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**SEEKING KNOWLEDGE: MUSLIM WOMEN, ISLAMIC EDUCATION, AND A
GUÉNONIAN CRITIQUE OF SECULAR ANTHROPOLOGY**

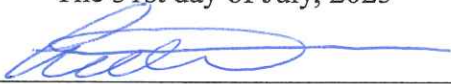
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SEEKING KNOWLEDGE: MUSLIM WOMEN, ISLAMIC EDUCATION, AND
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by

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Abstract

Thesis Title: Seeking Knowledge: Muslim Women, Islamic Education, and a Guénonian Critique of Secular Anthropology

In the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan witnessed a remarkable religious revival. Among its significant developments has been the growing number of young Muslim women seeking Islamic knowledge through formal and informal means. This thesis offers a metaphysical critique of secular anthropological approaches to Islamic revival, focusing on women's pursuit of religious education in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. While much of the existing literature, shaped by liberal and feminist paradigms, interprets Muslim women's piety as a form of ethical self-fashioning or agency within social structures, such readings, I argue, remain limited by immanentist assumptions. Drawing on the metaphysical insights of René Guénon, this thesis critiques the modern epistemological foundations underlying secular anthropology. It proposes that Islamic self-cultivation must be understood not merely as ethical practice, but as a reorientation toward transcendent Truth and spiritual order. Through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical analysis, I investigate how women seek religious knowledge in a landscape shaped by Soviet-era secularism, postcolonial nation-building, and global Islamic currents. I ask: *What motivates their turn to Islamic learning? What is the significance of religious knowledge and education for these young women? Does it transcend the functionalist or corporeal utility and acquire metaphysical value as a path towards the Divine? What is the role of contemporary secularized institutions of Islamic education in religious self-cultivation of young women? Does it align with the spiritual function of religious knowledge?* To answer these questions, I adopt a relatively novel theoretical approach. It explores the roles of Islamic educational institutions, the motivations behind women's engagement in Islamic education, and the inadequacy of prevailing conceptual tools to account for these phenomena. As a response to

the calls for a post-secular anthropology and more integration between anthropology and theology, the study introduces a Guénonian framework that situates piety within the metaphysical order of tradition, rather than within the confines of modern subjectivity. Through this lens, I aim to produce an anthropology of Islamic education that takes seriously both the historical specificities and the metaphysical depth of women's learning practices in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Keywords: Islamic education, Islamic revival, post-secular, post-Soviet, René Guénon, women

Rabbi zidni 'ilman

(O My Lord, increase me in my knowledge)

*For Hind, Reem, Ward and all other children of Palestine. May the Gardens of Paradise and
the Prophet's embrace be your eternal abode. Ameen.*

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Contents:

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	7
Chapter 1. Post-independence Kazakhstan and Islamic revival.....	14
1.1. Sociopolitical context.....	15
Context at a glance.....	15
Islam and the state.....	16
Islam in public discourse.....	19
Islamic revival and its limits.....	21
Intergenerational tensions.....	23
The transition.....	24
The rupture.....	24
Global dynamics and new media.....	25
Concluding remarks.....	27
Chapter 2. Young Women, Islamic Knowledge and Education.....	28
2.1 Islamic education in Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet period.....	28
2.2 Analytical reading of <i>Aiel zhane ilim</i>	30
2.3 Theoretical framework.....	35
Post-secular anthropology.....	37
Ontological divide.....	38
Knowledge vs. action.....	38
Sacred vs. profane science.....	39
Chapter 3. Study of Nur-Mubarak University's female (ex)students.....	41
3.1 About Nur-Mubarak University (NMU).....	41
Background.....	41
3.2 Methodology.....	43
A note on positionality.....	44
A note on ethics.....	45
3.3 Social portraits.....	47
3.4 Fieldwork findings.....	48
University.....	48
Stories of <i>tolibas</i>	49
Lessons.....	58
Summary.....	65
Conclusion.....	66
References.....	71
Appendix A. <i>Aiel zhane ilim</i>.....	74
Appendix B. A brief introduction to René Guénon, Traditionalism and <i>The Crisis of The Modern World</i>.....	75
Appendix C. Interview questions.....	77

Introduction

In contrast to earlier theories predicting the decline or privatization of religion in the modern world, recent decades have seen the re-emergence and consolidation of Islamic revival movements across various regions, including Kazakhstan. The fall of the Soviet regime gave way to grassroots retraditionalization and religious revival in Central Asia. This revival has taken multiple forms, one of which is the increased participation of women in Islamic education. Knowledge acquisition and dissemination is one of the major ways how historically Muslim women took an active role in society besides not less important responsibilities of marriage and motherhood (Sayeed 2013). In modern secular societies often described by female empowerment and striving for egalitarianism, many doors have been opened for Muslim women to realise their talents and ambitions in various public spheres. However, with the onset of Islamic revival and increase in orthodoxal practice of Islamic values, there is a growing number of Muslim women who choose to expand their Islamic knowledge to serve their communities as religious teachers and scholars while minimising their presence in public.

While a significant body of scholarship has examined women's religious learning and piety across diverse Muslim contexts, the case of Kazakh women's turn toward Islamic knowledge remains largely underexplored. More importantly, much of the existing scholarship continues to interpret Muslim women's piety through secular or feminist lenses, leaving a critical theoretical gap in our understanding of what it means for Muslim women to seek knowledge and cultivate themselves within a God-oriented tradition. This thesis focuses on the post-independence generation of young orthodox Muslim women (in their late teens to late twenties) who strictly adopt Islamic values.

Research gap. This thesis addresses two interconnected gaps. The first is the empirical neglect of Kazakh women's engagement with Islamic education in the context of contemporary Islamic revival. The second is the lack of a theoretical framework that adequately accounts for the metaphysical dimensions of Muslim women's self-cultivation. Dominant frameworks, including liberal-secular paradigms and post-structuralist theories such as Saba Mahmood's ethical subject formation, remain immanentist in orientation. While Mahmood's work has been pivotal in challenging liberal conceptions of agency, it continues to operate within the epistemic confines of secular thought, focusing on power, discourse, and historical contingency while neglecting the transcendent foundations of religious life.

Research question and main argument. The questions I explore in this thesis are: *What motivations and/or circumstances drive young women's pursuit of formal Islamic education? What is the significance of religious knowledge and education for these young women? Does it transcend the functionalist or corporeal utility and acquire metaphysical value as a path towards the Divine? What is the role of contemporary secularized institutions of Islamic education in religious self-cultivation of young women? Does it align with the spiritual function of religious knowledge?* By studying the female Muslim community from the native anthropologist's perspective, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of deeper processes of Islamic revival among youth taking place in Kazakhstan.

At the heart of this thesis is the argument that Muslim women's pursuit of Islamic knowledge in Kazakhstan cannot be fully understood without recognizing and centralizing the metaphysical orientation of the Islamic tradition. As a result of my fieldwork, it has emerged that what motivates young women to pursue formal Islamic education is a deeply God-oriented worldview, where pursuit of knowledge is not only necessitated by a need to practice religion properly or reflexively, but most importantly is seen as an act of worship

(*‘ibadah*) and a way of attaining God’s pleasure. A “worldly” reason for pursuing Islamic education can be easily manufactured but does not represent the actual motivation. As for the role of the university in this regard, it provides the conducive desecularized and Islamic (though imperfect) environment and community that young women seek in the larger familial, social and political context where the remnants of Soviet atheism and the forces of contemporary secularism and Islamophobia are deeply felt and strongly experienced.

On a theoretical level, drawing on the work of René Guénon, I argue for a re-centering of knowledge and self-cultivation within an Islamic metaphysical framework. While existing research provides valuable insights into the sociopolitical and affective dimensions of Muslim women’s experiences, it often overlooks the deeper ontological commitments that shape their religious lives. These metaphysical dimensions—rooted in divine revelation, sacred knowledge, and God-consciousness—are not peripheral but central to the ethical and epistemological structures guiding Muslim women’s religious practices. Acknowledging the great contribution of secular-oriented scholars in the anthropological study of Muslim women’s religious education and piety, this thesis seeks to shift the terms of debate by arguing that the study of Muslim women’s Islamic education must begin not from the point of secular logic, but from within the metaphysical structure of Islam itself.

Theoretical framework. The theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in the works of the twentieth-century French intellectual René Guénon’s critique of modernity and secularism. Guénon’s concepts—such as the ontological divide between religious and secular, the hierarchical ordering of knowledge, and the critique of secular individualism—serve to explain why secular frameworks are ultimately incapable of capturing God-oriented modes of existence. Why did I choose Guénon’s ideas as a framework to critique secular anthropology? Besides being grounded in traditional ontology and offering a sharply articulated critique of the modern West, Guénon’s work is also chosen for how it repositions the West as marginal

in relation to the rest of the world, which he sees as united by a shared metaphysical orientation. This depiction stands in stark contrast to Eurocentric worldviews that isolate and marginalize Islam (alongside other traditional religions) as deviant from a presumed universal trajectory of modernization and progress.¹

Additionally, Guénon's focus on ontology allows for engagement with the notion of *stasis*. As mentioned earlier, theories centered on discursive traditions (like that of Mahmood) are challenged by the inherent heterogeneity and dynamism of the discourses individuals encounter at any given time. Indeed, at the level of public discourse and everyday social practice, Islamic discourse is undeniably dynamic and contextually situated. However, this fluidity does not extend to Islamic ontology (nor to secular ontology, for that matter). Ontology, by definition, constitutes the foundational reality that underpins and encompasses everything. It is not subject to change; it remains constant.

Finally, Guénon's ideas re-establish the traditional hierarchy between sciences where sacred sciences are prioritized over instrumental or profane sciences, which are subordinate to the former. This view exactly reflects how sciences are structured to this day in traditional Islamic curricula and hence, is more suitable in understanding the significance of Islamic sciences and education for Muslims. In its theoretical approach, this thesis contributes to emerging scholarly conversations (Fountain 2013; Kahn 2016; Rasanayagam 2017, 2023) on how theological God-centred commitments can be meaningfully integrated into the anthropological study of religion.

Methodology. This study is based on fieldwork conducted in 2024 among *tolibas*² (female seekers of knowledge) at Nur-Mubarak University (NMU), a prominent and the only higher level Islamic educational institution in Kazakhstan located in Almaty. I conducted

¹ This is also why Guénon's ideas are appealing for postcolonial frameworks.

² The term *طالبة العلم*—*tolibatul 'ilm* (طالب العلم *tolibul 'ilm* for males), is a common term within Islamic world to refer to one who pursues religious knowledge (*'ilm*) in traditional Islamic sciences. It is commonly used by the women themselves and reflects their conscious commitment to Islamic learning. It is often shortened to *toliba/tolib*.

one-to-two-hour semi-structured interviews with five women aged between 18 and mid-twenties, all of whom were either current students, recent graduates, or former students at NMU. While diverse in regional background and educational history—some having previously obtained or pursued degrees in pedagogy, psychology, nursing, or technical fields—they share a common trajectory: having been raised in largely secular or non-practicing households, they turned toward traditional Islamic education as young adults. These women are orthodox Muslims in both belief and practice, adhering to the Maturidi school in creed (*aqidah*) and the Hanafi school in jurisprudence (*fiqh*). They consciously resist modernist reinterpretations of Islam, embrace traditional gender roles, and take classical female Islamic figures, such as the Prophet’s wives, as role models. These women represent a relatively underexplored segment of Kazakhstan’s Islamic revival—one that remains largely absent from public discourse, media visibility, or entrepreneurial religious platforms. They lead quiet lives away from the public eye, often choosing to embody their faith through inward transformation and consistent learning rather than public expression. Precisely because of their relative invisibility and difficulty of access, their experiences offer valuable insight into the deeper, less institutional dimensions of (re)Islamization in contemporary Kazakhstan. As women regarded within their communities as exemplary for their knowledge and educational accomplishments, their trajectories speak to a form of Islamic revival that is rooted in metaphysical aspiration and spiritual discipline—dimensions often overlooked in analyses of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan focused primarily on institutional developments or outward signs of religiosity.

Literature review. Over the past two decades, ethnographic and anthropological scholarship on Muslim women’s Islamic education and piety has expanded, offering detailed accounts of women’s pious practices across diverse contexts. However, much of this literature interprets religious learning through secular lenses—emphasizing ethical

self-fashioning, identity, and sociopolitical empowerment—while neglecting the God-centered orientations at the heart of Islamic education. After reviewing the published literature, I argue that secular conceptual frameworks adopted by most of the scholars remain fundamentally, ontologically inadequate for understanding women's theocentric motivations and metaphysical commitments.

A relatively recent foundational work in this field is Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005), which challenged liberal-feminist assumptions about autonomy by highlighting how Egyptian mosque participants cultivated piety through embodied discipline. Drawing on Talal Asad and Michel Foucault and in contrast to such long-standing scholars as Lila Abu-Lughod, Mahmood reframed Muslim women's agency as alignment with tradition rather than resistance to it. While her critique of liberal secularism has not depleted its value to this day, her analysis remains within the boundaries of Western liberal-secular philosophical traditions, failing to engage Islamic metaphysics as a true or valid alternative foundation for her critique. Scholars influenced by her—such as Jeanette Jouili (2015) and Svetlana Peshkova (2014b)—similarly emphasize ethical performance and sociopolitical navigation over divine orientation.

Across the literature, a dominant trend is the functionalist interpretation of religious education. Van Doorn-Harder (2006), Hassan (2012), and Künkler and Fazaeli (2012) frame women's learning as a pathway to empowerment, state-sanctioned legitimacy, or public authority. In these accounts, female religious education is primarily significant because it facilitates access to visibility or social mobility—not because it draws the soul toward God. Even when scholars describe women's sincere pursuit of knowledge, they often interpret this through sociological categories such as upward mobility, community legitimacy, or identity formation.

Most of the study of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan tends to focus on external markers of Islamic practice, on public presence of Islam, on populations who lived through the Soviet period, and on the historical and cultural place of Islam in ethno-national discourse. Such studies fail to capture the deeper processes that are taking place in various parts of Kazakhstan's society oftentimes reducing Islamic revivalism into going back to roots or search for authentic Kazakh identity. They paint a rather distorted version of reality by oversimplifying the social phenomena and homogenising Muslim populations of Central Asia.

There is a growing interest in studying Islamic education in contemporary Kazakhstan, which can be evidenced by the works produced by Mustafayeva et al. (2023), Bissenova (2005), Muratkhan et al. (2021), Begalinova (2022), Nurmanova and Izbairov (2009), Zengin and Badagulova (2017). However, most of them are produced by sociologists and political scientists and hence, detail the structure, content, and organisation of religious studies education, the role of religious education in combating religious extremism, the state control and legislation of religious education, the current problems and challenges of religious studies education in Kazakhstan, the role of Islamic education in formation of Kazakh identity in post-Soviet space. There is a visible gap in anthropological and more humane approaches to learning about contemporary Muslim communities in Kazakhstan.

When it comes to studies of female religious education, feminist framings dominate much of the literature, frequently centering themes such as empowerment, public participation, agency and female religious and interpretive authority. However, this emphasis often ignores or misrepresents the perspectives of women who see domesticity, humility, and submission to divine command as spiritually meaningful ends. Scholars tend to privilege visible forms of agency and overlook Islamic conceptions of gender roles, moral accountability, and authority grounded in God-given responsibility.

Overall, these ethnographies and analytical studies offer rich accounts of Muslim women's religious lives, but their secular and feminist interpretive frameworks limit their ability to capture the metaphysical dimension of Islamic education. The literature tends to translate divine pursuits into immanent goals, thereby misframing the very subject it seeks to understand. In the chapters that follow, I propose a conceptual framework rooted in Islamic ontology—one that can more fully account for the God-oriented nature of religious knowledge and self-cultivation.

Structure of the thesis. The body of the thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the broad political, social and religious context in post-independence Kazakhstan in which my interlocutors are located. Post-Soviet Islamic revival in Central Asia is given special attention as the main focus of this thesis. After setting the context, Chapter 2 of the thesis delves deeper into the topic of women's Islamic education and Islamic knowledge in general in post-Soviet Central Asia. It consists of three major parts. The first part of Chapter 2 provides an overview of the topic, the second part is a textual analysis of one of texts produced by a female student of NMU, titled *Aiel zhane ilim* (Women and Knowledge). Finally, the last part of Chapter 2 outlines the reasoning behind the choice of theoretical framework for this thesis. Lastly, Chapter 3 presents fieldwork findings from Kazakhstan, providing ethnographic groundedness and presenting the voices of Kazakh female students of Islamic sciences.

Chapter 1. Post-independence Kazakhstan and Islamic revival

In this chapter, I will examine the context in which my study is situated, briefly outlining the social, political, and religious landscape within which the university I focus on operates and in which my interlocutors are embedded. In the later part of the chapter, I will

focus in more detail on the post-Soviet Islamic revival, with special attention to Islamic revival among youth. Setting out the context is crucial to understand the motivations of women pursuing Islamic education. This section of the chapter relies on published secondary sources on the Islamic revival in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Central Asia at large as well as some primary sources such as media articles, legislative documents, and my own observations.

1.1. Sociopolitical context

Context at a glance

Kazakhstan is historically a part of the broader Islamicate world. However, its religious landscape was significantly altered by decades of Soviet rule, preceded by Russian colonial domination. Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, alongside other Central Asian republics, embarked on a nation-building project that continues to evolve. The early years of independence witnessed a largely unregulated religious revival, as the country opened to foreign missionary activity and citizens were no longer compelled to publicly adhere to Soviet state atheism. However, this period of relative openness was short-lived. The political elite, many of whom retained the Soviet-era suspicion toward uncontrolled religious expression, began to impose strict regulation over religious life, including education and the circulation of Islamic literature, often employing administrative mechanisms inherited from the Soviet system. Despite these constraints, grassroots Islamic revival persisted, especially among large parts of the post-independence generation of Kazakhstani youth who were not directly exposed to Soviet ideological training. This has resulted in a somewhat persistent generational divide in many families: older generations, shaped by the discourse of scientific

atheism, often struggle to understand the younger population's turn to religion. At the same time, the rupture in traditional modes of Islamic knowledge transmission—caused by the systematic destruction of religious institutions and scholarly networks during the Soviet period—has left many young Muslims without strong, locally rooted systems of religious guidance. Finally, the advent of globalization and the proliferation of digital technologies have further reshaped the religious landscape by introducing competing secular-liberal ideologies while simultaneously expanding access to Islamic knowledge—thus significantly supplementing the limited infrastructure for local Islamic education.

Islam and the state

Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, like its Central Asian neighbors, witnessed a surge in religious revival as state-imposed atheism was lifted and the country opened to external religious influences. Shortly after independence, due to a relatively relaxed legal environment, many religious movements, sects, and organisations, including non-Islamic or pseudo-religious ones or those supported by foreign countries such as Turkey, Kuwait, and Pakistan, became active in the country (Bissenova 2005; Begalinova 2022; Nurmanova and Izbaïrov 2009; Mustafayeva et al. 2023). Some Kazakh students at Al-Azhar University in Egypt³ ‘felt that the government was not doing enough to stop the onslaught of foreign missionaries from the West’ (Bissenova 2005, 260).

However, the early openness did not last; political elites—shaped by Soviet-era suspicion—soon reasserted control over the religious sphere through heavy regulation and administrative oversight (Omeličeva 2011). A shift in the public perception of visibly Muslim women was also triggered by the highly-publicized “Zhusan” operations in

³ Al-Azhar University is widely-known as a global and historical centre of traditional Islamic education.

2019-2021, during which the Kazakh government repatriated women and children from conflict zones in Syria⁴ (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova 2021). While repatriation operations are now seldom referenced in public discourse, they continue to shape popular imagination. The persistent stereotype of the “ignorant, uneducated *Salafi/Wahhabi* woman in wide black clothing recruited by ISIS in Syria” remains a common association often projected onto visibly practicing Muslim women⁵ (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova 2021).

According to the country’s Constitution⁶ Kazakhstan is a secular state. Article 19 of the Constitution stipulates that ‘[e]veryone shall have the right to determine and indicate or not indicate his national, party and religious affiliation’, though religious political parties are explicitly prohibited (under Article 5). The preamble of the Law on religious activities and religious associations⁷ (2011) further stipulates that ‘the Republic of Kazakhstan [...] recognizes the historical role of Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the development of culture and spiritual life of the people’. Hence, on state level, secularism is upheld, while Hanafi *madhhab*⁸ is recognized as having a special status in the history and spiritual life of Kazakhstan. Now, how these two commitments along with ethno-nationalist discourse are reconciled in the nation-building process and public discourse in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet Central Asian republics has been a subject of a vast body of research on the region (Khalid 2014; Weller 2014; Rasanayagam 2014; Malik 2019; Schwab 2019; Thibault 2019; Thibault 2020; Jalil 2024—to name few). In the current political climate, religion⁹, especially in its politicized form, remains a sensitive topic closely related to political and social stability, national identity, and state security issues.

⁴ https://forbes.kz/news/newsid_218453;

https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/operatsiya-jusan-knb-opublikoval-rasskazyi-uchastnikov-455221/

⁵ This stereotype is also common in other Central Asian republics such as Kyrgyzstan (Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2018) and Tajikistan (Miles 2018), where for Muslim women wearing black dresses and headscarves is extremely discouraged.

⁶ https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitution

⁷ The major law that regulates religious activities in Kazakhstan.

<https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1100000483/info>

⁸ The term “Hanafi Islam” is problematic but addressing it is not the objective of this work.

⁹ Throughout this chapter by “religion” I mean “Islam”, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

In all Central Asian republics, strict state control is realized mainly through special state bodies in forms of committees on religious affairs and official statutes and legislation (Jalil 2024). The Soviet legacy still persists in Central Asian governments' relations with religion (Khalid 2014; Jalil 2024; Schwab 2012). This is largely driven by inherited Soviet suspicion of religion's 'potential to be put to unhealthy political uses' (Khalid 2014, 121) and hence its ability to challenge the power monopoly of state elites who are enjoying the status of 'national leaders' without any appeal to Islam (Khalid 2014, 139). Post-Soviet state elites and intelligentsia still largely perceive Islam as counter-modernist and a 'backward worldview' even though such 'Orientalist' views are subsiding in recent decades as new generations give more space to Islam and demonstrate increased tolerance towards it (Jalil 2024, 39). The Soviet-like nature of Central Asian governments' policy towards religion strictly regulates what is the 'correct version' of Islam without any space for open debates (Malik 2019; Rasanayagam 2014). A limited degree of freedom makes it permissible to critique certain Muslim public figures; debate the authenticity of certain household rituals, interpretations of Sufi history, or Muftiate's intellectual efforts; and even urge the government to take action. However, 'the authenticity and benevolence of the Kazakhstani nation and the highest levels of its government are not up for discussion' (Schwab 2019, 188).

Some scholars, perceiving the states' paranoia over Islam as exaggerated and unfounded, have advocated for a shift in Central Asian governments' policies toward religion. For instance, Malik (2019) urges the Kazakhstan government to abandon the Soviet-style binary that categorizes Islam into "official" (and thus acceptable) and "unofficial" (and thus dangerous) forms. Instead, he recommends 'mobilis[ing] indigenous Islamic traditions and spiritual knowledge' (368) as a resource in the nation-building process. Similarly, Khalid (2014) calls for a decoupling of grassroots Islamic revival from assumptions of politicization. He contends that 'one should not assume that piety and stricter

observance of Islamic injunctions have direct political implications. The politicization of Islam nowhere has a direct relation with piety' (139). Jalil (2024) also suggests that the threat of "radical Islam" in the region could be largely exaggerated by the state rhetoric as there is no conclusive evidence for strong popular support of radical Islamic movements or political Islam in the region.

Islam in public discourse

After independence, Islam was quickly re-established as the historical religion of Kazakh people but tensions emerged between groups who differed on the role of Islam and its place in Kazakh history and contemporary society. Most of the scholars who study the role of Islam in public discourse in Central Asian republics identify two major approaches to Islam in public debates. They highlight the scripturalist versus (ethno)nationalist tensions in public debates on Islam in Central Asian republics.

In the public space, the two main camps emerged: 'scripturalist' and 'nationalist' Muslims (Schwab 2019). Scripturalist interpretation of Islam-Kazakh tradition nexus is focused on scripture-based purification of Kazakh tradition from pagan or non-Islamic elements, while nationalist interpretation is centred around Kazakh ancestral traditions and sees Islam as a part of Kazakh culture and as always present in it. This difference can also be expressed in terms of prioritization of nation in the system of values and identity of the two groups. For "scripturalist" Muslims, sacred scripture (Quran and *hadith* tradition) takes priority over everything else and hence they tend to consider themselves a part of larger Muslim *umma*, that transcends national or cultural boundaries, rather than of Kazakh nation only. "Nationalist" Muslims rather see Islam as a significant part of Kazakh history and culture but not a priority over Kazakh national values. However, such discrete distinction, though meaningful in the early years of revival, became less and less relevant and too simple as the diversity of modes of engagement with Islam in public discourses has become

increasingly nuanced and dynamic, especially so when new post-independence generation's voices made their debut. In neighboring Uzbekistan, a similar dynamic in the discussions of the space for Islam in public debates was unfolding (Rasanayagam 2014). The key concept for those debates was cultural authenticity. The category of culture became the point of divergence between Soviet and post-Soviet space for Islam in Uzbekistan. Factoring in the strict state control, political Islamism and any 'foreign, dangerous ideas that are alien to the essential cultural and spiritual *being* of Uzbek society' (Rasanayagam 2014, 8) are perceived as the major threat by the post-independence Uzbek government while public religious expression is strictly delimited by the boundaries of what the state authorizes as the 'culturally authentic Central Asian Islam' (Rasanayagam 2014, 4). In this regard, the relationship between the state and religious leadership becomes very delicate due to the tension between scriptural practice of religion and cultural elements (e.g., in lifecycle events like weddings and funerals). Establishment *ulama* (Islamic scholars, Islamic public authorities) have to support state policies but also 'inhabit their own, Islamic conception of truth and authenticity' (Rasanayagam 2014, 11). As pointed out by Rasanayagam (2014, 11), '[t]heir relation to the hegemony of state ideology cannot be captured in straightforward terms of domination and resistance'. The situation is very similar in Kazakhstan where public authoritative Islamic figures have to navigate the constraints of state ideology along with their own commitments to Islam and face accountability from both—state organs and an increasingly devout Muslim community.

Nowadays, religious revival in Kazakhstan is not limited to Islam. In fact scholars like Charles Weller (2014, 142) list up to seven different streams in the revivalist voices preoccupied with (re)interpretation of Central Asian history. Namely,

- (1) an exclusivist 'orthodox' Muslim view;
- (2) a Tengri-inclusivist Sufi-Modernist Muslim view;

- (3) an exclusivist Tengrist view;
- (4) a Muslim-inclusivist Tengrist view;
- (5) a cultural Muslim-predominant pluralist view;
- (6) a neo-Marxian atheistic progressivist view; and
- (7) a Western-influence Kazakh (or Kyrgyz) Christian view.

Thus, the religious revival and cultural-religious debates in the public sphere in Central Asian republics acquire polyphonic nature. Islam is still largely recognized as a significant and major influence, however the debates on scriptural authority persist in a political climate of strong control over public expressions of religiosity, fear of political Islam and increasingly popularized ethno-nationalist discourse.

Islamic revival and its limits

Despite state control, Islamic revival found strong resonance among post-independence youth who had not been directly exposed to Soviet ideology, fostering a generational divide in attitudes toward religion. This revival, however, is unfolding within a national framework shaped by secular nationalism, where the state promotes a culturalized and depoliticized form of “traditional Islam” or “Kazakh Islam,” often in tension with but increasingly accommodative of popular desires for scriptural literacy and spiritual depth.

Much research on Islamic revival in Central Asia attempts to give reasons for the resurgence of religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, available studies fail to capture the deeper processes that are taking place in various parts of Central Asian society, often reducing Islamic revivalism into a response to ‘ideological vacuum’, disorientation after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Thibault 2018), going back to roots, or searching for ‘authentic’ national identity¹⁰ (Mustafayeva et al. 2023). Some scholars (Fathi 2016; Thibault

¹⁰ Assimilating Islamic revival with national and cultural revival legitimizes ‘nationalist’ Islam and delegitimizes ‘scripturalist’ Islam.

2018) believe that religiousness should not be an indicator of a significant change in personal beliefs, and associate revival only with resurgence of religious institutions. While such claims can be utilised partially, they should not mislead readers into thinking that there are no significant changes in personal beliefs of Central Asian people, especially among the youth who are going through a major period of moral and spiritual orientation and formation. Such explanations paint a rather distorted version of reality by overemphasising visible social phenomena and ignoring the complexity of the revival and the real change in personal beliefs and religiosity of people.

In the early years of independence Islamic revival in Central Asia was seen only as ‘a profoundly national phenomenon’ (Khalid 2014, 118). In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—countries with large Russian populations compared to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—a return to Islam was seen as an assertion of local identity against the Russians (Khalid 2014, 119). It was believed that for most Central Asians, Islam is understood as a “return” to national tradition (Khalid 2014, 120), and thus has little to do with the everyday observance of Islamic doctrine; daily life remained largely secular and ‘public presence of Islam [was] highly muted’ (Khalid 2014, 122). Of course, this assessment no longer holds with the same level of confidence in today’s Central Asia, where both public and private life have undergone significant *grassroots* Islamicization. This is reflected in visibly stricter adherence to religious practices, increased mosque attendance, reduced alcohol consumption, and a notable boom in halal industries—including eateries, modest fashion, hair salons, religious education, and even Islamic banking and finance.

Nevertheless, Islamic rhetoric—however subtle—remains excluded from the political sphere and state institutions. In this regard, as pointed out by Khalid (2014), public discourse is entirely secular, Islam is never invoked to legitimize the state authorities, the post-independence constitutions all retained the Soviet period’s provisions of the separation

of state and public education from religion. The national objectives are all formulated in the worldly terms of economic growth, better health and education, and so forth (Khalid 2014, 131).

Despite majority of population being Muslim for many centuries, nation-building process in all five republics is secular with no attempt to incorporate Islamic principles (Khalid 2014; Jalil 2024), though the symbolic role of Islam is still acknowledged in such actions of state leaders as performing *hajj*¹¹, occasionally visiting mosques for prayer and all five republics' membership in Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Political decision-making is dominated by secular approaches (Jalil 2024).

Intergenerational tensions

Besides the divisions on the nation-religion relationships, the youth revival has been marked by intergenerational tensions, as the older generation raised on scientific atheism struggles to comprehend the younger generation's turn to faith amidst the historical breakdown of Islamic educational institutions. "Islamic revival" can be a somewhat misleading term. 'Revival' is often understood as bringing back to life something that is gone, lost, or dead. Even though (because Kazakhs are historically a Muslim nation) reviving some of the pre-colonial Islamic traditions, culture, language, practices, morals, institutions etc. *is* in fact a part of Islamic revival process, it is *not* the entirety of it. This becomes starkly evident when looking at young practising Muslims—oftentimes, they do not just 'go back' in time or 'bring back' what was lost, they find Islam independently as faith and religion not as a lost part of their national or ethnic identity. Many of them find Islam *in spite* of their secular or irreligious upbringing and *in spite* of living in families with hostile attitudes towards Islam (often inherited from the Soviet past). In fact, young generations of Muslims often accept

¹¹ Islamic pilgrimage.

Islam as their religion and complete way of life before they attempt to look for its traces in their nation's past.

The transition

In general, new Muslim youth in Kazakhstan go through the transition from being “(non-practicing) ethnic Muslim” (*этнический мусульманин*) or “ordinary Muslim like all Kazakhs are” (*обычный мусульманин как все казахи*) to being “praying/practicing Muslim” (*намазхан*¹²/*дінді ұстанатын/практикующий/соблюдающий*) or specifically for girls and women—“covered/veiled/hijabi Muslimah” (*орамалдағы/хиджаптағы/покрытая/в платке/в хиджабе*). Moreover, in terms of inward reorientation, Jouili's (2015) understanding of two kinds of Islam is similar to how Kazakhstan's Muslim youth often distinguish between ‘popular Islam’ practiced casually, often perceived as part of Kazakh tradition or culture, sometimes even stripped of any religious connotations, and “conscious” (*саналы/осознанный*) practice of Islam, which is scriptural, more structured, comprehensive, visible, and reflexive. In the post-Soviet space, for many young people raised by secular parents heavily influenced by Soviet state policy on religion, there might be almost *no* Islam taken from parents. Though knowledge of Islamic practice has largely faded, fragments of doctrine, moral teachings, stories of the prophets, and the Prophetic sunnah linger—often disguised as traditions, customs, superstitions, proverbs and folktales passed down through generations¹³.

The rupture

Nevertheless, these remnants, that managed to survive the Soviet purge on religion, are not nearly sufficient to quench the thirst of young people for Islamic knowledge and

¹² “Намазхан” (*namazkhan*) is a Kazakh gender-neutral term used for both men and women who practice five daily prayers.

¹³ For example, see Schwab's (2012) discussion on Islamic practices preserved as “*taza zhol*”.

Islamically-rooted life, so the rupture becomes strongly felt. Khalid (2021, 546) heavily criticises the works of Devin DeWeese and Paolo Sartori for painting a ‘highly essentialized version of Islam’ in Central Asia and for claiming the presence of historical continuity of ‘Muslimness’ in Central Asia that was not significantly affected by Soviet rule. I cannot agree more with Khalid on this point. Indeed, the absence of historical continuity for Islam is quite stark in Kazakhstan and larger post-Soviet Muslim lands. The loss of Islamic knowledge, lifestyle, and heritage by the Soviet generation of Kazakhstan is felt most deeply by young Muslims. Young people who choose to actively practise Islam and accept it as a complete way of life often face something between the inability to find spiritual guidance and straight up Islamophobic resistance from older family members, oftentimes, from their own parents and grandparents. In most families, there is no more passage of Islamic knowledge, values, literature, or practice from parents to children beyond the minimal level of rituals which survived. Enthusiastic Muslim youth nowadays often have to seek even basic Islamic knowledge and guidance outside of their families—on the internet, in mosques, *madrasas*, universities, or Muslim communities (friends, acquaintances, mosque community). A telling indicator of the rupture of this continuity and new beginnings of Islam in Kazakhstan is the very location of the very first and only Islamic university in Kazakhstan—Almaty, a city which never had any historical importance as a centre for Islamic knowledge, nor did it have any significant place in historical Islamic networks in the region.

Global dynamics and new media

Globalization and the rise of digital connectivity have further transformed Kazakhstan’s religious landscape, facilitating the circulation of both secular ideologies and Islamic knowledge. These developments provide alternative sources of authority and educational support, particularly in contexts where local Islamic learning infrastructures are

still developing¹⁴ (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova 2021). Interestingly, the healing of the rupture has been significantly accelerated by cross-border exchanges. Young Muslim women are increasingly seeking Islamic knowledge not only through local study circles, mosques and formal institutions, but also through online platforms. Notably, the localized chronocentric question of “continuity versus rupture” becomes less important and the issue of the lack of strong infrastructure becomes partially remedied as contemporary knowledge acquisition and dissemination becomes more and more cosmopolitan. Globalization, hyperconnectivity, and tech-savviness opened unprecedented paths and accelerated the travel of Islamic literature and knowledge in all kinds of genres. It includes many translations and originals of foreign-language texts from contemporary scholars from all over the Muslim world—from Pakistan’s Taqi Uthmani, Turkey’s Osman Nuri Topbas and Daghestan’s Abu Ali al-Ash’ari, to Harvard graduate Daniel Haqiqatjou; from Syrian Shaykh Ramadhan al-Buti to converts to Islam such as Hamza Tzortzis or Hamza Yusuf. Thus, when studying youth Islamic revival, one should not limit one's focus to internal Islamic discourse only, but rather also account for the significant role of globalization and the internet. Research that focuses on local media and personalities fails to account for cross-border Islamic networks that are especially relevant for “scripturalist” Muslims not constrained to local nationalistic discourses on Islam.

One of the major developments that is shaping the contemporary grassroots Islamic discourse in the entire post-Soviet space from Central Asia to Eastern Europe is the emergence of a strong grassroots Russophone Islamic scene. For example, in Kazakhstan such projects as “azan.ru”¹⁵, “darulfikr”¹⁶ and public figures behind them—such as *ustaz* Abu Ali al-Ashari and his close Russian convert disciple *ustaz* Ahmad Abu Yahya have a very diverse and large readership and audience among youth. This has also been taken notice of by

¹⁴ As was also pointed out by Adeeb Khalid (2021): ‘The advent of print, the railway, the telegraph and steamships altered the means of the production and reproduction of Islam all over the world’ (546).

¹⁵ Not to be confused with “[azan.kz](https://www.azan.kz)”, though they share some genealogy.

¹⁶ Based in Russia.

official preachers and teachers of Islam in the region. In 2020, on the platform of azan.ru, both Abu Ali al-Ashari and Ahmad Abu Yahya led a major collaborative project—production of new Russian translation and *tafsir* (exegesis) of Quran in which official Islamic figures such as Kazakhstan’s widely-respected Islamic scholar—*ustaz* Yersin Amire and widely-respected Mufti of Tatarstan—*ustaz* Kamil Samigullin also took part. *Ustaz* Ahmad Abu Yahya also has recently visited Kazakhstan. In June of 2022, he conducted lessons in the mosques of Pavlodar for a few days.¹⁷ In 2023, he participated as a guest in a local Islamic podcast with a Russian-speaking audience.¹⁸ These names and platforms are easily recognizable for most serious young seekers of Islamic knowledge in Russophone space including large parts of Kazakhstan.

Concluding remarks

In contemporary Kazakhstan—and Central Asia more broadly—young individuals engaged in piety movements encounter a range of challenges across multiple domains, from the home environment to public spaces, and from state institutions to media discourse. These challenges include grappling with the legacy of Soviet atheism and the historical suppression of religion on both state and societal level, navigating the tensions between nationalism and religion and facing the intergenerational rupture. However, as I have also illuminated, technological advancements have strengthened the cross-border Islamic knowledge flows and networks partially compensating for the loss of traditional historical presence of Islamic learning institutions and present shortage of Islamic knowledge in the region. The full context and scale of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan can never be covered by one single work.

¹⁷ <https://t.me/ahmadalhanafi/1636>; <https://t.me/ahmadalhanafi/1637>; <https://t.me/ahmadalhanafi/1640>; <https://t.me/ahmadalhanafi/1641>.

¹⁸ See episode “ПУТЬ И ВАЖНОСТЬ ПРИЗЫВА К РЕЛИГИИ - Устаз Ахмад Абу Яхья и Бекзат Канатулы” of “Mihrab kz” at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8N_vmrFIROM.

Acknowledging that, it is my hope that this chapter is sufficient to appreciate the theoretical points of this work.

Chapter 2. Young Women, Islamic Knowledge and Education

2.1 Islamic education in Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet period

Historically, women's Islamic education in Central Asia mostly had a non-institutionalized, domestic character. In Soviet and post-Soviet periods, this was not only caused by Islamic norms for women's seclusion but also due to strict state policies on religious education. In Uzbekistan¹⁹, during Islam Karimov's presidency, combined with gendered expectations, greater control of religious education restricted women's access to institutionalized education (Peshkova 2014a, 86). However, this relative absence from institutions actually allowed women to escape strict control and regulations by organizing informal education in domestic environments. At the same time, religious education was instrumentalized by the state to produce 'politically correct' Muslims (Peshkova 2014a, 81). However, government authorities were not able to control the sector of private religious instruction, where women were mostly involved (Peshkova 2014a, 82). As pointed out by Fathi (2006) 'the more women are distanced from official religious institutions, the broader is their freedom of religious action' (313).

In Kazakhstan, formal religious education is also strictly controlled by the state and mobilized for national objectives of secularism and ethno-national Islam. The state promotes a model of educational system where religious subjects are taught alongside secular subjects, religious-background teachers teach alongside secular-background instructors, and students are taught about Kazakh culture and ancestral ties (Mustafayeva et al. 2023). This approach is described as preventing the isolation of students of religious institutions from their

¹⁹ The research done on Islamic education in post-independence Kazakhstan is extremely scarce, so in this section I also draw on some research from Uzbekistan.

counterparts in non-religious schools. It is believed to teach students ‘the best of both worlds’ (Mustafayeva et al. 2023, 105). In other words, religious education in Kazakhstan is prevented from being purely religious. In this regard, NMU is referred to as a successful example of ‘synthesis of Islamic and secular education’²⁰ (Mustafayeva et al. 2023, 122).

The state also recognizes the role of religious education in combating religious extremism, and building a secure multiconfessional society. Some even assert that religious, and more specifically Islamic, education is the only effective way to fight dangerous religious movements and terrorism (Begalinova’s 2022, 149) and that in the current context, Islamic religious education is “an absolute necessity” (Mustafayeva et al. 2023, 103). The strict government control over religious education is also justified as necessitated by negative influence of foreign organisations on the minds of young people (Begalinova 2022, 150). Such policies of Central Asian governments are often described as Soviet-like due to the strict regulation of what is the “correct version” of Islam without any space for open debates (Malik 2019; Rasanayagam 2014).

The negative consequences of Soviet attitudes towards religion and religious education persist not only in the state-religion relations but also in the underwhelming quality of religious education. The poor quality of religious studies instruction is often associated with a shortage of proficient cadres at all levels of educational institutions due to the loss of religious intellectual elite and great damage done to the historical knowledge networks during the Soviet period. Moreover, the suppression of religion by the Soviet regime left a deep mark on people’s view of religion. Atheistic propaganda and delimiting religion to the private sphere created a remarkable ignorance of religious practice even within religious communities (Bissenova 2005). As a consequence of that, the rebuilding of the religious education system in Kazakhstan lacks consistency and continuity (Zengin and Badagulova

²⁰ See Chapter 3 for a detailed commentary on this approach from one of my interlocutors.

2017, 56). In the early years of independence, in the wake of growing need for religious instruction and services, the problem of the shortage of capable cadres became especially apparent (Bissenova 2005, 254). As a partial remedy, the common trend among Central Asian republics at that time was in turning to the Middle East to fill the gap in provision of Islamic education (Bissenova 2005, 254). However, since then the country has managed to train and prepare local *ustazs*, imams and scholars and nowadays, there is no dependence on foreign scholars at least at the level of basic religious instruction for general masses of Muslims. The recent significant achievements of Islamic education in Kazakhstan include improved level of local theologians and religious elite, increased demand to pursue Islamic education domestically, and establishment of knowledge and experience exchanges with foreign Islamic educational institutions (Mustafayeva et al. 2023, 121).

Thus, the current state of religious education in Kazakhstan is marked by significant progress relative to the early years of independence. Though the Soviet legacy still persists in the state's containment of religious education within the confines of state secularism and its securitization of religious institutions. This is the environment in which NMU operates and in which Muslims seek religious knowledge. Before moving to the next chapter where I share my findings from the fieldwork at NMU, I would like to present a brief analysis of an important primary source and also outline the theoretical framework for this thesis's findings.

2.2 Analytical reading of *Aiel zhane ilim*

Even though this thesis primarily relies on fieldwork findings, I found it analytically productive to engage with a small self-published booklet titled *Aiel zhane ilim*²¹ (“Women and Knowledge”), authored in 2021 by a female undergraduate student at NMU²². *Aiel zhane ilim* is characteristic of a broader genre of short-form Islamic literature produced by different

²¹ Kazakh: Әйел және Ілім. See *Appendix A* for the cover page.

²² See Figure 1 in *Appendix A*.

ustazs and students of Islamic sciences that circulates widely in Kazakhstan's religious circles, both among young men and women engaged in Islamic learning and self-cultivation. This text was written by a female student of NMU specifically for other young women pursuing Islamic studies. Its accessible style and pedagogical tone can be found in similar religious materials, many of which are circulated informally in digital form through various Telegram channels.²³ A close reading of this text thus offers a good starting point to explore the broader discursive circle of Islamic moral instruction, female piety, and the formation of religious subjectivities in the post-Soviet region influenced by new media.

As mentioned before, the booklet is intended for young women studying at Islamic institutions such as *madrasas* and NMU and directly addresses the theme of women's pursuit of Islamic knowledge. As a piece of contemporary Islamic women's literature emerging from within Kazakhstan, the booklet is an important source that points to the broader framework that guides students' pursuit of Islamic knowledge and their perspectives and views on religious education of women and girls. It demonstrates how young women engaged in the Islamic revival articulate their ethical commitments, authority structures, and aspirations for religious knowledge in a post-Soviet context. It provides a rare glance into the social reality and represents a public voice of an otherwise publicly-invisible group of Muslim women, whose influence is, nevertheless, considerable.

²³ Nowadays, young female piety activists often engage in digital *da'wah*, yet they usually choose platforms such as Telegram over more public-facing ones like Instagram or YouTube (Thus, two of my interviewees run Telegram channels with Islamic content. Zhibek has more than 1800 subscribers on her public channel and over 500 subscribers on her women-only channel. Saule has more than 600 subscribers on her public channel and over 450 subscribers on her women-only channel). For women who pursue a stricter religious lifestyle, Telegram channels offer greater privacy, lower visibility, and more intentional, text-based engagement with a selective audience—affording a form of quiet, controlled religious communication that aligns with values of modesty and sincerity even if the reach is much more limited. In contrast, Instagram is often viewed as a noisy, visual-heavy, commercialized space where serious Islamic content can easily be overshadowed by entertainment and algorithm-driven popularity. While closely analysing digital platforms falls outside the primary scope of this thesis, future research could explore how different media environments shape contemporary Islamic communication among Kazakhstani women.

The 61-page text, written in Kazakh, was initially sold electronically by the author, who was also running an Instagram page (@gulama.analar, “scholar mothers”) dedicated to sharing biographies of Muslim female scholars. A year later, in 2022, she made the booklet available for free via her Telegram channel²⁴, claiming approximately 200 initial purchases. Divided into three sections—the religious obligation of knowledge acquisition for women, biographies and anecdotes of female Islamic scholars, and the significance of knowledgeable mothers—the booklet draws on a wide range of Islamic sources and figures to inspire young Kazakhstani women to seek religious knowledge. From an anthropological perspective, *Äiel zhane ilim* is significant as a grassroots articulation of Islamic revival by one of its active female participants. It reveals how scriptural authority is interpreted, how educational aspirations are gendered, and what kind of social issues arise for practicing Muslim women navigating an emerging religious landscape.

The text opens with a familiar nationalistic trope quoting the Kazakh proverb “*El bolam deseng, besigingdi tuze*” (“If you want to build a nation, fix your cradle”) and a quote from Abai’s²⁵ poetry on the importance of *madrassa* education. However, this nationalistic framing quickly gives way to a transnational Islamic orientation. Only two out of the many women mentioned in the booklet are Central Asian, and only one is Kazakh (Aiganym Ana, the grandmother of Shoqan Valikhanov²⁶). The bulk of the role models are Arab, and as mentioned by the author, many biographies are translated from Muhammad Akram Nadwi’s²⁷ 43-volume Arabic work on biographies of female scholars²⁸. This disjuncture between the

²⁴ <https://t.me/okymysty/78>

²⁵ Prominent Kazakh poet, thinker, writer and philosopher.

²⁶ Shoqan Valikhanov (1835–1865) was a Kazakh geographer, ethnographer, and member of the Russian Geographical Society. Though viewed ambivalently in postcolonial studies as both a native scholar and colonial agent, he remains widely respected in Kazakhstan for his scholarly legacy on Central Asia.

²⁷ Indian-British Islamic scholar.

²⁸ Original title: *Al-Wafa bi Asma al-Nisa* (Arabic: الوفاء بأسماء النساء, 'Loyalty with the Names of Women'). An English introduction to the Arabic work was also published in 2007 by the same author under the title *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*. There is also a book by American journalist Carla Power titled *If the Oceans Were Ink: An Unlikely Friendship and a Journey to the Heart of the Quran*, which was inspired by her friendship with Muhammad Akram Nadwi at the time when he was working on the volume.

Kazakh national framing and the global Islamic content exemplifies a broader trend: the emerging Islamic revival among youth is far more scripturalist and *umma*-oriented²⁹ than ethno-nationalist and is open to cross-border exchanges, even when national motifs are briefly invoked to localize the content.

A central analytical value of the booklet lies in the author's engagement with themes of female religious learning and the gendered transmission of knowledge. The text affirms the centrality of learning for women not simply as a right, but as a religious obligation. Drawing from Qur'an, hadith, and opinions of classical Islamic scholars³⁰, the author outlines the theological argument for women to acquire knowledge. After establishing the importance of knowledge acquisition for women, the text briefly discusses what looks like a common social issue for contemporary young women—being educated by one's husband, i.e., not engaging in Islamic learning before marriage and postponing it to after marriage. The author clearly but softly criticizes such a position and encourages young women to not waste opportunities to seek knowledge before marriage, stressing that a wife cannot become a student of her husband and husbands generally do not make good teachers. This is explained by the nature of marital relationships where a wife should bring her husband peace and comfort and not burden him with educating her during his limited family time at home.

Probably unintentionally, the booklet demonstrates that female religious authority is historically derivative. Although the author provides numerous examples of accomplished women as motivation and inspiration for her readers, the majority are identified as daughters, sisters, or wives of renowned male scholars. While this reflects historical realities, it also unintentionally affirms the gendered hierarchies of religious capital: women emerge as scholars primarily through proximity to male scholars. In the post-Soviet Kazakh context, this

²⁹ *Umma* refers to the global Muslim community with shared belief in Islam which transcends national, ethnic, racial, linguistic, temporal or geographic boundaries.

³⁰ Specifically, the text includes quotes from Ali Al-Tantawi (Syrian scholar), Muhammad Akram Nadwi, Mohammed Aslam (UK-based scholar trained in Syria), Muhammad Iqbal (South Asian philosopher, poet, politician).

historical pattern proves even more constraining. As discussed in Chapter 1, the dismantling of Islamic educational institutions during the Soviet era severed intergenerational links to Islamic learning, making it nearly impossible for contemporary young women to have a learned male relative. This is why as mentioned in the beginning of the book, oftentimes young women see marriage as the only practical option of acquiring a learned male family member. It is much easier to find a religiously-knowledgeable or at least aspiring man (or woman) in the younger post-independence generations rather than in the older generation whose formative years coincided with Soviet state-endorsed atheism and suppression of religious education. Consequently, the notion of “marrying into” a person or lineage of knowledge appears to be one of the practical responses to this rupture.

The booklet ends by urging women to remain committed to their studies and not to seek excuses for avoiding the pursuit of Islamic knowledge, even if they are not enrolled in a formal Islamic educational institution. It mentions online courses and lessons of such Kazakh Islamic scholars and *ustazs* as Bauyrzhan Aliuly, Yersin Amire, Rizabek Battaluly, Zhasulan Zhusipbekov, Abylai Kenzhaly, Arsen Izbanov, Olzhas Beisenali, who are popular among youth as a good starting point for knowledge acquisition for those women who are not attending formal institutions of Islamic education. The text’s invocation of male *ustazs* and online learning for further guidance highlights another key issue: the lack of widely recognized and accessible female Islamic authorities and teachers or alternative ways of knowledge acquisition for women independent from male intermediation (e.g., private lessons with female teachers, offline female learning circles, intergenerational knowledge transmission between female members of the family) in contemporary Kazakhstan. In the earlier part of the text, the author also explicitly mentions the social need for female Islamic teachers and scholars as there are many unsolved religious issues which require female perspective, though she doesn’t provide an example of such issues. Despite the booklet’s

strong call for female scholarship, its concluding recommendations underscore the continued dependence on male scholars and teachers. This reflects not only infrastructural gaps (e.g., few female teachers or institutions that train women to teach) but also the gender asymmetries in both public religious authority and private religious learning.

Ultimately, *Aiel zhane ilim* is a time-defining text that exemplifies a broader genre of short-form Islamic literature currently produced and widely circulated within religious circles in Kazakhstan. It has a strong element of *da'wah*³¹ and an attempt to redefine female Islamic subjectivity in a changing post-Soviet landscape. It reveals who young women see as legitimate role models, which global sources they find resonant, and how they navigate the tension between idealized religious models and their lived social constraints. Its analytical value lies in how it captures an important formative period in Kazakhstan's Islamic revival shaped by gendered aspirations, institutional limitations, and a reorientation toward transnational Islamic discourses.

2.3 Theoretical framework

In this thesis, I have made a somewhat unconventional choice for a theoretical framework to frame my exploration of Muslim women's Islamic education in Kazakhstan. Given that this is not a standard theoretical move in contemporary anthropology, especially in studies of Muslim women, it is important to clarify why I've chosen this approach and how it connects with my fieldwork and broader scholarly conversations.

The study of contemporary Muslim women's pursuit of Islamic knowledge in the last two decades has been heavily shaped by feminist concepts and secular frameworks leaving out Islamically-rooted concepts and worldviews. While this scholarship has produced important insights, it often remains confined to analytical categories like agency, resistance,

³¹ In the sense of educating, reminding, and calling upon Muslims to fulfil their religious obligations.

identity, or empowerment. Such categories, while useful in certain respects, tend to translate religious commitments into secular terms, flattening the theological orientation that many of these women uphold. My research suggests that for many of my interlocutors, the pursuit of Islamic knowledge is not about social empowerment or asserting identity. Rather it is a major part of self-cultivation rooted in a sincere desire to align oneself with the Divine. This dimension, I argue, escapes the reach of dominant explanatory models.

As a partial response to this limitation, post-secular scholars such as Saba Mahmood urge us to re-evaluate the epistemological foundations of secular framings. In particular, Mahmood (2005) foregrounds the ethical and embodied dimensions of piety, arguing that religious practice cannot be fully understood without recognizing its role in shaping moral subjectivities. Her work pushes anthropology to suspend its liberal-secular bias and instead attend to the internal logics of submission, discipline, and virtue as forms of agency in their own right. Yet even Mahmood's Foucauldian framing ultimately leaves the God-centred logic of religious claims bracketed, as anthropology remains epistemologically and ontologically rooted in secular frameworks.

In this thesis, I want to take a step further. Rather than merely suspending judgment on religious claims, I advocate for treating these claims as real, to take seriously the metaphysical commitments that underpin Islamic education. Here, René Guénon offers a compelling framework. Writing in opposition to the modern West, Guénon articulates a critique of secular modernity based on its ontological divide from the rest of the world. His work positions traditional (as opposed to modern) civilizations, including Islam, as rooted in metaphysical principles that transcend utility, material concerns, and profane reality. From this perspective, Islamic education is not about producing ethical subjects, promoting gender equality, or affirming cultural identity; it is a disciplined orientation toward the Real—toward God and the Hereafter.

Guénon's critique is helpful to me in two interrelated ways. First, it addresses the major limitation of secular anthropology of religion by drawing attention to the fundamental ontological divergence between secular and Islamic worldviews. Second, it offers an ontologically-congruent framework to understand the moral and spiritual significance of Islamic knowledge for Muslims. For my interlocutors, learning the Qur'an or mastering Arabic morphology is a way of aligning the self with divine reality. This understanding of knowledge—as oriented toward transcendence—cannot be adequately captured by frameworks that restrict themselves to the social observations and secular interpretations. For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in the ideas of Guénon about the ontological divide between secular and traditional and two dichotomies that he focuses on: knowledge/action and sacred science/profane science.

Post-secular anthropology

Discussions on post-secular anthropology are still emerging and novel to the field. Some of the scholars who addressed this turn include Philip Fountain (2013) and Johan Rasanayagam (2017, 2023). Fountain, coming from a Christian background, calls for “anthro-theology”—a deeper integration between theological and anthropological epistemologies and challenges the discipline to move beyond mere tolerance of religious ideas and to engage them as legitimate knowledge. Rasanayagam (2017) as a secular scholar, drawing on ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, emphasizes the limits of translation and the irreducible alterity of the other, pushing for a more dialogical and self-reflexive anthropology. As a Muslim anthropologist studying Muslims, I, like Fountain, seek to decentre the dominance of secularism in our discipline and to foster greater integration between anthropology and theology. At the same time, although I am not an ontological other to my interlocutors, I have come to deeply value Rasanayagam's reflections on de-objectifying

Muslims and resisting the urge to encompass the totality of their experience within the limits of my own perspective. I attempt to embody this orientation in the chapter presenting my findings.

Ontological divide

I draw on Guénon to contribute to the project of post-secular anthropology by foregrounding metaphysical ontology as a serious mode of understanding. Guénon (2004) insists that the modern West is not merely different from traditional civilizations but ontologically severed from them due to its “negation of principles.” This leads to a kind of nondialogue between secular anthropology and Islamic traditions, as also observed by Joel Kahn³² (2011). For Guénon, true understanding can only happen where there is shared metaphysical ground; without this, what looks like dialogue is often a form of misrecognition.

Knowledge vs. action

While ontological divide forms the basis of my critique of secular anthropology, I also utilize some other concepts of Guénonian thought to frame the importance of Islamic knowledge for my interlocutors. One of such concepts is the relative importance of knowledge (or contemplation, terms he uses interchangeably) and action in Eastern traditions versus modern Western mentality. Guénon identifies this as the most important point of opposition between the two. According to him, ‘the East upholds the superiority of contemplation over action, whereas the modern West on the contrary maintains the superiority of action over contemplation’ (2004, 36). He critiques the West for inverting the

³² Though, unlike Guénon, Kahn does not locate the root of the existing nondialogue in ontological differences, instead attributing it to methodological agnosticism—a “bracketing out” of beliefs as is customary in phenomenological approach in encounters with believers. He also, unlike Guénon, does not completely rule out the possibility of meaningful or at least respectful conversation between naturalistic secularism and religion.

proper hierarchy between knowledge and action, leading to ‘making action [its] sole preoccupation and of denying all value to contemplation, the true nature of which [it] ignore[s] or entirely fail[s] to understand’ (2004, 36). In contrast, Eastern traditions, while asserting the primacy of contemplation, still recognize action as important ‘in the order of human contingencies’ (2004, 37).

I would argue that this inversion of the relationship between knowledge and action is mirrored in sociological explanations of Muslim women’s pursuit of education, particularly within feminist frameworks. Scholars often overlook the intrinsic value of knowledge for Muslim women, instead treating action as the primary, or even sole, aim of education. Religious learning of women is thus almost exclusively interpreted through its potential to bring about social change: gaining positions of authority, challenging patriarchy, reinterpreting sacred texts, or enabling upward social mobility. Even when scholars turn to the ethical or moral dimensions of women’s learning, they tend to frame the value of education in actionable terms—such as embodiment, agency, or transformative practice. In most cases, the motivation to acquire knowledge for its own sake with orientations that transcend this-worldly concerns is ignored, or mentioned only briefly without deeper engagement.

Sacred vs. profane science

Guénon also distinguishes between sacred and profane knowledge. He argues that the modern West has not only negated everything that transcends the limits of natural sciences, or in better cases declared it ‘unknowable’, but also denied to others (non-Westerners) the knowledge that it itself has no access to (2004, 45). In contrast, traditional sciences—even those dealing with quantity, logic and materiality—retain a link to higher truths when situated

within a metaphysical framework³³ (Pietsch 2013). This resonates with classical Islamic education, where disciplines like grammar or astronomy were understood not just as technical skills but as pathways to deeper reality. In the following chapter, I will offer an ethnographic example of how Arabic morphology and syntax as parts of Arabic grammar are employed in Quranic exegesis directly linking instrumental knowledge to sacred reality.

In conclusion, while post-secular anthropology has begun to challenge secular reductionism, it often stops short of reintroducing metaphysical ontology as a legitimate mode of knowing. In this thesis, I use Guénon's metaphysical critique to contribute to a move towards post-secular anthropology. I argue that the pursuit of Islamic education among young women in Kazakhstan cannot be adequately understood through frameworks that ignore or suspend the metaphysical realities they orient themselves toward. My goal is not simply to describe this turn to sacred knowledge but to explore what it reveals about the limits of secular thought and the possibilities of God-centered epistemologies within anthropological inquiry.

The next chapter grounds this framework in fieldwork. Through interviews, participant observation, and daily life encounters, I explore what Islamic knowledge-seeking means for the young women I met—what motivates them, what shapes their practices, and how they themselves articulate the purpose and value of what they learn. I ask: *What is Islamic education doing in terms of ontological and spiritual alignment? How do they navigate the secularized institutions of learning available to them? And to what extent does*

³³ The notion of intrinsic sacredness across all sciences resonates with the traditional significance of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy)—once collectively referred to as the liberal arts—not only in Islamic education, but also in other Abrahamic, Indic, Asian traditions (Yusuf 2018) and, of course, in the Greek tradition. The *trivium* disciplines the mind through abstraction of quality—embodied in language and reason—and is considered by the Abrahamic faiths to be of a spiritual nature (Yusuf 2018, Joseph 2002). The *quadrivium*, by contrast, disciplines thought around quantity—i.e., the abstraction of matter. As Yusuf (2018) puts it: '[these] two—spirit and matter—entail the sum total of reality'. The real potential of the liberal arts lies in this very scope: 'nothing less than reality itself is the object of their inquiry' (Yusuf 2018). This perspective reveals the metaphysical depth of language and thought.

their learning transcend the social and functional, aligning instead with a deeper metaphysical pursuit?

Chapter 3. Study of Nur-Mubarak University's female (ex)students

This chapter serves to provide ethnographic evidence to theoretical claims made in the previous ones. It aims to demonstrate how the Guénonian framework which puts metaphysical principles at the centre of traditional worldview and knowledge is capable of illuminating the dimensions of Islamic knowledge acquisition not accessible to secularistic anthropological frameworks.

3.1 About Nur-Mubarak University (NMU)

Background

In Kazakhstan, women have many opportunities to acquire basic Islamic knowledge like learning to pray, learning to read the Qur'an, and the basics of Islamic practice. But for those who want to advance their religious knowledge, receive formal education and a state-recognized diploma, the highest degree is offered in the only Islamic higher education institution in Kazakhstan—Nur-Mubarak University (NMU) located in Almaty. As the only way to receive institutionalised Islamic education, NMU, situated in the cultural capital of Kazakhstan, is a convenient place to study religious Muslim women who pursue Islamic studies in Kazakhstan. This is why my study of Islamic education of religious orthodox Muslim women is centred around current and former female students of NMU.

Nur Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic culture (*Nur-Mubarak Egipet islam madenietü universiteti* in Kazakh, NMU) was founded upon the initiative of then presidents of Kazakhstan and Egypt in 1993. In fact, '*Nūr-Mübarak*' in its name comes from the combination of Nursultan Nazarbayev and Hosni Mubarak's names. It is the only university

in Kazakhstan which offers university level theological education in Islamic sciences. The first students were admitted in 2001. The main campus of NMU is located in the city of Almaty, the university also has affiliated preparatory studies centres³⁴ in Talgar, Shymkent, and Aqtobe. A new bigger building is also under development on the current territory of the campus. The university has a dual management system where the President of the university is always from Egypt, and the Provost is always from Kazakhstan. As all other official Islamic educational institutions in Kazakhstan, it is supervised by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK, or *QMDB* in Kazakh). The university is also affiliated with a highly-prestigious Al-Azhar university in Cairo. Currently, NMU has four departments: (1) Islamic studies, (2) Religious studies, (3) Foreign language philology and translation studies, (4) Humanities. The university was ranked 19th out of 89 in the 2020 National Ranking of universities. By groups of educational programs, ‘Religion and Theology’ at NMU at all three levels–Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral was ranked first. As of 14 April, 2022, the university had more than 1,600 students: 1,572 undergraduate students, 60 master’s students, and 36 doctoral students. The teaching at university to varying degrees is conducted in Kazakh, Russian, Arabic, and English. 23% of NMU faculty are internationals, mostly from Egypt. The university offers only a few majors, the most popular of them being Islamic Studies (*Islamtanu* in Kazakh).

Most of the graduates of Bachelor’s programmes at NMU are employed in SAMK. The total number of graduates between 2004 and 2022 is 2353, 1453 of them are employed in SAMK, 184 pursued postgraduate studies, 398 work in the government, and 255 pursued other occupations³⁵. In the academic year 2022-2023, the total number of students was 1856,

³⁴ Voluntary pre-undergraduate level studies to help aspiring students to pursue further undergraduate studies at NMU. Usually last one year.

³⁵ All the numbers are taken from the *Strategic Development Plan of the Nur-Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic Culture 2022–2026* (issued by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Only Kazakh version is available at:
<https://www.nmu.edu.kz/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2022-2026-%D2%9B%D0%B0%D0%B7.pdf>

among them: 1745 undergraduates (1225 in Islamic Studies), 84 master's (56 in Islamic Studies), and 27 doctoral students (12 in Islamic Studies). According to numbers obtained from university admins during my fieldwork in 2024, 295 students have graduated from NMU, while 860 students were accepted in the same year. Unfortunately, there is no available data on female and male students separately. Interestingly enough, both female and male students and instructors attend the same campus, and in fact only Islamic Studies students are gender-segregated in class. Both female and male instructors may teach girls' groups, and supervise female students' graduation theses. Female and male students have separate dormitory buildings on campus. So in practice, gender segregation is followed with limitations.³⁶

3.2 Methodology

The research was designed as a qualitative study mainly based on one to two hour (on average) individual semi-structured interviews with female current and former students and graduates of NMU and a short one-week campus visit to NMU in the fall of 2024. The interview questions were mostly related to the reasons for pursuing Islamic Studies degree, the experience of studying at NMU, the plans for the future (if applicable) or prospects after graduating from university.³⁷ All of the informants were found through personal connections. I have met most of the students through online classes of such Islamic sciences as basic Arabic grammar that I attended as a student. Some of them were my peers in those classes, others were teaching them. I have also reached out to one of the interviewees through her Instagram account. The interviews were also supported by my own observation of students during my visit to campus. I have only interviewed female Islamic Studies students born between 1998 and 2006, who were either current students, recent graduates, or ex-students at

³⁶ While all of my interlocutors would prefer more strict gender segregation.

³⁷ See Appendix C for interview questions.

the time of the interviews. Even though I did not formally interview any administrative or academic staff of NMU, I had paid a formal visit to the admin bloc of NMU and had brief interactions with NMU's Director of the Department of Science and Innovation–Yktyiar Paltore and his office staff on the first and the last days of my fieldwork visit. I was also offered a brief library tour by a female doctorate student who was also working as one of the campus librarians.

Table 1. Sample of informants

Informant (Alias)	Student status at the time of the interview	Birth year	Years at NMU
Zhibek	Year 4, Bachelor's	2002	2020–2024
Aizhan	Year 2, Bachelor's	2004	2022–now
Saule	Year 3, Bachelor's	2004	2021–2025
Raushan	Ex-student	1998	2020–2022
Gaukhar	Year 1, Bachelor's	2006	2024–now

A note on positionality

This research does not aim to produce generalisable claims, but rather offers an account shaped by my own positionality. As a Kazakh Muslim woman with a little experience of studying basic traditional Islamic sciences who once also wanted to be a student at NMU, my interest in the religious lives of Muslim women in Kazakhstan emerges from both personal connection and academic curiosity. My identity and shared cultural and religious background allowed for a level of trust and openness with informants that might not have been possible for a different researcher, that's why I could easily recruit interviewees and conduct long format interviews. However, since I have never been a part of Islamic educational institutions, have never attended Kazakhstan's universities as a visibly-practicing undergraduate student and had never closely interacted with religious instructors at

educational institutions, I share some distance with my interlocutors in terms of academic background and environment. So inevitably, I approach them as an outsider to their academic environment.

At the same time, I am aware that my presence, assumptions, and interpretive lens have inevitably influenced the research process—from the choice of topic and framing of questions to the dynamics of the interviews and interpretation of data. For example, as I share in more detail in the paragraph on ethics below, my interlocutors might have been hesitant to share everything they know about NMU with a researcher knowing that this thesis might be publicly available without a possibility of anonymizing the name of the university as this is the only Islamic university in Kazakhstan. As I have mentioned in the background section, due to the high level of state control, any Islamic institution in the country does its utmost to avoid any unnecessary attention and suspicion from the authorities and to uphold a clean public image.

I do not claim neutrality or objectivity; instead, I acknowledge that this work is shaped by my religious and moral commitments, my mixed academic training, and my position within the social and intellectual worlds I inhabit. Despite the above limitations, I believe I am uniquely situated to be able to shed light on this underresearched community which nevertheless, (maybe unknowingly) finds itself driving the Islamic revival at the deeper levels of Kazakh society beyond the reach of surface-level research of observable social changes.

A note on ethics

Studying female religious communities is often a delicate topic due to high levels of modesty and isolation from public view practised by many young religious women, that's why it is important for a scholar to keep in mind several ethical considerations and to

understand the Islamic ethics of proper behaviour. Religion is in general a sensitive topic to discuss due to a level of surveillance and state control over it, so it was important not to push the informants too far during interviews if they were actively avoiding certain questions or statements, particularly those which may contradict the ‘correct version’ of Islam promoted by the state. It was also important to be conscious of teacher-student dynamics in Islam. In general, critiquing your teachers (*ustaz*) especially in their absence is not encouraged in Islam, so the informants might be hesitant to say anything remotely negative about their learning experience at NMU. Since interview questions covered broad topics, it was very possible to invoke past emotional experiences or crises of informants. There were times when an informant could get emotional and find it difficult to elaborate on a topic. Oftentimes, the informants had to share a lot of personal information, so I had to earn their trust and assure them that their personal identifiable data will be secure and not shared anywhere. With some of the students who are younger than me, there was a potential power asymmetry because as a practising Muslim I was considered as their ‘older sister’ in religion. I felt like I had some power to force them to answer the questions that they wouldn’t want to. So I had to be very alert and aware of the conversation dynamics. To mitigate such instances, I did not force interviewees to strictly follow and answer all of the interview questions. The semi-structured format helped to sustain the natural pace and flow of the interview without being stuck on one topic and allowing my interviewees to lead the conversation. I had also continuously reassured them before and during the interview that they didn’t have to answer all of the questions. I had also sent them the interview questions well before the interview so that they can take a look at the questions and know what to expect.

3.3 Social portraits

An important aspect of my research is that I am focusing on ‘new’ Muslims of Kazakhstan. Most of the young women I am studying do not belong to practising Muslim families, they were not raised as practicing Muslims and only started to practice in their late teens. The usual native term for women I interviewed is the Arabic word *tolibatul ‘ilm*, literally–female seeker of knowledge, often shortened to just *toliba*. In this work, I will use the term *toliba* interchangeably with the word “student” to refer to my interlocutors.

The *tolibas* I interviewed are quite different from each other. They are aged between 18 to mid-twenties, are native to different parts of Kazakhstan (Eastern, Western, Southern), were raised in rural and urban areas, but all of them share the experience of being raised in secular rather than religious families. Interestingly, though not an uncommon occurrence for NMU students in general, four out of five students that I interviewed previously pursued degrees in completely different fields. That includes pedagogy and psychology, nursing and even a technical degree. For the purpose of this thesis and considering how flexible and inclusive the term “Muslim” has become in anthropology, it is important to stress that all the women I interviewed are orthodox Muslim women. By “orthodox” I mean that they are *ontologically* rooted in Islam—that is they believe in six articles of Islamic faith³⁸, and accept Islam as the only one true religion acceptable in front of Allah and a complete way of life and a path towards success in the hereafter. In particular, they are not interested in any projects of reconciling Islam with modern -isms or of fundamentally reforming it. In Islamic creed, they belong to Maturidi school. In religious practice (*fiqh*), they strictly follow the *madhhab* of Abu Hanifa. These are women that accept traditional gender roles, Islamic hierarchies and accept classical female Islamic figures like wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, as role

³⁸ Belief in the Oneness of Allah (Tawhid), belief in angels, belief in holy books, belief in prophets, belief in the Day of Judgment, and belief in divine decree.

models. They all share a serious attitude towards traditional Islamic knowledge acquisition and prioritize it over everything else.

3.4 Fieldwork findings

University

‘We are a normal secular university,’ I was reassured on the first day of my official visit to the campus for fieldwork. The university administration kindly welcomed me into their office and offered tea accompanied by rose water Turkish delight. And secular it was, more than I expected.

As in any other sizable educational institution, three major forces shape the experience at NMU. First, there is the administrative body, which operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, as is the case with all public universities in the country. This body is responsible for implementing state-approved curricula, complying with ministerial directives, and submitting regular reports. Second, the teaching faculty is diverse, comprising local *ustazs*³⁹ who teach Islamic subjects, Egyptian professors of Islamic disciplines, and instructors of secular subjects. Third, the student body is notably heterogeneous, particularly in terms of religious commitment—more so than one might initially expect.

Generally, the university administration is obligated to uphold the secular values of the state. In contrast, both the faculty and student body tend to foster a more religiously-oriented community and atmosphere. Nevertheless, no overt conflict or tension is apparent between these two orientations. On the contrary, the three groups are united by a

³⁹ Most of them have doctoral degrees and could well be addressed as “professors” or “doctors”, but it is customary for students to address all of them as “*ustaz*” (ұстаз). Sometimes the Arabized version of “doctor”—“doktur” is used to address Egyptian professors. I will stick to using the word *ustaz* to refer to all the instructors.

shared interest in maintaining the university's well-being, avoiding unwanted public or governmental scrutiny, and preserving a positive institutional image.

However, these forces also contribute to an ambiguous environment. For instance, I was surprised to discover that class schedules do not accommodate prayer times. Students often have several hours of consecutive classes and are left to perform their prayers hurriedly during the brief 5–10 minute breaks between sessions. This frequently takes place in cramped classroom spaces, squeezed between desks and chairs. Notably, there are no designated prayer rooms within the academic buildings of the university campus. This absence is typically justified by the presence of a small mosque on campus. The hallways resemble those of any other university in Kazakhstan, where male and female students and *ustazs* routinely cross paths. While the university does not explicitly require female students to observe hijab, I did not encounter any uncovered female students during my fieldwork. The only unveiled women I observed were members of the administrative staff or instructors of secular subjects, such as English. Though one notable feature that sets the hallways apart from those of other universities is the occasional presence of students quietly memorizing, reviewing, and at times reciting the Qur'an to *ustazs*, who assess their memorization during breaks. But again, the diversity of female students' clothing styles is also noteworthy, ranging from modest, muted tones and loose-fitting garments to bright-colored headscarves, bold red lipstick, and high heels.

Stories of tolibas

So why Islamic education? Why NMU? *Tolibas* gave me very similar answers. First of all, they saw NMU as a logical next step for anyone who chose the path of seeking *'ilm* (knowledge). It is the only Islamic university and hence it is the place that gathers all the best *ustazs* and *tolibas* besides *madrasas*, which are not accessible after a certain age limit.

They were also seeking *orta*—a comprehensive Kazakh word for “community, environment, surroundings”—that will not be hostile to their religion and more conducive to it. As young girls who already started to practice religion in high school, they confronted state secularism quite early on, already when the schools they attended wouldn’t allow praying and hijab. They all actually mentioned the *de facto* hijab ban⁴⁰ in schools as the main example of the flawed secularism of our country.⁴¹ For those who had previous training in nursing and pedagogy, they faced difficulties with finding a job⁴² and also developed unpleasant feelings towards secularized environments which are hostile to practising Muslim women. As pointed out by one of the *tolibas* during an interview, people are tired and exhausted of secular society so they look for [Islamic] *orta*.

Seeking knowledge (*‘ilm*) and seeking *orta* emerged as the two primary motivations for students to attend NMU. While the motivation to seek knowledge could have been unpacked further—by asking *why* they wanted to acquire knowledge—I soon realized that even the conceptual tools I had brought into the field, such as “self-realization,” carried secular and human-centered assumptions that did not translate meaningfully into my interlocutors’ worldview. The term itself was foreign to them; attempts to explain it risked imposing my own framework of meaning onto their experience. They were seeking knowledge, and that was enough.

This is not to say that the students were incapable of articulating instrumental or functionalist reasons for their pursuit of Islamic education. They certainly could, and often did—especially when speaking about future careers in the religious sector. But in the God-centered orientation that shaped their lives, such motivations were not primary. In fact,

⁴⁰ Whether school hijab ban is existent, legal, or legally-enforceable are all issues that are still widely-debated in Kazakhstan.

⁴¹ They largely understand secularism as the separation of the “church” and the state and hence the state shouldn’t ban religious expression such as hijab.

⁴² In Kazakhstan, in big cities especially, there is an unwritten rule of largely not allowing hiring hijabi women in public institutions including schools and hospitals. Exceptions exist but are extremely rare.

they often appeared as *afterthoughts*—strategic justifications offered to make their choice of pursuing Islamic education more comprehensible or socially acceptable to others (parents, relatives, friends, or broader society). These justifications sounded formulaic, lacking the conviction that characterized their religious drive. When I asked what they intended to do with their diplomas after graduation, many looked puzzled—some even visibly uncomfortable or taken aback, as though the question was alien to the logic that animated their studies. It seemed that, for these young women, the *worldly value* of their education was marginal, if not altogether irrelevant. This was further evidenced by the trajectories of those who had already left or graduated from NMU (three of them): none had pursued formal careers in teaching or preaching, yet all remained actively engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. They started families and now lead primarily domestic lives—some as mothers—but continued their studies independently. Some even had formed online study circles where they conduct online/offline lessons⁴³ for other young Muslim women and share their knowledge with others without constraints of secular institutions. The closest their motivations came to a functionalist rationale was in how each of them emphasized the role of the mother in educating her children and transmitting religious knowledge and worldview.

In the next sections, I would like to specifically share some excerpts from my interviews with some of the *tolibas*.

Zhibek⁴⁴

Zhibek was already in her fourth year of studies when I interviewed her. An exceptionally studious and energetic young woman, she had earned a reputation among her juniors at NMU as a capable student-teacher.⁴⁵ Raised in a heavily Russified *aul* in western

⁴³ Sometimes they charge symbolic monthly or per course fees for their classes. Sometimes they conduct them for free. Mostly they rely on their husbands for financial provision.

⁴⁴ All names of interviewees are aliases.

⁴⁵ At NMU, it is not only *ustazs* who hold voluntary extra classes, sometimes advanced students also get requests from junior students to teach a specific textbook.

Kazakhstan, she told me she was—and still is—the only woman in her *aul* who wears the hijab. She previously graduated from a vocational college with a diploma in preschool education. However, she realized that this field did not align with her true interests. For her higher education, she was determined to pursue what genuinely inspired her—Islamic sciences. She identified NMU as the most suitable institution for this path. At the same time, she strongly believed that anyone considering NMU should have a sincere and well-considered interest in Islamic sciences. In her view, one should not enroll without serious reflection on whether this field truly resonates with their commitment.

Her story of coming to NMU is also an example of an intergenerational tension and young Muslim women's resilience in the face of resistance to their increasing religiosity. Fearing that her family would not support her decision, Zhibek didn't tell anyone that she was applying to NMU. After graduating from college, she went to Almaty alone as an eighteen-year old and submitted her documents and passed the entrance exams. Only after she was admitted to NMU on a state scholarship, did she tell her family about her plans. Thankfully, after some discussion and seeing her determination, her parents agreed to let her pursue this path. To be honest, I was very impressed by her level of knowledge and rigor in spreading Islamic knowledge to lay Muslim women who did not get an opportunity to formally pursue Islamic education. When I first saw her, she really looked like a very simple and approachable rurally-raised girl. In Kazakh, I would say *qarapaiym qyz*.⁴⁶ But as our conversation unfolded, I realized that she is an extremely hardworking student, who does a lot of extra-curricular reading, deeply studies the textbooks and really excels in teaching other students to the point where they constantly ask her to offer more lessons. I was especially impressed that she is fully conversant in Arabic and actually prefers expressing herself in

⁴⁶ In Kazakh, the phrase “қарапайым қыз” (*qarapaiym qyz*, lit. ‘simple girl’) is used to describe a girl who is modest, humble, and unpretentious, someone who leads a simple life, avoids showing off, and is generally admired for her good manners and grounded nature. It is usually used as a compliment.

Arabic rather than Kazakh when talking to her *ustazs*. Not many students at NMU can boast such a level of communicative proficiency in Arabic.

When I asked her what drew female students to NMU's *orta*, she highlighted several distinctive features that make the university community particularly appealing to observant young women: gender-segregated classrooms, limited exposure to non-Islamic subjects, and a fertile environment for spiritual development. Great emphasis, she said, is placed on a holistic approach to education. Moral conduct (*adab*), religious upbringing (*tarbiyah*), and Islamic ethics were central to her description of NMU's *orta*:

In my view, Nur-Mubarak University is not just a specialized educational environment (orta), it is a very high-quality environment in terms of upbringing (tarbiyah) and spiritual development. There, ustazs do not hold the opinion that studying is only for acquiring knowledge. Whether it's teaching different life values or shaping the worldview, it has a strong influence on students.

This reflects core elements of traditional Islamic education, where the cultivation of moral character and piety are as central as intellectual development.

At the same time, Zhibek acknowledged that she may have idealized NMU's community before entering the university. She admitted that the university, like any social institution, was not without its flaws:

Actually, I expected Nur-Mubarak to be a place without any flaws, but after all we are all humans, so there are issues. Things that I didn't expect can also happen, including both students and ustazs, as nobody's an angel.

Despite these imperfections, Zhibek expressed no regret about her decision to study at NMU. Her reflections suggest that idealism does not preclude realism—and that spiritual commitment can coexist with pragmatic understanding of human limitations.

Raushan

Raushan entered NMU as a more mature student, having already earned a bachelor's degree in pedagogy and psychology from another university. She spent nearly three years at NMU before halting her studies without obtaining a degree. Although she got married during that time, her decision to leave was primarily driven by growing disillusionment with the university's secular orientation. She became increasingly uncomfortable with NMU's internal policies and the presence of gender mixing outside the classroom environment. Despite leaving the university, she did not abandon her pursuit of knowledge. At the time of the interview, she shared her plans to continue her studies online at a foreign Islamic university.

Probably due to her previous professional training in pedagogy, Raushan was more willing to discuss the educational system at NMU and more open in voicing criticism than the younger students I interviewed. She challenged the secular nature of NMU's curriculum, arguing that it fails to properly accommodate the traditional Islamic learning that students like her were seeking:

European standards [of secular education] are completely incompatible with the Islamic system of education. The two simply cannot be reconciled. But NMU tries to do so because everything comes pre-approved by the Ministry of Education—subjects, disciplines—everything is approved by the Ministry. Only the most capable students can handle it all, while 80% of the students can't keep up and end up with a very low level [of understanding].

There are too many secular subjects at NMU—sociology, philosophy. There are too few Islamic subjects.

Raushan was particularly critical of the Bologna system's approach of teaching multiple subjects in parallel, without respecting the hierarchical sequencing foundational to traditional Islamic education. She highlighted how this system undermines the purpose of the classical Islamic trivium—*sarf* and *nahw* (morphology and syntax), *balagha* (rhetoric), and *mantiq* (logic)—collectively known as '*ulum al-alah* (auxiliary sciences). In classical Islamic learning, mastery of these subjects is a prerequisite for seriously engaging with the core Islamic sciences such as *fiqh*, '*aqida*, *hadith*, *tafsir*, *usul al-fiqh*, and others. However, the

state-mandated curriculum at NMU compresses these subjects into the same academic period, resulting in students feeling overwhelmed and acquiring fragmented, unsystematic knowledge. This deprives them of the intellectual coherence and depth that traditional Islamic pedagogy offers—an approach refined over centuries.

Ironically, Mustafayeva et al. (2023) argue that NMU has managed to successfully integrate secular and religious curricula, referring to it as a '[successful] synthesis of Islamic and secular education' (122). However, their claim is not substantiated by further analysis or empirical evidence demonstrating the outcomes of such a synthesis.

In contrast, my interviews with female students revealed numerous issues with the integration of traditional Islamic learning into the secular university framework. Aside from the structural incompatibility of the Bologna system with classical Islamic pedagogical methods, students also reported that insufficient time is allocated to each subject. Moreover, because NMU does not follow the traditional order and hierarchy of subjects, the first two years of study prove especially difficult for students coming from non-religious high schools, many of whom have no prior knowledge of Arabic. The inadequacy of class time was one of the reasons for the proliferation of voluntary extra classes. *Tolibas* described NMU's system as still 'developing' and even 'experimental.'

Overall, Raushan did not recommend NMU to women, citing its overly secular environment. Instead, she suggested seeking knowledge through alternative avenues, such as online platforms, where a wide range of high-quality lessons are available for learners at different levels, often taught by well-known scholars.

When I asked her my secular-grounded question about the purpose of pursuing a degree in Islamic studies, she did not hesitate to reject the premise. Instead, she emphasized the centrality of a God-oriented outlook and highlighted that a woman's primary role is as a mother, not a careerist. As she put it: *'Muslims believe in the afterlife. Even if they [female*

*graduates of NMU] don't chase careers or use their diplomas professionally, the knowledge they pass on to their children does not go to waste.*⁴⁷

Gaukhar

Gaukhar was the youngest of all the women I interviewed—a lively girl with a bubbly personality. She initially enrolled at one of Kazakhstan's top secular universities to pursue a technical degree but left after one year to study Islamic sciences at NMU. I spoke with her after she had completed her first year there.

She shared that she chose NMU because the public religious lessons offered at local mosques didn't satisfy her hunger for knowledge—the content was too basic and general, designed to accommodate the broader mosque-going public. Gaukhar, by contrast, was seeking depth.⁴⁸ And, like many others, she was also seeking an *orta*.

Again, as with other *tolibas* I interviewed, when I asked about the more practical or instrumental value of her education, her tone shifted and became more serious. Just like Raushan, she also clearly rejected the premise of the question. Refuting its underlying logic, she said:

*I don't know how right it is, from a Shariah perspective, to pursue religious knowledge for worldly purposes. When a person embarks on the path of religion and seeks religious knowledge, it should only be with the afterlife in mind.*⁴⁹

This God-oriented ontology underpinned all of Gaukhar's responses to my questions. When I asked about the poor financial prospects commonly associated with Islamic studies graduates, she responded with calm confidence: *"I don't worry much about provision. I place my trust in*

⁴⁷ "Мұсылмандарда ақырет деген бар. Мансап құмаса да, дипломдарын қолданбаса да, балаларына берген білім жоқ болып кетпейді ғой."

⁴⁸ Interestingly, this lack of advanced level of teaching and learning in mosques was also cited by Zhibek as a reason why she didn't like teaching in the mosque. For a short period she worked as an *ustaz* in one of Almaty mosques during her early years of studies at NMU.

⁴⁹ "Ілім жолына түсіп, дүниені мақсат еткен шариғи тұрғыдан қаншалықты дұрыс, білмеймін. Дін жолына, діни ілім алу үшін адам тек ақыретті көздеп түседі ғой."

*Allah alone.*⁵⁰ When I asked who her role model was, she seemed puzzled by what she considered an unnecessary question—the answer was obvious: of course, it was the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

When I asked about the challenges she faced while beginning to practice Islam and navigating secular environments, she replied: *“To be honest, I don't really see our current situation as a hardship. I ask myself: how is this even a hardship, if the initial short-lived struggle brings endless reward in the end? So I endure the difficulties with patience—and I think I've even forgotten that they were ever difficult.”*⁵¹

Even when I asked her about self-realization—a concept I had to unpack as it was clearly unfamiliar—her answer was grounded firmly in her religious outlook: *“What is self-realization? It's living a life of worship and piety.”*⁵² She added: *“As Muslims, our entire worldview is tied to the afterlife: how will our final moments be, what will our end be like, how will we be held accountable? The ultimate goal is to return to Allah in a state where He is pleased with us.”*⁵³

As should now be evident from the interviews with *tolibas* Zhibek, Raushan, and Gaukhar, each of them consciously rejected secularism and actively sought to avoid it. Their pursuit of *de-secularization* and their longing for an Islamic *orta* were key motivations both for coming to NMU and, in the case of Raushan, for leaving it when it fell short of these expectations. For these women, the quest for *‘ilm* was never reducible to a university curriculum or the attainment of a degree, nor was it satisfied by the basic-level mosque classes that aim to accommodate the general public. Rather, it was understood as a lifelong journey of learning, fundamentally anchored in the afterlife.

⁵⁰ “Мен ризық мәселесіне қатты уайымдамаймын. Аллаға ғана сенемін.”

⁵¹ “Қиындық ретінде көрмеймін, шыны керек, қазіргі жағдайымызды. Оның несі қиындық? деймін де, егер басында сәл қиналып, арты шексіз сауап болса. Сондықтан ол қиындықтарға сабыр етіп, оның қиындық екенін ұмытып қалған сияқтымын.”

⁵² “Самореализация деген не? Құлшылық етіп, тақуалықты ұстанып өмір сүру.”

⁵³ “Мұсылман болғасын біздің өмірлік ұстанымымыз сол ақыретпен байланысты ғой: соңғы сәтіміз қалай болады екен, ақырымыз қалай болады екен, есеп-қисап қалай болады екен. Алла бізге разы болған күйде Оған қайту.”

Their motivations are not animated by the promises of humanistic self-realization, career advancement, or even marriage prospects. Their worldviews and ontologies are unmistakably God-centred. They revere and yearn for traditional Islamic learning that preserves the classical hierarchy of the sciences, and they reject the modern, secular commodification of education—precisely the concern that René Guénon has so trenchantly critiqued, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Yet, their response to secularism is not one of confrontational resistance or ideological activism. There is no aggressive assertiveness in their discourse. Instead of pursuing reform, empowerment, or open confrontation, they exhibit *sabr*—patient endurance—and, at times, quiet withdrawal. They embrace a metaphysical hierarchy of being in which the challenges they face in particular worldly domains lose their significance in the broader eschatological vision that orients their lives. Their concerns and aspirations are directed toward the final reckoning, the hereafter, and the pleasure of Allah.

These metaphysical commitments occupy far more space in their hearts and minds than the mundane realities of university life. Even when they encounter institutional shortcomings at NMU, they continue to appreciate its spiritual value and remain committed to their path. They do not cease orienting—and reorienting—themselves toward God. It is little wonder, then, that secular anthropological frameworks—which deny or marginalize God as a real presence—struggle to translate these modes of being without stripping them of their essence.

Lessons

One of the most striking experiences during my fieldwork at NMU was attending a public lesson held in the campus mosque after the night prayer. While I participated in a range of both secular and Islamic classes during my stay, it was this particular

gathering—centered on the classical text *Tadhkirat al-Sami‘ wa-l-Mutakallim fi Adab al-‘Alim wa-l-Muta‘allim* (*A Reminder for the Listener and Speaker on the Manners of Scholars and Students*) by Ibn Jama‘ah⁵⁴—that left a lasting impression. The class offered not only a powerful articulation of what it means to seek knowledge in the Islamic tradition, but also revealed a moral universe that stands in stark contrast to the usual secular framings of women’s religious education. Below, I recount this vignette in detail, as it illuminates the metaphysical orientation of Islamic education that Chapter 2 re-theorizes.

The *ustaz* conducting the class was seated in the main prayer hall. As is customary in many Kazakhstani mosques, the women’s section was located upstairs, separated by a wooden partition, from where female attendees could see and hear the speaker. Though it was already quite late and most students had returned home, around twenty-five women stayed for the class.

The session opened with a stark answer to Gaukhar’s earlier guess about the permissibility of pursuing knowledge for worldly purposes. The *ustaz* translated a line from Ibn Jama‘ah’s text: *‘Whoever seeks knowledge not for the pleasure of Allah, but for worldly purposes, is destined for Hell.’*⁵⁵

This warning was followed by instructive stories of historical figures who had misused their knowledge for worldly gain. The *ustaz* then reviewed twelve *adabs* for students of Islamic sciences, including the following:

- *Fear of Allah*—Maintain a constant awareness of Allah’s presence, whether alone or in public, active or still. Know that Allah sees you at all times.
- *Trustworthiness*—Knowledge is an *amanah* (trust); do not betray it.
- *Do not distort the religion*—Safeguard religious knowledge from misrepresentation or misuse.

⁵⁴ Badr al-Dīn ibn Jama‘ah al-Kinani (1241–1333) was a Shafi‘i jurist of the Mamluk Sultanate.

⁵⁵ ‘Кім білімді Алланың разылығы емес, дүниелік мақсаттар үшін алса, ол–тозақтық.’

- *Noble character*—A student should be composed, dignified, humble, and kind.
- *Guarding the self*—One’s greatest enemies are the *dunya*, other people, Satan, and the *nafs*. The hardest to conquer is the *nafs*.
- *Balancing humility and dignity*—Be humble before ordinary people but uphold the dignity of the religious tradition before the worldly.
- *Reverence for knowledge*—Show deep respect for knowledge and its transmission.
- “*If you preserve knowledge, knowledge will preserve you*”—Honor and act upon what you learn; it will protect and elevate you in return.

This vignette brings into focus the God-oriented telos of Islamic education—an element consistently marginalized or reformulated in the secular and post-secular anthropological texts. The moral gravity conveyed in the *ustaz*’s opening statement—‘*Whoever seeks knowledge not for the pleasure of Allah, but for worldly purposes, is destined for Hell*’—signals that Islamic learning is not simply a form of self-cultivation or social positioning, but a sacred obligation with eternal consequences. The *adab* of the student, as outlined in the lesson, is inseparable from metaphysical understanding of the nature of the soul, divine accountability, and the vertical relationship between knowledge and God. Rather than empowerment or ethical self-fashioning in the Foucauldian sense, this model stresses *submission*, *humility*, and *taqwa* as foundational to learning. As such, it resists secular translation. This moment in the field, therefore, exemplifies my broader critique: that much of the ethnographic literature re-narrates women’s engagement with Islamic education in terms that sever it from its metaphysical roots. Here, however, we witness a living tradition in which knowledge is both a sacred trust and a means of salvation, demanding a frame of analysis attuned to its theological depth.

According to estimates by Zhibek, as many as half of the students at NMU attend voluntary supplementary classes organized by various *ustazs*, either on their own initiative or

in response to student demand. I had expected that, in contrast to the more sterile atmosphere of mandatory curriculum courses, these voluntary lessons would be more intimate and attract especially motivated and committed students. I was therefore pleased to have the opportunity to observe one such class during my fieldwork. On one occasion, both as a student and an observer, I attended an extracurricular session on *i'rab* (grammatical inflection) and *tafsir* (exegesis) offered by a male *ustaz* to interested female students.

If the public lesson on Ibn Jama'ah's text on *adab* illuminated the ethical foundations of Islamic learning, the next class I attended offered an equally striking demonstration of how even ostensibly technical subjects like Arabic grammar⁵⁶ are embedded in a metaphysical worldview. Held during voluntary extra-curricular class hours for especially studious students and attended by around ten young female students, this lesson began as a conventional grammar session but gradually unfolded into a theological discussion. What emerged was a clear example of how traditional Islamic pedagogy intertwines all branches of knowledge with doctrine and orients even linguistic inquiry toward divine reality.

Even before the class began, the students' *adab* was evident. They greeted the *ustaz* standing—a gesture still common in Kazakh schools, though increasingly rare in Westernized academic settings. One student humbly passed him a bottle of water as he sat down.

The first half of the session consisted of routine grammatical exercises: parsing Quranic verses, identifying parts of speech, subjects, objects, conjugations, and the like. However, the tone of the class shifted in the second half.

The *ustaz* introduced one of the contemporary scholars he admired—Sheikh Fadil as-Samarra'i. He played a video⁵⁷ in Arabic in which the sheikh responded to the question: *Why does the Qur'an not use the feminine plural form "kafirah" (disbelieving women), but*

⁵⁶ Which is a part of Islamic trivium.

⁵⁷ I wasn't able to obtain the link to the exact video that *ustaz* showed. But here are video clips where Sheikh Fadil as-Samarra'i answers the same question on Sharjah TV's (Emirati TV channel) program:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxwYIQVdK3A> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/rhab.alayman.413895/videos/1063486388152907/?idortvity=1644933089141517>

still uses “*kafirun*,” the masculine plural? After the video ended, the *ustaz* began translating and elaborating on the sheikh’s response in Kazakh.

The gist of the explanation was this: in the Qur’an, *kafirun* is used when addressing disbelieving men, but other plural forms such as *kuffar* and *kafarah* also appear. Hence, the form *kafirun* implies abundance rather than rarity. Had the feminine plural *kafirāt* been used independently—without its classical counterpart *kawafir*, which does not occur in the Qur’an—it would have implied scarcity. But that would not reflect reality, since disbelievers vastly outnumber Muslims, and among them, women are particularly numerous. The abundance of women among disbelievers is also affirmed in various hadiths.⁵⁸ Therefore, the absence of *kāfirāt* from the Qur’an is not incidental but meaningful: its presence might have suggested scarcity, contrary to the reality and to what is known from hadiths.

Given the nature of the answer, I anticipated some reaction. After all, the *ustaz* was a man, the students were all young women, and the explanation hinged on a theological and linguistic claim that could be unsettling for a believing woman. I imagined how such a statement would provoke intense debate or criticism if voiced at my home university. The *ustaz* himself appeared to expect a response, pausing as though awaiting a reaction.

But none came. Silence. The students remained still—no comments, no visible gestures. Perhaps they harbored the same questions I had, but hesitated to express them

⁵⁸ This refers to a well-known theme in Islamic tradition, based on several Prophetic hadiths that mention women forming the majority of the inhabitants of Hell. For example, in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is reported to have said: ‘*I was shown the Hell-fire and that the majority of its dwellers were women who were ungrateful.*’ These reports have been interpreted in various ways. While some classical scholars understood them as indicating a greater presence of women among the disbelievers, others have emphasized contextual explanations, such as references to specific sins or societal conditions. Another well-known hadith about the signs of the end times states: ‘*Women will increase in number and men will decrease in number so much so that fifty women will be looked after by one man*’, suggesting a numerical predominance of women in later periods. These narrations contributed to the traditional perception of women as more numerous among disbelievers. Nevertheless, other Islamic sources affirm that women may also be numerous among the people of Paradise, and gender is not the ultimate determinant of salvation. The Qur’an’s use of the broken plural *kawafir* (disbelieving women), which connotes abundance, rather than *kafirāt*, which suggests fewness, reflects this broader theological, eschatological and demographic context.

aloud. The *ustaz* seemed aware of this, and after a brief pause, he added, as though replying to an unspoken concern:

“This is simply the law—Allah’s law.”

The intent of showing the video was not to spark controversy, but to illustrate the intimate link between grammatical structure and Qur’anic exegesis. The *ustaz* was mindful of the sensitivity of the topic, and he addressed it with restraint. To be honest, I had expected a much longer and more apologetic explanation—the type that typically draws on arguments about gender complementarity, metaphysical and biological differences between men and women⁵⁹, or recurring rationalizations⁶⁰: women’s emotional nature, their being created from a “crooked rib,” their numbers in paradise and hell. None of that was mentioned. Nor were there references to the exemplary piety of the Prophet’s ﷺ wives or the female Companions. Instead, the answer was brief, stark, and theologically direct—something only a God-oriented heart could accept without inner resistance:

“It is Allah’s will.”

As the class drew to a close, the teacher asked, “What is our goal in this life?” The question was rhetorical. After a pause, with a soft smile and a gentle voice, he concluded:

“May Allah protect us from falling among the many disbelievers. Our goal is to remain Muslim until our very last breath.”

He left the room quickly. I remained seated, motionless, still absorbing the intensity of what had just unfolded. What struck me most was the *adab*—the refined etiquette—between *ustaz* and his students: the *ustaz* spoke with care, the students listened with quiet attentiveness. But more than that, I was taken aback by the brevity and theological clarity of his response. There

⁵⁹ For a comprehensive anthological overview of the metaphysics of gender relations in Islam, see Sachiko Murata’s *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Murata 1992).

⁶⁰ For example, see the video in which a widely-respected contemporary Islamic scholar Hamza Al-Bakri addresses the similar question of “Are women less intelligent than men?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxpQLoolW9k&t=140s>, Rooted Thought 2020). Coincidentally, Hamza Al-Bakri officially visited NMU campus in 2023. Some of my interlocutors even received his signature.

was no attempt to mollify or rationalize, only a calm reminder of divine decree. The *ustaz* knew his audience. They did not require elaborate justification—only a reminder to orient their lives towards Allah.

This moment captured something essential about how Islamic sciences are taught and understood in this setting. As Guénon argues, in the traditional view of sciences, even instrumental subjects like grammar are not detached from metaphysics. They serve as extensions of doctrine—tools for grasping the layered and precise meanings of divine speech. What looked like a grammar lesson unfolded into Qur’anic exegesis and, ultimately, theological affirmation. The goal was not mastery of language for its own sake, but to access deeper truths about the nature of God’s message.

The *ustaz’s* explanation—short, theologically precise, and unapologetic—also stood out for what it didn’t do. It didn’t seek to reframe the issue in gender-equalist terms or appeal to liberal sensibilities and forced secular rationalizations. Instead, it reflected a broader mode of reasoning that some Muslim scholars present in discussions of encounters between secular frameworks and Islamically-rooted modes of being. Haifaa Jawad (2023), for instance, makes a similar point when discussing why there are no female messengers in Islam:

All scholars [...] agree that there are no female messengers [...] based on texts like Sura al-Anbiyā’: ‘We have only sent men whom We inspired’ (21:7). This is not about gender superiority but Allah’s choice. Therefore, the principle is to not search for alternative reasons. Furthermore, Allah’s choice should not necessarily affect the question of equality between males and females, because the notion of equality has limitations in all aspects of life. Why, for example, has Allah the exalted chosen Muhammad as the last messenger, not Ja‘far or Ḥamzah⁶¹? It’s purely His choice.

Jawad’s point, like the *ustaz’s*, challenges the impulse to make divine will legible within secular moral categories. These kinds of explanations make sense only within a theological framework that treats God’s decree as the highest epistemic authority.

⁶¹ Ja‘far ibn Abi Talib and Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib were male companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

One final detail: the *ustaz* didn't say "May Allah protect you" in his closing prayer. He said "us." In doing so, he reminded the students—and perhaps himself—that regardless of knowledge, role, or gender, all are equally in need of Allah's mercy. Even within a hierarchically structured class, the final note returned to metaphysical equality: teacher and student, male and female, are ultimately just slaves of God, seeking salvation.

Summary

In this chapter, I have grounded my critical arguments in fieldwork observations. These observations underscore that metaphysical concerns cannot be sidelined when studying women's piety and pursuit of religious knowledge. For many young Muslim women in Kazakhstan, learning Arabic grammar, memorizing the Qur'an, or attending Islamic classes is not merely about acquiring religious content and obtaining a degree—it is about becoming someone who inhabits a divinely ordered world. Their quest for knowledge is both ethical and ontological. It is not simply an expression of belief but a mode of reintegrating the self into a sacred cosmos—a cosmos long suppressed under Soviet materialism and modern rationalism. Though not ethnographically grounded, Guénon's metaphysical framework helps articulate the depth of aspiration expressed in these seemingly ordinary educational efforts.

This perspective takes on particular significance in the context of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet Islamic revival. Since independence, many young Muslim women have pursued Islamic knowledge through study circles, online platforms, and formal institutions—often in the absence of robust institutional religious infrastructure. Decades of Soviet-imposed atheism had marginalized religious learning, and the post-1991 revival unfolded within a national landscape marked by secular nationalism. The state's promotion of a culturalized, instrumentalized and depoliticized "traditional Islam" often sits uneasily alongside some popular desires for scriptural engagement and spiritual depth, especially among the youth.

Women's pursuit of Islamic education in this landscape can be interpreted in multiple ways. A secular lens might view it as post-Soviet identity reconstruction, a response to uncertainty, or a resistance to dominant gender norms. While such readings may contain elements of truth, they risk obscuring the moral seriousness and metaphysical intentionality that underpin many women's practices. I do not deny that Islamic education may carry instrumental value for some, but for the individuals I encountered, this was rarely the primary motivation—often it emerged only as an afterthought.

By integrating post-secular sensitivity with metaphysical affirmation, we can better understand Kazakh women's Islamic learning not as a return to "tradition" in the sociological sense, but as a forward movement toward metaphysical grounding in an age of epistemic fragmentation.

Conclusion

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Islamic revival in Kazakhstan is unfolding at a steady pace at many levels including institutional, social and especially grassroots levels despite the lingering legacy of Soviet state suspicion and general exposure to global neoliberal secularism. Even though the publicly visible re-Islamization has received significant attention from scholars of the region, more subtle changes happening in inner circles of Islamic piety movements have been scarcely researched. In this thesis, I have attempted to shed some light at the core of Islamic revival among the young generation of women in Kazakhstan, at the knowledge, orientations and motivations of the more orthodox community that is ontologically-rooted in Islam. Attempting to go beyond reductionist sociological explanations for religious phenomena, I sought to find answers to the following questions: What motivations and/or circumstances drive young women's pursuit of formal Islamic education? What is the significance of religious knowledge and education for these young women? Does it transcend the functionalist or corporeal utility and acquire

metaphysical value as a path towards the Divine? What is the role of contemporary secularized institutions of Islamic education in religious self-cultivation of young women? Does it align with the spiritual function of religious knowledge? As the go-to place for formal and structured Islamic education in Kazakhstan, NMU was the obvious choice to explore these questions and to meet the students of Islamic sciences while also observing the religious instruction and environment.

Methodology. This study greatly benefited from in-depth interviews with *tolibas* of NMU. Interviewing *tolibas* at different stages of their studies allowed me to gather diversified views while identifying the commonalities shared by all of them. While I interviewed only orthodox and strictly-practicing women, by visiting the campus for fieldwork I realized the great diversity in terms of religious commitment and practice among NMU student population. The fieldwork visit also allowed me to see how exactly religious orientations are reconciled with secular governance on the ground. Due to my religious, social and even outward proximity to the students, participating in university classes even as an observer allowed me to temporarily become one of them and fully immerse myself into the university environment and experience the teacher-student dynamics firsthand during classes. At the same time having long semi-structured interviews with students allowed me to recognize my own epistemological and conceptual biases, the limits of my thinking, and the differences I shared with the students. Supplementing my interviews with textual analysis of *Aiel zhane ilim* further enriched the research data allowing a closer look at the discourses happening inside the female piety circles. Even though my fieldwork visit was short and the number of interviews may seem small, I believe my position as an insider to the broader Muslim female community and as native anthropologist and my previous knowledge partially compensated for the limitations of my empirically-gathered data.

Key findings and contributions. As a result of my research I have arrived at several major findings. First of all, all of the students I talked to cherished a deeply God-oriented worldview where they primarily saw attainment of religious knowledge as a God-pleasing act. They sought Islamic knowledge to elevate their Islamic practice as newly-practicing Muslims and even acknowledged the practical value of Islamic degree, but ultimately their decision process was always God-oriented with the Hereafter in mind. That's why it is difficult to capture it within secularist frameworks that either deny or ignore metaphysical dimensions of existence. Living in a largely secular society as young Muslims from non-practicing families, besides knowledge students I interviewed came to NMU for its religious environment, community and spiritual guidance they could get from *ustazs* that they wouldn't be able to find elsewhere. Though, we have also seen that students are not oblivious to the flaws in NMU's environment which originate both from personal shortcomings of people and also secular commitments of the university administration. Nevertheless, *ustazs* at NMU acting both as religious instructors and moral role models relying on traditional Islamic scholarship reinforce Islamic *adab* and theocentric orientations of students even in the classes of instrumental sciences like Arabic grammar. This makes students further appreciate their Islamic education not for its functionalist value or future prospects but for its sacredness and spiritual guidance. Taking a close look at NMU demonstrated how Islamic subjectivities can be cultivated and thrive in overtly secular state-controlled environments through grassroots efforts and common orientation of students and teachers. The extra-curricular activities of NMU students such as producing pedagogical booklets and disseminating the knowledge they gained to the larger female Muslim community through online and offline classes proved their enthusiasm in combating mass religious ignorance and increasing role as agents of Islamic revival and as emerging intellectual elite of the new generation of Muslim women. Hearing the voices of these young women further supported my argument that God-denying

secular-liberal epistemologies cannot capture the most important dimensions of ontologically Islamic existence.

In broader sense, in this thesis, I had attempted to contribute to closing the research gap in anthropological study of female religious education and Islamic revival in contemporary Kazakhstan. After reviewing the studies of female Islamic education in other geographical contexts and identifying the limitations of secular frameworks, this thesis has also attempted to demonstrate the need for more serious engagement with theological orientations of Muslims. Offering a case study of post-Soviet Islamic revival beyond visible activism this thesis also contributed to a deeper and more focused understanding of Islamic revival shedding light to the quiet, steady, publicly invisible yet transformative changes taking place among the post-independence youth. In dialogue with the emerging conversations on post-secular anthropology, this thesis has also made an attempt to centralize God-conscious subjectivity in its theoretical framings.

Limitations and further inquiry. As any other focused anthropological and ethnographic study, this thesis prioritised depth over breadth and hence has been significantly limited in its geographic reach and demographic focus. It also was limited to a rather short fieldwork visit. Also notably, as a gender-specific study it was only focused on females leaving out male students, their voices and experiences. All these limitations can hopefully inspire further research in this area as a relatively newly-emerging phenomena; contemporary Islamic knowledge acquisition in Kazakhstan remains almost untapped by scholarly inquiry and presents many opportunities for various types of social scientific research. For example, further research can be focused on analyzing Islamic revival and female activism in digital space⁶², comparative studies of male and female Islamic education, longitudinal tracking of

⁶² Especially interesting would be a topic that looks into the broader post-Soviet Russophone Islamic scene which covers the wide region stretching between Central Asia, North Caucasus, and other Russian-speaking Muslim communities up to Eastern Europe.

graduates of Islamic institutions and their further paths and influence, or examination of contemporary Kazakh-language Islamic literature and local scholarly production.

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Figure 1. Cover page and first page of *Aiel zhane ilim*.

Appendix B. A brief introduction to René Guénon, Traditionalism and The Crisis of The Modern World.

René Guénon (1886-1951, later adopted a Muslim name of Abd al-Wahid Yahya) was a prolific writer whose works laid the foundation for the Traditionalist School. He and his works were a major influence for such Islamicist traditionalists as Martin Lings, Frithjof Schuon, Gai Eaton, Ivan Aguéli, Titus Burckhardt and more recently Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Gaydar Jamal. There are also a number of other non-Islamicist traditionalists who are closely associated with his legacy such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Alexander Dugin, Baron Evola, Mircea Eliade and others (Sedgwick 2004).

The Crisis of The Modern World [La crise du monde moderne], first published in French in 1927, is one of his more refined works dedicated to traditionalist critique of modernity and is named by Mark Sedgwick⁶³ (2004, 28) as ‘Guénon’s masterpiece’. In this work, Guénon utilizes Hindu cosmology and eschatology to identify the confusion, decadence, and crisis unfolding in the West. In *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Guénon (2004) uses the term “crisis” in a dual sense. First, it denotes a critical juncture at which a profound transformation is imminent, necessitating an impending change of course (2). Second, he draws attention to the etymology of the word “crisis,” linking it to “judgement” and “discrimination.” In this sense, a crisis marks the moment preceding a resolution—whether positive or negative—when the outcomes of a given trajectory are subject to evaluation (3). This brings Guénon to state the objective of his work: to communicate certain fully established preliminary consequences of the crisis, while refraining from making definitive predictions, as ‘the crisis is not yet ended’ (3).

⁶³ A British historian, frequently-cited authority on the history of Traditionalism, who produced the first comprehensive historical account of the movement—*Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (2004).

As the chapters progress, Guénon explains the major differences between modern West and traditional East⁶⁴, noting that before the fourteenth century (around two centuries prior to Renaissance and Reformation) the West, that is to say pre-modern West, was not that different from the East and was as much traditional. However, gradual degeneration of Christendom and rise of humanism, secularism, and individualism, led to the current “dark age” in the West. He sees the only viable solution for the West in return to its pre-modern traditional outlook, specifically through the re-establishment of Catholicism and an intellectual elite⁶⁵ that will lead the movement towards re-traditionalization (111-113), which he posits is still possible in the West despite the difficulties. Guénon asserts that due to the irreconcilable differences, it is not possible for the modern West, as it was at the time, to arrive at a genuine understanding of the East.

⁶⁴ The works of Guénon have been criticized for essentialization and Orientalism. For example, see Ingram 2007, Kahn 2016.

⁶⁵ And by “intellectual” Guénon also means “spiritual” (113).

First interview questions

Islamic education

1. What is your name, age, marital status, and educational/professional background?
2. Why did you apply to NMU?
 - At which age did you decide to apply to NMU?
 - Would you recommend other females to apply to NMU?
 - Have you considered any other universities for application?
3. Why do women apply/go to study at NMU?
 - In your opinion, what are the prospects for female graduates of NMU after graduation (social and professional)?
 - What are your plans after graduation, if any?
 - Have you ever regretted your decision to study at NMU? Why or why not?
4. Do women need Islamic higher education as much as men?
 - Is there a difference between studying at NMU as a male or as a female? If yes, what is the difference?
 - What could be the best applications of their Islamic studies degrees for females?
 - Was there anyone in your family/friends who opposed your decision to study at NMU? Why or why not?
5. Do you think it is disadvantageous for females to pursue Islamic studies at NMU in Kazakhstan in terms of worldly life?

⁶⁶ The English version is for reference only. All the interviews were conducted in Kazakh.

- Would you pursue something else at university level if you could get Islamic knowledge from other sources/institutions - at home, local masjid, school?
 - What is something you don't like about your studies, if any?
 - Do you think you have/had to postpone marriage/motherhood because of your studies at NMU?
6. In your opinion, how competitive is it to get admitted to NMU?
- In your opinion, how difficult is it to study at NMU?
 - Do you think there should be more opportunities for females to get Islamic higher education in Kazakhstan - e.g., increased funding, promotion, raising awareness about NMU among school students/parents, more career opportunities, more universities, more professors?
 - Would you like it, if your daughter wanted to study at NMU?
7. What is the most important thing for you at university? - networks, resources, social environment, knowledge itself, discipline, professors, else?
- Did you consider getting Islamic higher education abroad? Why or why not?
 - What do you like most about NMU? Can be several things.
 - What were your expectations before starting your studies at NMU and how accurate were they?

Follow-up interview questions

Islamic practice

1. Since when and how did you start to practice of Islam?
2. What are the major struggles you face in your daily life now?

3. In what kind of country/time/society would you love/prefer to live?
4. How much have you and your environment changed in the last five-ten years?
5. Why did you start practising religion as a young woman and not when you are old?

Self-actualization and secular environment

6. How do you understand self-realisation/self-actualisation?
7. How do you understand secularism/secular society?
8. How can Muslim women nowadays serve their community or be active in society?
9. How secular/religious was the environment that you were in before NMU?
10. Who are your (female) role models from past or present (if any)?
11. What do you perceive as an ideal woman's life path in the present time? Does it change depending on time/context?
12. Who is your favourite female/male sahaba (companion of the Prophet, peace be upon him) (if any)? Why?
13. What are your current big goals in life (in terms of personal, social, religious, academic spheres)?
14. What is your dream?
15. What are some big goals that you've set for yourself and already achieved? Which ones you haven't? Why?
16. What do you see as positive and negative aspects of today's Kazakhstani society?
17. Is it hard to practise Islam in Almaty?
18. Have you ever faced direct confrontation/criticism of your way of life?
19. What advice would you give to young religious women?
20. What kind of life would you want for your daughter/next generation?

First interview questions

Шарғи ілім

1. Сіздің есіміңіз, жасыңыз, отбасылық жағдайыңыз және білім/кәсіптік деңгейіңіз/салаңыз қандай?
2. Неліктен сіз НМУ-ға оқуға түсу үшін құжат тапсырдыңыз?
 - a. Неше жаста сіз НМУ-ға тапсыруды шештіңіз?
 - b. Басқа таныс құрбыларыңызға/әйел туыстарыңызға НМУ-ға түсуге кеңес берер ме едіңіз?
 - c. Оқуға түсіп жатқан кезде сіз басқа университеттерді қарастырдыңыз ба?
3. Неліктен қыздар НМУ-ға оқуға тапсырады/оқиды?
 - a. Сіздің ойыңызша, НМУ-ді бітірген қыз-келіншектердің болашағы қандай (кәсіби және әлеуметтік тұрғыдан)?
 - b. Оқуды бітіргеннен кейін қандай жоспарларыңыз бар?
 - c. Сіздің НМУ-да оқу жайлы шешіміңізге өкінген кезіңіз болды ма? Неге/неге болған жоқ?
4. Әйелдерге ислами жоғары білім ерлермен бірдей деңгейде қажет пе?
 - a. НМУ-да ұл не қыз ретінде оқудың айырмашылығы бар ма? Егер иә болса, айырмашылығы неде?

- b. Әйелдер үшін олардың ислами білімінің (дипломының) ең жақсы қолданысы неде болуы мүмкін?
 - c. Сіздің отбасыңызда/достарыңыздың арасында НМУ-да оқу туралы шешіміңізге қарсы болған біреу болды ма? Неге/неге болған жоқ?
5. Сіздің ойыңызша, Қазақстанда қыздардың НМУ-да Исламтану саласында білім алуы олардың дүнияуи өмірі үшін тиімсіз бе?
- a. Егер сіз исламдық білімді басқа жерден/мекемелерден - үйде, жергілікті мешітте, мектептен ала алсаңыз, университет/жоғары білім деңгейінде басқа саламен айналысар ма едіңіз?
 - b. НМУ-да білім алудың өзіңіз ұнатпайтын тұстары бар ма? Бар болса, қандай? Жоқ болса, неліктен жоқ деп ойлайсыз?
 - c. Сіз үшін НМУ-дағы оқуыңызға байланысты тұрмысқа шығуды/ана болуды кейінге қалдыруға тура келді деп ойлайсыз ба?
6. Сіздің ойыңызша, НМУ-ға түсу қаншалықты қиын?
- a. Сіздің ойыңызша, НМУ-да оқу қаншалықты қиын?
 - b. Сіздің ойыңызша, Қазақстанда әйелдердің ислами жоғары білім алуына мүмкіндіктерді көбейту керек пе? Мысалы, қаржыландыруды көбейту, мектептегі қыз балалар/ата-аналар арасында НМУ жайлы ақпарат тарату, кәсіби мүмкіндіктерді арттыру, ислами білім беретін ЖОО-ның, профессорлардың санын арттыру? Жоқ болса, неліктен жоқ?
 - c. Өзіңіздің қыз балаңызды НМУ-ға оқуға жіберер ме едіңіз?
7. Жоғары оқу орнында сіз үшін ең маңыздысы не? - кәсіби/академиялық байланыстар, ғылыми ресурстар, әлеуметтік орта, білімнің өзі, тәртіп-тәрбие (дисциплина), профессорлар, тағы басқа?

- a. Сіз шетелде ислами жоғары білім алу жайлы ойландыңыз ба? Неге/неге жоқ?
- b. Сіз үшін НМУ-да оқудың ең жақсы тұстары қандай? Бірнеше нәрсе болуы мүмкін.
- c. НМУ-да оқуды бастамас бұрын НМУ-дан нені күттіңіз? Сол үміттеріңіз ақталды ма?

Follow-up interview questions

Дінді ұстану

- 1. Ислам дінін ұстануға қашан және қалай келдіңіз?
- 2. Қазір күнделікті өмірде дінді ұстануға қатысты қандай қиындықтарға кезігесіз?
- 3. Сіз қандай елде/заманда/қоғамда тұруды қалар едіңіз?
- 4. Соңғы бес-он жылда сіз және сіздің ортаңыз қаншалықты өзгерді?

Өзін-өзі таныту (самореализация) және зайырлы орта:

- 1. Өзін-өзі таныту (самореализация) дегенді қалай түсінесіз?
- 2. Зайырлылық/зайырлы қоғам дегенді қалай түсінесіз?
- 3. Қазіргі уақытта мұсылман әйелдер үмметке қалай қызмет ете алады немесе қоғамда қалайша белсенді бола алады?
- 4. НМУ-ға дейін сіз болған орта қаншалықты зайырлы/діни болды?
- 5. Бұрынғы немесе қазіргі заманда сіз үшін үлгі болған әйел не ер адам бар ма?

6. Қазіргі уақытта кемел әйелдің өмір жолы деп нені түсінесіз? Ол уақытқа/ортаға байланысты өзгереді ме?
7. Сіздің сүйікті әйел/ер сахабаңыз бар ма?
8. Сіздің қазіргі өмірдегі үлкен алға қойған мақсаттарыңыз қандай (жеке, әлеуметтік, діни, академиялық салаларда)?
9. Сіздің арманыңыз қандай?
10. Қазірдің өзінде қол жеткізген мақсаттарыңыз бар ма? Ал әлі де қол жеткізбеген мақсаттар ше?
11. Бүгінгі Қазақстан қоғамының қандай жағымды және жағымсыз жақтарын көресіз?
12. Алматыда ислам дінін ұстану қиын ба?
13. Сіздің өз өмір салтыңызға (дінді ұстану жағынан) қатысты ашық қарсылыққа/сынға тап болған кездеріңіз болды ма?
14. Дінді ұстанатын жас қыздарға қандай кеңес берер едіңіз?