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Becoming Muslim in Soviet and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This is an autoethnographic paper in which I, as an anthropologist, focus on my own experience of being a Central Asian Muslim from Kazakhstan. The paper consists of three main parts describing my spiritual growth and transformation over three periods in my life: my childhood in the late Soviet period, my youth during the early 1990s, and my path to maturity in the late 1990s and early 2000s. All three periods are partly shaped by the history of my family's travels from the northern region of Kazakhstan to the south, and overlap with such historically important processes as perestroika, the collapse of the USSR, and Islamic revival in the period of independence.

Keywords:

Islam, Kazakhstan, Salafism, Sayeds, religious revival

Introduction

This paper is an autoethnography based on the memories and experiences of my childhood and youth from 1987 to the early 2000s. I was born in the city of Tselinograd (currently Nur-Sultan) in 1980, and in 1986-87 my family moved 180 kilometers north to the city of Stepnogorsk. In 1991, we moved again – to the town of Chu, in Zhambul Oblast, Southern Kazakhstan – and, in 1997, I moved to Almaty to start my undergraduate program at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Using the method of autoethnography, I portray my process of becoming a practicing Muslim by focusing on these three places where I lived and the milestones associated with each of them. In this paper, I show how all three cities played a crucial role in creating my perception of what it means to be a Muslim in Central Asia.

In conducting ethnographic fieldwork for other projects in different parts of Kazakhstan and broader Central Asia, and relating what I observed to my own experiences, I came to think that the

stages of my own religious growth coincided with the trajectories of many of my Central Asian Muslim compatriots and were very different from the trajectories of ethnic Russians and other non-Muslim groups.

In Tselinograd, when I was a child, I observed how Islam was practiced by the Kazakhs of older generations, who were born in the early 20th century and who went through and participated in such Soviet modernity projects as collectivization, industrialization, *korenizatsia* (creation of the local Kazakh Soviet cadres), and *Tselina* (so called Virgin Lands agricultural program initiated by in 1953 by the Soviet heads). Tasar (2017) brilliantly described the generation of my grandfather as both Soviet and Muslim. Their Islam was hidden from the public and preserved in the family circles in the forms of blessings, short prayers and other traditions. To me the Islamic practices of my grandfathers are still associated with a sense of fear and trauma. I remember vividly how, even in the late 1980s in the heat of Perestroika, my grandparents would cover windows and close doors during their daily prayers to hide from the eyes of passers-by and how prayers were performed in the half-darkened room.

In contrast to Tselinograd, my life in Chu was associated with the rise of interest toward Islam among a larger share of the population who were “rediscovering” Islam. Interestingly, religion at that time was strongly associated with the sense of growing national identity. The nationalist and religious revivals were strongly mixed. A large number of mosques and madrasas were built, Islamic rituals began to be performed openly across large areas of the former Soviet Kazakhstan, and Islam was becoming an important marker of ethnic Kazakh belonging. What I witnessed as child in the northern and southern parts of the country is portrayed in Dilshod Achilov’s chapter on Islamic Revival and Civil Society in Kazakhstan where he writes that “On the premise that Islam offered a national sense of being Muslim by attaching a religious distinction that separates Kazakhs from ethnic Russians, Islamic revival has also been linked to the rise of nationalistic identities mainly emphasized by Central Asian elites” (2015, p.82).

In my third period, spanning the late 1990s and early 2000s and my time in Almaty, I witnessed first-hand what many western and local scholars call the rise of Salafism, when the generation of young Kazakhs in their twenties started to question the state approved narrative of what it meant to be a Kazakh Muslim. These young Kazakh Salafis¹ were often naïvely searching for the “pure” Islam. By pure, they meant an Islam “clear” from Kazakh traditions, many of which they labeled as non-Islamic, “shamanic,” and “pagan”. In turn, these young Muslims were labeled as followers of “Arab Islam,” which was “alien” to Kazakh culture and were highly demonized on different levels both by the state institutes via state-run mass media and by the followers of so called “traditional Kazakh Islam.”

In the following sections, I describe my experience of becoming and being a Muslim during these three distinctive consequent periods of my life in the hope that this personal autoethnographic

¹ Salafis – followers of Salafism, Islamic movement that originated in Saudi Arabia; it calls for the return to original Islam and criticizes four *mazhabs* (Islamic schools of thought)

narrative will provide some insights for better understanding the spiritual trajectory of Kazakhstan from late 1980s to the early 2000s.

Becoming a Muslim, I: Tselinograd, KazGorodok

Tselinograd, or the capital of *Tselina* (Virgin land), was the former Aqmolinsk, a Tsarist fort in the Kazakh Steppe. After the Tselina campaign of 1950s (Pohl 2007), Aqmolinsk was renamed Tselinograd (capital of the Virgin Lands), and this small town in the steppe became a new Soviet city. My family did not live in one of the new Soviet-style apartments that were constructed during the Soviet period. Instead, we lived in the *Kazakhskii Gorodok* or *KazGorodok* (Kazakh town). Locals would jokingly call it the “Kazakh reservation” in reference and comparison to the Native American reservations in the US. KazGorodok is located on the far edge of the right bank of contemporary Astana, and it is now known unofficially as *Ugolnyi district*.

The street where my father’s and grandfather’s houses were located was called Balochnaia. KazGorodok consisted of 150-200 houses; most were populated by ethnic Kazakhs, but there were also a few Russian and Tatar families. KazGorodok was located on the grimy industrial side of Aqmolinsk, close to the railroad, and was surrounded by Soviet motor depots (avtobazy), concrete silos for storing wheat, and construction cranes.

Despite its industrial landscape, KazGorodok resembled a semi-agrarian Kazakh village. People tended to their cows, horses, and sheep, and I still remember the daily return of 200-300 cows from their pastures. The pastures were located near the large Soviet power station that served the city’s industries. The station’s pipes are still working; they are visible from the left bank of Nur-Sultan. There was no central heating system in KazGorodok, unlike in the central part of Tselinograd, nor were there other modern technological facilities for residents, and people used coal and chopped firewood to heat their houses. To collect water, people from KazGorodok would go to metal water pumps known as kolonkas near the roads.

My family follows the lineage of *Sayeds* or *Khojas*² in the Kazakh tribal system. The Sayeds are perceived as the descendants of the family of Prophet Muhammad, as saintly figures, and are considered to be sacred lineages by many Muslims around the world, including Central Asians (DeWeese 1999; Dudoignon, 2019).

My grandfather, Zhumaghul Bigozhin, was a respected Kazakh elder. As my father and his younger brother shared, Zhumagul, or Ata (grandad) as I called him, had the reputation of a good Sayed: he was depicted by locals as smart, strong, and just, and many Kazakhs would seek my grandfather’s advice for help in solving personal issues.

I think Ata was a typical example of a Central Asian Soviet Muslim man whose generation experienced Soviet modernity (Ro’i, 2000). He was present at the the birth of Soviet Kazakhstan with

² Kazakh’s don’t separate Sayeds and Khojas

the arrival of the Bolsheviks in Aqmolinsk in 1917-1918; he witnessed and suffered during the famine of the 1930s, took part in the Tselina program, and was a political worker in Tashkent during WWII. He was also a member of the Communist party and admired Joseph Stalin, but he nonetheless practiced Islam on the everyday “grassroots” level. From other relatives I have heard that my grandfather started to pray regularly five times per day in late 1960-1970s, which coincided with the reduced pressure on religion in the region (Cornell, Starr and Tucker 2018, p.37). He also practiced religious Muslim celebrations and observed the fast during Ramadan.



Figure 1: Our Qozha lineage and other relatives; my grandfather in the center-right, wearing white shirt and traditional Kazakh cap, family archives

Celebration of Soviet holidays, like Victory Day on May 9, can be seen as a symbol of the hybridity of Kazakh Muslimness: my grandfather invited his elder neighbors, who came with their WWII medals, and before the meal they recited Quranic suras. Cornell et al. writes that Soviet atheism “...failed to achieve its stated goal of abolishing religion; but it succeeded in secularizing the state” (Cornell, Starr and Tucker 2018, p.37). It also highly secularized public life of Kazakh society, while religion was kept within the family circles and daily rituals.

My grandmother, Banu, was from a tribal group called the Nogai and she was also a practicing Soviet Muslim. Historically, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Kazakhs with the name Nogai were usually

associated with Tatars, but my grandmother was perceived as a Nogai from Astrakhan or the Caucasus. It is a misconception to think that Islam in Kazakh patriarchal families was only spread by male elders with years of experience, wisdom, and white beards. When I was six, my grandmother taught me how to recite the Surah al-Fatiha and Surah al-Ikhlās, often referred to by its first line as *Kulhūaallahu Ahad*. My cousin and I would recite these surahs for our relatives during family gatherings and we would be given small gifts or small amounts of money to buy ice cream for our recitations. Looking back at my childhood, I can say that my grandfather and my grandmother played a crucial role in creating my Muslim sense of belonging.

I still remember daily encounters with our older family members, like that one time when our grandmother scolded my cousins and me for playing our games too loudly by saying “Don't behave like that, you are Sayeds, you should behave properly.” Such everyday reminders of our origin played an important role in our upbringing. The recitation of the Quran, watching my grandfather and grandmother praying in the darkish room with closed windows and locked doors, and accompanying my grandparents on their visits to other Kazakh and Tatar friends, elders and WWII veterans who were also practicing Muslims reminded me of my Kazakh Muslimness. This Islam was kept in the family circles on the grassroots level because of the fear of being caught by the state. Probably, the memories of the terrifying Stalinist purges were still fresh for this generation.

Each meeting I went to with my grandparents was accompanied by a short surah from the Quran before the meal and often by the reminders of our lineage and the noble status of Sayeds. I still remember a tall and strong elder Syzdyk who also lived in KazGorodok and whom my grandfather visited quite often. Later, when I was ten or twelve years old, my uncle told me that Syzdyk, in his youth, had been in some kind of anti-Soviet Basmachi movement and had been imprisoned and sent to a Gulag camp.

KazGorodok was a suburb with a large number of elders, many of whom were born before the Russian revolution of 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet state. They preserved the tiny bits of Kazakh nomadic culture and Muslimness in this semi-industrial enclave. I remember the period of *soghum* (winter slaughter), when fat horses and cows were slaughtered and relatives came to visit my grandparents to pay respect and enjoy freshly cooked meat. Interestingly, such celebrations were accompanied by alcohol and Kazakh and Soviet songs. Many other Soviet celebrations, such as New Year, were celebrated in similar ways. During the Soviet period, our Sayed lineage was quite interconnected, and there were endless visits by guests from Tselinograd, Zhanaarqa and the Qorgalzhyn steppe areas. Through these visits we maintained a sense of collective identity and belonging. This unity and the friendly relations we had always surprised our Tatar and Russian neighbors.

Around 1986, we moved to Stepnogorsk, a Soviet semi-secret city founded in 1970 and located around 140 kilometers from Tselinograd. It was “semi-secret” because Soviet military labs were located there, which, according to the rumors, produced bioweapons. After the end of Cold War, Stepnogorsk

was demilitarized and lost its primary function. Yet, even then, just before the collapse of the USSR, Stepnogorsk was a shiny new city with large malls and schools and abundant goods and food provisions. Such abundance was an important factor in attracting people to visit or move to Stepnogorsk. By the second half of 1980s, the deficit of goods during Perestroika had started to spread across USSR (Nath 1989). Stepnogorsk in the late 1980s did not have food shortages. Thus, many people from local villages, and even those from larger cities including Kokshetau and Tselinograd, would come to Stepnogorsk to buy supplies and food. Stepnogorsk's buildings were constructed and built with the use of bright materials and new architectural forms, making this northern steppe city look very attractive in comparison with the monochromatic grey of Tselinograd.

If the first part of my childhood was associated with Tselinograd and my grandparents, who practically adopted me through Kazakh tradition from my parents, I associate the second period with my life in Stepnogorsk and my parents. Here our family had met perestroika and glasnost. My father was a moderate Kazakh nationalist, and he even took part in the 1979 Kazakh protest in Tselinograd. The protest was against the creation of a German autonomous region on the territory of Tselinograd oblast. The events around perestroika and the 1986 student uprising in Almaty, which resonated amongst many Kazakhs, as well as life in Stepnogorsk, increased my father's nationalist vision of the past and present.

Stepnogorsk was a predominantly Russian city, where animosity and racism toward Kazakhs was very visible. In the elementary school, I was met with hostility by my Russian classmates and found myself in many fistfights with them. I was not an athletic child and was beaten many times. The beatings were often accompanied with the shouting of "Beat this Chukcha!" or "Beat the *kalbit*." I didn't know at that time who Chukchas were, but through history and geography textbooks and Soviet films I learned that they were a native group in the northern part of Russia. Chukcha people in Soviet racist anecdotes often represented stupidity and idiocracy (Graham, 2007). *Kalbit* was Russian slang and, although I still don't know the origin, it is often widely used in northern Kazakhstan as a racist term for Kazakhs. Thus, if KazGorodok was a friendly village, Stepnogorsk was a tough challenge. After each of these fights the accompanying racist shouts, I came home and watched the news with my father. Gorbachev appeared on TV often at that time, and the word "perestroika" entered the daily linguistic landscape. I would watch Gorbachev's speeches on TV about the friendship of people and I wouldn't understand why my Russian classmates (not all, but many) would call me Chukcha and Kalbit. Tired of the beatings, I joined the local Soviet wrestling club and did additional weightlifting at home. My father's younger sister was an athletic medical worker, and she gave me a brochure about fitness. I read it at home and did exercises with weights according to the brochure's program. Fitness and wrestling helped me survive.

Stepnogorsk also influenced my religious and ethnic identities, and this was unintentionally stimulated by my parents. By the late 1980s, during glasnost, my father had begun ordering more newspapers in Kazakh, such as *Kazakh Adebiety* (Kazakh Literature) and *Ana Tili* (Mother Tongue). Some of these newspapers even had some text in Arabic script. My father also bought some textbooks

and started learning Arabic. My father often called Arabic the first or native tongue of the Sayeds, and he would explain to me that our ancestors were Arabs but then were assimilated by the Kazakhs. As a seven-year-old boy I also tried to read the newspapers, but at that age it was hard for me to understand them. Books were easier, and I had fun reading them. I became a frequent visitor at my local library, which was located in a long Soviet apartment building in micro-district #6.

The real Islamization of my family started after the death of my grandfather in 1987. His funeral and the meeting with the imam of Aqmola, who was also a Sayed but from Shymkent, increased the religiosity of my father and his younger brother. Both of them started learning about Islam and took Islamic classes. Brochures like “Iman Shart” started to appear in our home at this time. Friday Quran recitations became the norm, and my father would sit and learn Quranic surahs after work.



Figure 2: Funeral ceremony for my grandfather with imam Faizulla (bearded man in fur hat), family archives

Muslim religiosity was one of the key elements of the Kazakh identity of my family in 1980s, even without deep scripturalist Islamic knowledge about Islam. Cornell et al. suggest that “...Central Asians may not have been conversant in theological matters, being Muslim was a key element of their identity” (2018, p.37). Even though my father did not teach me much about religion, I looked up to him as he, like most parents, was a model for his children. At this time, my mother started talking more about our family identity. She is not from the Khoja lineage, but she was proud that her husband and children were the descendants of a sacred family. Just like my grandmother, she corrected and taught me about the norms that were “appropriate” for Sayeds.

It is important to mention that, under the pressure of the Russian majority in Stepnogorsk, being a Muslim, a Kazakh and a Sayed at that time for me was often shaped around the negative identity of “not being Russian.” In my family, this included a constant reminder (mostly from my mother) of food taboos such as the prohibition on eating pork when I visited the houses of Russian friends. The period of living in the Russian speaking Tselinograd and Stepnogorsk ended in 1991 when my family moved to another location with a new environment and an entirely different way of life.

Becoming Muslim II: Chu

In 1991, right before the collapse of the USSR, my father, mother, and myself visited Almaty. Our family traveled to a holistic medicine center, a practice which had suddenly become popular during the glasnost period. On the train back to Stepnogorsk, our family received an invitation from an old family friend to stop for a day or two in Chu, a small city three hundred kilometers away from Almaty. Our family looked quite comical as we were dressed in our northern winter coats and boots (there were heavy blizzards in Stepnogorsk) at the Chu railway station, where the temperature was around negative three degrees Celsius and the snow had practically melted.

The Chu valley had become famous through Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel *Plaha* (Execution Block), where it was described as a place of wild cannabis collection and high criminality. What we had intended to be a one- or two-day stop extended to almost a week-long visit. A Kazakh couple who were friends with my parents and whose father had worked for a couple of years with my dad in northern Kazakhstan had moved to Chu in the mid-1980s. Right before our visit, they had purchased a house from a German family. It was a typical, comfortable, good-quality German house. In addition, they had buildings for livestock, a very nice vineyard, some apple trees, and a garden.

My parents fell in love with the southern hospitality, warm weather, and especially with the idea of having their own house with a plot of land, a vineyard, and livestock. After returning to Stepnogorsk, they sold their apartment and their newly built dacha (small summer house in the suburbs). Within about two months, we had purchased a house in Chu and relocated. This is how, in the spring of 1991, I arrived in Chu as an urban Russian-speaking Kazakh Sayed.

We got cows, chickens, sheep and a horse, so I became occupied with taking care of our little farm. My mother was hired by a local school as a teacher and was later promoted to the position of a principal of the first Kazakh school in this part of town. My father initially worked in commerce, but by the mid-1990s he too became a schoolteacher, teaching history. The 1990s were very tough in Chu. It was a period of infrastructural collapse and a lack of a stable electricity lasting several years, as well as high levels of criminality, violence, and rising post-colonial Kazakh nationalism.

After living in the predominantly Russian environment of northern Kazakhstan, I was deeply shocked by the number of Kazakhs on the street and their dominance in everyday life. Independence was received with lots of excitement expressed in a variety of ways by the Chu dwellers. Kazakh nationalism was widespread and there were several fights between Slavic and Kazakh youth, often in

the local night clubs and discos. But in general, many Russians of Chu, just like Russians around Central Asia and in the other republics of the former USSR, decided to return to Russia. I saw whole streets of Russian houses with the words “for sale” painted on every other gate. Many of my Russian classmates in Chu were preparing to leave Kazakhstan and move to Germany, Russia, or elsewhere.

In Chu, like in many parts of Kazakhstan, sacred families were surrounded by a certain aura of respect, and my family was well perceived as Sayeds. My father became friends with the imam of Chu central mosque, Abdul Khamid, who was an Uzbek Sayed from Taraz. He also became friends with other *ulamas* (Islamic scholars) who were Kazakh returnees (in the past *oralaman*, now *qandas*). One of the Kazakh returnees was Amin mullah, who moved to Chu in the early 1990s from Iran. Amin represented a group of Kazakhs whose ancestors had escaped the Soviet state and famine in the 1930s by moving to Afghanistan. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Amin and many other Kazakhs there moved to Iran.



Figure 3: My father and my relative praying by the car while traveling, family archives

This Muslim *alym* (scholar) and Kazakh elder, Amin mullah, played an important role in my father's Muslim identity formation, and thus also in the increase of our family's religiosity in general. My father would invite Amin mullah quite often and took Islamic lessons from him. Our family started celebrating Islamic holidays, such as Eids, and started fasting and praying namaz regularly. For Qurban Eid we usually slaughtered a sheep from our flock that was intentionally fattened in advance of the sacrifice. The whole family would gather around the chosen sheep, and my father would slaughter it in a ritualistic way. The meat was then cooked for guests such as Abdul Khamid, Amin mullah, and other Sayeds. In the early 2000s, Amin mullah moved to a village near Almaty with all of his lineage, and I

visited him there once. My family asked me to go and receive a blessing from him before beginning my master's program at Indiana University. That was the last time I spoke to him. Amin mullah passed away in 2007.

In a short time, my father had built relations with the local Chu Sayed members and entered their circle. By 2010, when we left Chu and returned to Astana, my father and our family already held a respected position among the Chu Muslims of different ethnic groups. Despite this, for a while, in the view of the Chu Kazakhs, we were still “northerners.” Along with the Sayeds, my father somehow established good relations with local ethnic Chechens and Ingushes, many of whom were members of the Qadiriya Sufi or Kunta Khadji brotherhoods, and my father was quite often invited to their gatherings and *zikrs* (Sufi rituals).

Later, toward the end of 1990s, another *alym*, Abdulkерim mullah, who had also returned to Chu from Iran and Afghanistan, became our family guest and friend. My father had high respect for Abdulkерim and would also take Islamic lessons from him. As I understood, Abdulkерim was quite a scripturalist and supporter of orthodox forms of religiosity. Thus, in Chu, my family was becoming more and more religious, and I increasingly encountered religion on the ground level. However, by the end of my schooling in 1997, I personally was still not praying namaz five times a day and my knowledge of the basic principles of Islam was quite vague. Islam, for my family, like for many others in Kazakhstan, was a part of the cultural landscape. Islamic identity coexisted with other forms of identities such as ethnic, secular, and civic. It took another relocation – to Almaty in 1997 – for me to become a practicing Muslim. I will discuss this in the next section.

Becoming Muslim III: Almaty

In 1997, I came in second place among students from all Kazakhstani state schools in the Republican School Olympic Games in Kazakhstan. This earned me a full state scholarship to study at any department of history at any university around the country. My parents suggested that I move to Tselinograd, which by 1993 had changed its name to Aqmola. They thought that I could study at the Eurasian National University and stay at my uncle's home. Staying in relatives' homes as a student was a normal practice among Kazakhs in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

I, however, had always dreamed about Almaty. Among Kazakhs, Almaty was and still is perceived as a multicultural, open, and interesting city to visit and live in. After visiting the Almaty universities, I practically fell in love with the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. I became a student in the department of history with a specialization in world history.

Between 1997 and 1998, I discovered Almaty and made new friends, but I also spent my school breaks in Chu, helping my parents and enjoying the southern summers. Almost all of my family were practicing Muslims, but no one pushed me to practice Islam on a daily basis. In 1999, my interest toward religion had increased due to the beginning of the second Russian-Chechen war. As a student who was majoring in history, I wanted to learn more about the Northern Caucasus and the “roots” of the conflict.

I wrote several term papers on the 19th century war in the Caucasus and on Dagestani imams, including the famous imam Shamil. My major then became an integral factor that contributed to my religiosity. At that time, I encountered such terms as Sufism and the murids, and I decided to learn more about religion. I just didn't know where and how to start.

In the winter of 2000, almost by an accident, I visited an Akhmadiya religious center. It was a branch of Akhamdiya in Almaty, located in an area known as "Kompot" behind the Abai theater. I became interested. I lived not very far from there and for a couple of months I visited the Akhmadiyat center and listened to their ideas. I never adopted these though. For me it was interesting just to spend time there and talk with Golam Mustafa, a Bangladeshi Akhmadiya religious leader. Meeting with people at Akhmadiya was my first experience interacting with foreign Muslims.

One day that same winter, two Salafis, one Kazakh and one Chechen, came to the Akhmadiya center to have a religious debate. For an hour and a half, they politely talked and debated with Golam Mustafa. Seeing me listening to the debate, one of them came to me when they were leaving and said that I should not come here because "it's not a proper Islamic center, but a heretic place." He then gave me the phone number of one of the "brothers" whose name was R., and he told me that R. ran an education center for Muslims. At the time, I didn't know who Salafis were. It was only much later I learned that those two represented one of the first waves of Salafism in Almaty.

I was quite taken by the energetic speech of these Salafi visitors and decided to call R., who answered and invited me to visit their center, which was located in the Aksai micro-district of Almaty. Aksai was located far from the place where I was living at the time, but I decided to pay a visit because I was looking for "real" ilm (Islamic knowledge). In that moment, I couldn't have imagined that my romance with Salafism would last for one year, or that I would later become a hardcore scripturalist.

The Salafi center in Aksai was located in a three- or four-room Soviet apartment with almost no furniture. Some rooms had long tables and the floors were covered with carpet. In general, it was a nice and clean place. This group of Salafis was multiethnic and consisted of Kazakhs, Tatars, Chechens, Russian converts and others. After getting in contact with this Salafi community and attending regular classes on Islamic *aqyda* (theology), principles of tauhid, and hadiths, I started praying regularly. I still remember my first month of fasting during Ramadan, which I spent as a member of this group. I quickly learned such terms as *jamaat* (community) and *ahi* (brother) that were used daily. The term *ahi* became associated with Salafism for me. I was studying history at KazGU, but after classes and studying in the national library, I would spend time with my brothers.

This first full month of Ramadan we, a group of twenty to thirty people, would regularly pray together. We decided to recite the whole Quran, and our *taraweeh namaz* (evening prayer performed during Ramadan) was at least an hour and a half long. My Ramadan schedule that year was something like this: after classes at KazGU I would head to the center for iftar, we would then drink water with dates and pray the taraweeh. For every taraweeh, we covered one *zhuz* (one thirtieth of the Quran). We stayed in two lines, and the imam, a half Georgian and half Tatar young man, would lead the prayers.

Almost all of us were around 20-22 years old, and we were young and healthy. Many of us practiced sports such as wrestling or martial arts. Because of our sports and studying, fasting and praying for hours was not hard for us. After taraweeh, we had an abundant iftar that was full of food. We didn't know where the money for the food came from, but R. delivered it regularly. Then we would sit and sip tea, receive lessons, or just share hadiths and wait for morning prayer and *suhoor* (breakfast). After suhoor, I would take the early trolley back to my house or directly to the university.

I still remember how, one day during Ramadan, someone told me that brothers from the opposite side of the city invited us over for *iftar*. It was not far from Almaty's Green Bazar. A group of us went there and we had *iftar* in a crowded apartment. There were 30-40 attendees altogether. Someone told me that the group who had invited us was made up of five-six brothers who had decided to rent an apartment together for Ramadan and live in it as a *jamaat*. It was a form of seclusion that they had adopted in order to focus on their praying and fasting. I was fascinated by their religious zeal. We were all sitting on the floor where a large *dastarkhan* (table cloth) full of food had been placed. We shared hadiths and discussed Islam. We felt such a strong sense of solidarity that we decided to spend the night there as one large group, and to share a communal morning prayer. The Green Bazar Mosque was nearby, and we did our early morning prayer as one group as we did not want to mix with other people in the mosque.

For many young Muslims like myself, this Salafi community provided a sense of solidarity, community, and belonging, as well as some arrogance towards the "traditionalists." We believed that our way of practicing Islam was the purest one, closest to the religion of the prophet and the first khalifs. Islam in the Salafi center was easy to understand, as it was based on books set on shelves and printed in Russian. These books were published by the Ibrahim Publishing House in Moscow. The daily interaction with Salafis brought forth a collective sense of belonging and a dynamic and interactive urban form of religiosity that attracted me as a young Kazakh Muslim. It was more attractive to me than the religion I saw in the Chu mosques, where a bunch of elders would talk and "mumble" silently about, as I thought, obedience toward God and the state.

For my spring break I returned to Chu, where I almost immediately got into a confrontation with my father. He was surprised by my growing religiosity, and especially by my criticism of the cult of *aruakhs* (ancestor spirits). I didn't have a lot of knowledge at that time, but in some Bolshevik way I was denying any local practice and trying to delegitimize these. My father even went to a well-educated imam in Chu, Abdul Khamid, for a consultation. He told him that aruakhs exist, but Muslims should ask for support from God first. I also shocked my father during prayers as I held my hands in a way that was different from the Hanafi madhab tradition, I also said "amin" loudly and used the Arabic terms for daily prayers instead of the Kazakh ones. In other words, I behaved in Salafi ways. My world at that time had split in two: Muslims (Salafi) and non-Muslims or "wrong" Muslims. I was so happy and excited to tell my dad how close, friendly, and supportive my jamaat and the ahis there were. I told him how we prayed and recited the Quran in proper Arabic with no Kazakh accent.

When I returned to Almaty at the beginning of the Fall semester in 2000, I discovered that the Salafi center in Aksai had closed: jamaat members spoke with fear about how the police had shut it down. I tried to get in contact with some of my ahis, but studying and academic interests prevailed. Over the short period of three or four months that followed, my Salafi zeal disappeared. I was only twenty years old and Almaty life, with its cultural diversity, was quite attractive. I joined a Tolkien Followers Re-enaction Club, and we made armor and wooden swords to bash each other with in the Almaty mountains. We recreated some historical battles and I remember that, in the Spring of 2001, we decided to recreate the Battle of Hastings, but the Russian members didn't know how to put us, a group of Kazakhs, into the army of "Wilhelm the Conqueror."

I suggested that, to keep the historical narrative "right," we, a group of five Kazakhs, would be "Arab mercenaries" who were "hired" by the Normans. We made some "Arabic" clothing and curved sabers with round shields and even had a banner with Arabic letters on it. We then had a pretty successful Battle of Hastings.

My parents were also happy that I had "returned" to "normal" life and *their form* of religiosity. From time to time, during summer breaks, I took classes in the Chu Mosque from Kazakh and Ingush mullahs. But, in general, I just enjoyed life in my early twenties and started to dream of traveling and studying abroad, as many of my friends were. When I did go abroad, a whole new chapter of my life associated with the US and Indiana University started. That, however, is a story for a different paper.

Conclusion

I separate my path to becoming Muslim into three distinctive parts or stages which reflect my family history and my journey across Kazakhstan's multicultural and multireligious society. In KazGorodok, my Muslim identity was born; in Chu, it was constructed; and in Almaty, transformed. I believe that my process of becoming Muslim mirrors some paths that Kazakhstani society and many other Muslims in Central Asia experienced in the period after independence. I took part in Kunta Hadji zikrs, Salafi classes, and sacred lineage gatherings, and I personally encountered different forms of religiosity which have become topics for study by many western and local scholars.

Studying in the US and encountering cultures other than post-Soviet cultures changed my religious views, and religion became an important part of my spiritual and family life. Being both an anthropologist and a practicing Muslim might seem controversial at first glance, but I have developed an internal consensus and learned to separate my academic activity and my religion. In my anthropological fieldwork I often meet young Central Asians who label themselves or get labeled as Sufis, Salafis, "traditionalists" or other things. This young generation who, in energetic ways, tries to get answers to existential questions about the meaning of life via Islam, often reminds me of myself in my early twenties. Looking at them, I understand that all the curves and trajectories of my own religious path definitely contributed to my becoming an anthropologist and an ethnographer.

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