping, and praising saints would be unseemly at a mosque. It is for this reason many women go to shrines not just for prayer time but also for meditation, napping, or chatting together” (395). Therefore, despite some restrictions, women feel relatively free in the shrines.

This shrine experience is also the result of the women’s historical role in embodied rituals. So, women have long been perceived as spiritually and emotionally sensitive, particularly in transitional moments of life. Their role in birth, death, and mourning rituals has reinforced their association with liminality, transformation, and spiritual mediation. As Stasevich (2011) writes:

Parallels between childbirth and funeral rites suggest that a woman's role in these life cycles was similar. Her primary function was not only to give birth but also to introduce the child into society. The reverse process—guiding the deceased out of the world of

the living—was also a woman's responsibility, aligning with broader beliefs about her life's purpose (173).

Therefore, here is the combination of ritual and bodily practices, which are also liminal ones. The woman's body is at the center of these practices, as is usual in the case of birth, where a woman and a child could be vulnerable and thus require protection. In the mourning rituals, women usually wash the deceased, and in traditional Kazakh society, demonstrate their grief physically, by letting their hair down and scratching their faces with their hands (Stasevich 2011, 142,144).

With this primary role of women in liminal rites, bringing life into the world and guiding souls in death, women required acts of protection and purification. In Kazakh culture, various traditions are aimed at shielding individuals from malevolent spirits, the evil eye, and other unseen dangers, with women as central figures in these practices. Stasevich (2011) describes how the practices, the special clothes, the jewelry, and amulets aimed to protect women in the significant parts of life as weddings, being pregnant, giving birth, and later days. The struggles in performing these life actions were associated with the bad spirits and needed protection as well.

According to Kazakh beliefs, a woman could become infertile due to the evil eye cast by childless individuals, harmful actions of shamans, or the influence of malevolent spirits such as *jinn*, *shaitans*, *peris*, *albasty*, and *martu*. Infertility could also result from a failure to observe social taboos (Stasevich 2011, 59–60).

To protect themselves and their children, the whole family of women long turned to prayers, amulets, and pilgrimage to sacred sites as essential means of spiritual defense.

So, these traditional embodied rituals of protection and transformation are carried into pilgrimage practices. At shrines, women continue to physically interact with sacred objects by

touching gravestones and placing veils or cloths on tombs for blessings, and others. They also perform acts of devotion through bodily activities such as bowing, kneeling on the ground, or sitting in silent meditation. In addition, women often engage in communal acts of storytelling, sharing experiences of *jinn* encounters, divine dreams, or miraculous healings, reinforcing their belief in the supernatural as a reality. This correlates with Csordas' paradigm of embodiment, where he demonstrates the deep embodiment of religious practices, ritual healing, ritual language, and even demonology. As Csordas (1990) writes, "The locus of the sacred is the body, for the body is the existential ground of culture" (39). In this way, pilgrimage serves as both a space for spiritual reflection and a site where faith is physically enacted, reinforcing the idea that spirituality is felt, sensed, and performed, rather than simply believed.

Here, I demonstrate further examples of the women's embodiment practices in the shrines and how they interpret everyday occurrences as divine signs. For instance, during my visit to Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, I met two women who insisted on reciting the Quran at every grave around the shrine, we passed. Although we originally planned to visit only one site, the grave of Nürilä, Mäshhür Zhüsip's daughter-in-law, we went other way accidentally, and they believed that the spirits had guided us to other graves, signaling their wish to hear prayers. Another episode with those women was when we finished the meal, and the elder woman gave *bata* to everyone. After reciting *bata*, the window suddenly opened. Though the reason could be the wind as well, she saw it as a sign that her prayer had been accepted.

The women have similar experiences not only here, but at different pilgrimage places, and some of them have their favorite, believing in the special protection from the saints. So, another woman, a frequent shrine visitor, spoke of miraculous occurrences at Begim Ana's shrine in the Qyzylorda region. She believed that a bird appearing at the shrine was the spirit of Begim Ana, who was her angel and defender. Each time she recited the Quran, the bird

would start chirping and stop only when she paused. She felt better after this, also believing that her praying were heard. Generally, these experiences could be compared with the bodily experiences of spiritual healing, described by the example of Roman Catholic community “Common elements of the repertoire are rapid fluttering or vibrating of hands and arms, and somatic sensations such as lightness or heaviness, power or love flowing through the body, heat, and tingling” (Csordas 1990, 18). One woman at Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine shared similar sentiments:

Here he reads prayers, and I have goosebumps all over my body, on my legs there is such a tingling, on my palms there is such a pleasant sensation. It is as if I am taking these sensations with me, as if I am being imbued with some invisible power¹⁰⁹.

This demonstrates the combination of the atmosphere and the activities' influence on the spiritual and bodily perception of women.

While women more openly express faith in sacred objects and places, they are also aware that some of their practices are not officially sanctioned. As a result, they often navigate this tension carefully, performing certain rituals discreetly. At Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly’s shrine, two women placed veils and pieces of fabric on the gravestone, encouraging me to do the same but urging me to hurry before the shrine keeper noticed. Many women engage in embodied practices at shrines, touching gravestones, placing their hands on the stone before bringing them to their faces, kneeling, or circling the site. Such acts are emotional and personal, reflecting a longstanding tradition of physical connection with sacred spaces. Honarpisheh (2013) describes a similar phenomenon among Iranian women, writing: “Visitors can be seen touching the tomb itself as a means of coming closer to the deceased, with the hope that their visitation will elevate the deceased’s status in the eyes of God” (399). One woman at the

¹⁰⁹ Interview with a woman pilgrim, Qabanbay Batyr’s shrine. November 12, 2023.

memorial museum of Mäshhür Zhüsip even stepped behind the barrier to touch the carpet in which Mäshhür Zhüsip's body had been carried, believing it held sacred power.

Women pilgrims also shared stories of spiritual encounters, visions, and dreams, which reinforced their belief in *ata* and the power of pilgrimage. One woman described how her daughter had a vision of Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata's silhouette at his shrine. This woman was quite talkative, whereas her daughter was reserved and quiet. They had come to the shrine hoping to see Mäshhür Zhüsip Ata because people claimed to have seen his silhouette at night. During their last visit, two years ago, *emshi* (healer) had told them that Mäshhür Zhüsip could be seen walking after midnight—at 12, 1, or 3 AM. The woman herself had never seen him, but the *emshi* and, most importantly, her daughter had. She described a white-cloaked figure, appearing like a shadow, moving near the shrine.¹¹⁰ At the time, I was conducting fieldwork with my friend, and we believed the women's account. However, this episode revealed how such beliefs could be met with skepticism or even ridicule from others, both men and women. When we overheard the conversation, the men working at the shrine initially affirmed that people had reported seeing the saint's shadow after midnight. However, later, a woman who also worked there laughed and dismissed the idea, calling it nonsense. She argued that *Ata* could not simply appear every night, walking around the shrine. She suggested that the men had likely been joking with us and doubted the young woman's vision, insisting that she must have been mistaken. While it is indeed unlikely that saints physically appear and walk around their graves, this episode demonstrates the faith of women who genuinely believe in this. Despite the skepticism of others, they remain convinced that they saw something meaningful, highlighting the power of personal belief in shaping spiritual experiences.

¹¹⁰ Field notes, August 22, 2024

Another elderly woman recounted her experiences with *ayans* (spiritual revelations or prophetic dreams). Once, she dreamed that she would divorce her first husband, and the vision eventually came true. She also had another prophetic dream in which Arystan Bab appeared and told her she needed to go on a pilgrimage”, so she understood it as divine advice. These accounts illustrate how visions, dreams, and signs are integral to the pilgrimage experiences of many women. Their encounters with the unseen reaffirm their faith and guide their life choices.

Blended Beliefs

Women’s spirituality here is a blend of traditional Islamic beliefs and newer spiritual concepts, shaped not only by intellectual engagement but also by bodily practices and sensory experiences. Some of them combine Quranic rituals with ideas about energy fields, engage in movements like *Ata Zholy*, and incorporate other spiritual frameworks into their worldview. While traditional pilgrimage acts, visiting shrines, praying, and reciting the Quran, remain central, some women also practice alternative embodied rituals, such as seeking healing from shamans, engaging in protective amulet practices, and performing purification rites with whips. Some pilgrims speak of energy fields that affect the body, using terms like alpha, delta, and other energy-related concepts. This suggests that for some women, spirituality connects with an active, physical experience. Their engagement with spirituality may have different reasons, including seeking deeper meaning, coping with modern anxieties, or simply exploring different paths to personal transformation.

At the same time, women’s interest in religion extends beyond personal practice. Many actively pursue religious education, attending courses, studying Arabic, and reading widely on faith, self-improvement, and spiritual growth. Their shared book recommendations reflect a broad curiosity that combines formal religious teachings with alternative spiritual traditions.

This dynamic engagement with different practices shows that pilgrimage is a space for embodied learning, exploration, and self-discovery.

The anthropologists' worldview

During my fieldwork, women frequently asked whether I believed in the power of shrines, insisting that without genuine faith, the deeper meaning of pilgrimage remains inaccessible. One woman advised me to “listen to the heart rather than the mind”, suggesting that true understanding comes through intuition, bodily perception, and spiritual openness rather than intellectual reasoning.

Anthropologists studying religious experiences often encounter fundamental differences in perception and belief between themselves and their interlocutors. As Mittermaier (2015) describes:

Fieldwork on dreams and the miraculous can also involve profoundly disorienting moments. An anthropologist might witness a miracle that cannot easily be explained as mere coincidence, or she might be sitting in the midst of her interlocutors and see nothing while they collectively see a waking vision (361).

These ideas are applicable to my own fieldwork experiences. My interlocutors frequently saw signs, divine messages, and miraculous occurrences, while I, as an observer, did not perceive them in the same way. However, because I share the same cultural background and understand the rituals and their meanings, I found it easier to relate to their perspectives. This contrast between seeing and not seeing, believing and analyzing, underscores the challenge of understanding the lived, embodied experience of faith. While anthropologists often seek rational explanations, pilgrims engage with spirituality through bodily presence, gestures, and sensations, making their faith an embodied reality rather than a conceptual framework alone.

Conclusion

Overall, for many women, pilgrimage is more than a physical journey or religious obligation but an act of embodied spirituality, where bodily engagement, such as touching gravestones, bowing, kneeling in the steppe, wearing special clothes, and listening to prayers, deepens their connection to the sacred.

Not all women interpret everyday events as divine intervention or engage in alternative spiritual practices, but they all experience the physical and sensory influence of the shrine. Many women, in particular, feel this connection due to historical and cultural traditions that emphasize women's roles in bodily rituals, liminal practices, and acts of protection and purification. These traditions continue today, shaping how women experience faith through belief, presence, and embodied engagement with sacred spaces.

Pilgrimage plays a significant role as a space for self-discovery, spiritual exploration, and shared experience. It allows women to express and shape their faith in personal ways, beyond the boundaries of formal religious teachings. While their perspectives may differ, for many, pilgrimage is a transformative and meaningful journey, strengthening their connection to the sacred through both belief and physical engagement.

Conclusion

This research explored how women participate in, interpret, and shape pilgrimage practices at the shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly in Northern Kazakhstan. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and archival materials, the study investigated women's motivations, spiritual experiences, and the broader social meanings embedded in their pilgrimages.

The shrines of Qabanbay Batyr and Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly represent recent cases of sacralization processes, supported by the state and local communities, as well as pilgrims. Choosing these two shrines helped to see the different dimensions of pilgrimages, how women express themselves in the case of a more traditional shrine, as Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's one, and more constructed, as Qabanbay Batyr's shrine. Generally, while pilgrims at both shrines expressed interest in visiting multiple sacred sites in different regions, held sincere beliefs, and showed deep respect for the deceased figures, notable differences between the two sites help to construct a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of pilgrimage in the region.

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine exemplifies a more strategically developed sacred site. It symbolically fills a gap caused by the lack of recognized sacred sites around Astana. This place has sparked active debates in society regarding its authenticity, which, nevertheless, has increased interest in the shrine and has resulted in strengthening its position today. The state's National Pantheon project, aimed at memorializing distinguished Kazakhstani figures, further reinforces the shrine's status. Despite differing opinions on its authenticity, the shrine remains a popular pilgrimage place. The shrine keeper Kamal Äbdirakhman, who actively researches Qabanbay Batyr's legacy as well as the history, culture, and traditions of the region, plays a crucial role in promoting this place. His presence and extensive knowledge help make storytelling a popular activity at the site, focusing on national history, language, *shezire*, and

other cultural factors. So, the experience here is not only religious but also educational and social.

Qabanbay Batyr's shrine is not associated with the traditional women's desires, but provides the space for praying, asking for help, protection, and recharging with positive energy, which many pilgrims search for in pilgrimage experiences. This shrine is a hybrid place, blending Islamic, folk, and contemporary spiritual elements. So, some women see it as a place to express spirituality outside the framework of official Islam. They visit the shrine with traditional healers and shamans, and participate in healing or purifying rituals. The activities of *Ata Zholly* members here and the inclusion of the shrine to the *Bes Ata* pilgrimage route further demonstrate the new sacralization processes around the shrine. As demonstrated in the 3rd Chapter, women play a significant role in shaping sacred landscapes, promoting this place, organizing and participating in pilgrimage tours. Generally, the shrine represents the place where women could find peace, connection with the roots, the knowledge of history and culture, the motivation from the batyr, and others.

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine, on the other hand, is a more traditional site, standing as a significant symbol for the Pavlodar region. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly is a widely known figure here, both for his secular activities and the miraculous ones. The shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip encompasses various layers, reflecting not only his personality but also the era he lived in, his contemporaries, and modern perspectives on religion, tradition, local and global history, and identity. Pilgrimage practices at the shrine reflect a sense of historical continuity, as people still undertook such pilgrimages during the Soviet period, when the shrine went through the destruction and rebuilding processes. The saint, the shrine, his works, and miracle stories have become a valuable regional heritage, a popular topic of discussion in the shrine. Many of these stories described the help with family and reproductive issues, promoting the women's pilgrimage to the shrine.

Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine functions as a canonical pilgrimage destination where visitors perform customary rites, sacrifices, share meals, and stay overnight. Many visitors are residents who frequent the shrine and know each other, while those from farther away can connect through shared activities. Here, women tend to concentrate more on the fulfillment of traditional values, such as being married, having children, helping others, being humble and hard-working, and others. These values are more visible and discussed than at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine because of the more intimate conversation due to spending more time with each other, and the visibility of the work for others. So, women are often occupied with the chores here and involved in the conversations on private lives, which promote traditional values. Nevertheless, women actively negotiate these expectations, and by demonstrating their agency, they often frame their actions as personal choices rather than obligatory duties. In a broad sense, the joined activities here often help to solve problems and receive assistance.

Overall, women's experiences at both shrines demonstrated the complex character of the gender relations. On the one hand, for the majority of women, the pilgrimage is an equal opportunity to spiritual devotion; on the other hand, there is a traditional tendency for the more respected position of men at the shrines. The majority of women accept these gender attitudes and do not feel oppressed. They saw the pilgrimage not as an act of opposition to anyone or anything, but as a valuable opportunity for spiritual growth, communication, travel, and other. In general, people perform pilgrimages to the shrines for different reasons, negative and positive, with meticulous preparations, or almost by accident, and in most cases, they usually find what they seek at the shrines, as long as they have clear intentions *nīet*.

Furthermore, pilgrimage, in many cases, is not an individual but a collective experience, which contributes to the broader community-building efforts and shaping national identity. Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyuly's shrine is strongly tied with the regional local landscape, by his activities there, by the personal connections, including his spiritual teacher, friends, and

appeared near descendants' burials. Qabanbay Batyr, who originates from East Kazakhstan, represents a rather lonely figure in the regional context, but is perceived as a nationally important figure. Ultimately, both shrines are involved in the numerous sacred networks connecting the sacred sites on the territory of the whole Kazakhstan, and beyond in Central Asia through pilgrimage routes, pilgrims' narratives, and others. In the context of North Kazakhstan, these shrines solidify the position of the region, its spiritual belonging to Kazakh heritage.

While this study offers valuable insights, it also has limitations. One of them lies in the level of interpersonal communication during the fieldwork and interviews. I conducted the interviews at the shrines with the people who saw me for the first time and were not always prepared to discuss some deeper motivations and personal experiences. Particularly at Qabanbay Batyr's shrine, where pilgrims sometimes performed brief visits, with praying and receiving *bata*, and not communicating with other pilgrims. So, while they agreed to give interviews to me, some of these interviews were short, and some pilgrims probably provided more socially acceptable answers rather than personal reflections. Nevertheless, the majority of them were open to discussing different topics and not only answered my questions, but also shared a lot of other valuable information. Usually, this format of the spontaneous interviews provides more meaningful insights and their lived experiences without preparation, but also poses a limitation, as some nuances may have been left unexplored.

The other limitation is the geographic and comparative scope, focusing on two shrines. While the analysis of both shrines provided a significant contribution to understanding the complex character of the contemporary pilgrimage practices, further research is needed at female-associated shrines and in other regions of Kazakhstan to better understand broader patterns and local variations.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation contributes to the existing scholarship on gender, pilgrimage, and sacred landscapes in Central Asia by centering women's voices and lived experiences. Through ethnographic attention to everyday practices, personal narratives, and emerging spiritual networks, it reveals how women participate in and actively shape the meaning and function of shrines in North Kazakhstan. It provides an anthropological and historical perspective on how spirituality, identity, and agency intersect in modern women's pilgrimage practices.

Broadly, my study contributes to understanding contemporary Islamic tendencies in Kazakhstan by highlighting the relative pluralism of religious practices. It shows how people combine traditional respect for sacred figures, Islamic beliefs, and elements of religious movements. This research contributes to the concept of Islam as a lived religion, shaped by everyday experience and intertwined with personal and collective identity. Shrines and pilgrimages, in this context, play an important role in shaping national, religious, and gender identities.

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