

## Islam in Everyday Culture and “Wandering Mullahs” in Kazakhstan in the 1950s–1960s

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### Abstract

*This article explores the role of Islam in the daily culture of the Muslim communities in Soviet Kazakhstan during the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing from a diverse range of materials, including memos, reports, secret communications of party officials, and accounts from commissioners of the Council for Religious Cults, the research sheds light on various facets of religious life among the local population. These documents, compiled from firsthand observations during official trips, consistently underscore the profound impact of Islam on the everyday culture of the faithful in Kazakhstan. The authors highlight a noteworthy discrepancy in the influence of Islam, emphasizing its markedly greater sway on the daily culture of Tatars, Uzbeks, Chechens, and Ingush as compared to Kazakhs. The findings suggest a discernible shift of Islam from mainstream cultural life into a “parallel world,” where pre-Islamic rituals and practices persist in society. Notable among these are fortune-telling based on the Quran and healing rituals performed by “wandering mullahs” employing ushyktau, ushkeyru, and the recitation of Quranic surahs. Despite the inherent ideological bias and partiality evident in official documents, the authors argue that these sources remain invaluable for comprehending the impact of Islam on the everyday culture of the Soviet Kazakh population during the 1950s–1960s.*

**Keywords:** *Kazakhstan; Islam; everyday culture; wandering mullahs; religious activity.*

### Introduction

Islam plays a very significant role in the modern world, so it is quite natural that in recent years there has been a noticeable increase in interest in Islamic institutions and the Muslim world. Since Kazakhstan gained independence, scientific interest in the specifics of the cultural life of Muslims living in the republic, traditions and innovations in their religious life and practices has increased significantly. Without analyzing the experience of the relationship between Islam and culture in the historical past, it is difficult to build a modern model of culture acceptable to all institutions of society. Therefore, the need for the Republic of Kazakhstan to develop a national policy towards Muslim communities makes it particularly relevant to study the historical experience of relations between religious communities and the state, including the Soviet period. If modern secular Kazakhstan is genuinely concerned about establishing relations with Islam, then “official Islam represents a return to old problems in its relationship with culture” (Jumayev, 2009).

It is worth agreeing with Jumayev that “Islam is not rooted in mentality of Kazakhs and is not identified with national identity as deeply as among Uzbeks and Tajiks. It mostly boils down to ceremonial and ritual functions in strictly defined situations that do not occur very often in a person’s life (births, weddings, deaths, funerals...), and it is realized precisely as a religion of rites and rituals” (Jumayev, 2009). The penetration of Islam into the conceptual foundations of culture was insignificant. The ceremonial culture of Islam and the Kazakh folk culture existed as if independently of each other, simultaneously creating a dichotomy of compromise and confrontation. Traditionally, Islamic culture maintained its stable significance during the Soviet years, especially in the southern regions of Kazakhstan and among the mixed Chechen-Ingush and Tatar-Uzbek populations.

In this regard, it is interesting to study the role of the commissioners of the Council for Religious Cults as direct officials in conducting state policy. They were responsible for collecting and systematizing material, not only on the influence of Islam on the culture of Muslim peoples but also on the activities of Islamic institutions to survive in the conditions of the atheistic policy of Soviet Kazakhstan (Saktaganova, Mazhitova et al., 2018; Mazhitova, Ilyassova et al., 2022). It is worth noting the articles of researchers who

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studied certain aspects of the influence of Islam on the everyday culture of peoples in the 1950s–1960s (Jumayev, 2009; Khalid, 2007; Mustafina, 2020; Ivanov, 1999; Auanasova, 2007; Sultangaliyeva, 1998; Muhtarova, 2007; Arapov, 2011; Bennigsen, 1999). At the same time, we would like to emphasize that the analysis of the works shows a serious historiographical gap due to the low coverage of the problem in the scientific literature.

## Materials and Methods

Methods: To study the influence of Islam on the everyday life of Soviet society, the authors used a set of methods enabling the examination of both general and specific patterns of this phenomenon. The article widely draws on archival materials from the funds of Kazakhstan archives (State Archives of the North Kazakhstan Region – SKGA, State Archives of the Pavlodar Region – SAPO and State Archives of the City of Astana – Astana City GA). In addition, the authors used materials from Russian archives – Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) and Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI).

Acknowledging that many Soviet documents from state and party bodies were composed within the context of anti-religious propaganda, the authors note that descriptions of Islamic institutions and religious life may be biased and not always objective. Consequently, to critically verify archival documents in the course of this article, the authors incorporated materials obtained from field expeditions. The recollections of Kazakhstanis about the activities of the “wandering mullahs” were supplemented by the materials collected in the archives.

## Discussion and Research Results

In 1941–1953, there was a certain revival of religious life in the Soviet Union, associated with an attempt to consolidate society during the war years. During this period, a clear vertical structure in the governing bodies of the country’s religious life was developing. So, in 1943, the Soviet government created the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. On May 29, 1944, by Resolution No. 628 of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR, the Council for Religious Cults (hereinafter. – CRC) was established under the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR. Its competence included issues related to “religious cults (Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Old Believer, and Armenian-Gregorian churches, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist faiths, and sectarian organizations)” (SAPO. F. 646. Inv. 5. C. 13. Sh. 7).

The mid-1950s are traditionally associated with the tightening of anti-religious policies, the intensification of religious struggle against Muslim communities, and the spread of “scientific atheism” (Saktaganova, 2017). During the time of N.S. Khrushchev, the struggle against Islam on the ground resulted in a powerful anti-religious campaign. As Saktaganova notes: “After the death of I.V. Stalin, significant adjustments were made to Stalin’s religious policy with the adoption of two resolutions in 1954, four months apart (in July and November) Their adoption is evidence of a dichotomy in the state’s policy towards confessions” (Saktaganova, 2017). On the one hand, the state, through its resolution “On major shortcomings in scientific atheistic propaganda and measures to improve it,” mandated that state and party organizations actively and persistently carry out anti-religious work. On the other hand, in the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU “On errors in conducting scientific atheistic propaganda among the population,” administrative interference in the activities of religious institutions was condemned (Saktaganova, 2017). Thus, Soviet cultural policy was characterized by duality and inconsistency, balancing the need to consider the cultural religious heritage on one hand and the struggle against religious consciousness and remnants of the past on the other.

However, the dichotomy in religious policy did not last long. By 1958, a series of resolutions from the Central Committee of the CPSU and the USSR Council of Ministers, including “On the note of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU for the Union Republics,” “On the shortcomings of scientific atheistic propaganda,” “On monasteries in the USSR,” and “On raising

taxes on income of diocesan enterprises and monasteries,” resulted in an intensified struggle against the religious culture of the population.

The activities of the CRC covered a wide range of issues from the preliminary examination and verification of petitions for the opening of prayer buildings to the rejection of petitions and complaints from the believers. In each region of Kazakhstan, its commissioners worked from the CRC, whose duties were defined by the “Instruction for the Commissioners of the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR” (hereinafter. – *commissioner*) (SAPO. F. 646. Inv. 5. C. 13. Sh. 6). According to this instruction, the following functions were defined by the commissioners: collecting the necessary data when checking the petitions of believers; registration of religious societies, their executive bodies and ministers of worship; accounting for religious societies and prayer buildings (houses); monitoring the correct and timely implementation of laws and regulations of the Government of the USSR, as well as the implementation of contracts on the use of prayer buildings and property; submission to the SRC of materials on the closure, construction and re-equipment of prayer buildings (houses); informing the SRC about the activities of religious cults on the territory of the republic (SAPO. F. 646. Inv. 5. C. 13. Sh. 7–14). It should be noted that the commissioners, as cadres of the executive branch, were strictly selected by the regional committee of the party and state security agencies, worked directly with communities and with leaders of a religious cult, their information and role were of great importance in determining state practices in relation to religious denominations.

In the reports that the Council’s commissioners had to submit to the Council for Religious Affairs at least once a quarter, they were required to pay special attention to “a) the number of petitions received from believers; b) questions of a fundamental nature raised by the clergy; c) facts of violations of Soviet legislation. Facts of unauthorized opening or closing of prayer buildings (houses), performing religious rituals in the open air without the permission of local authorities, cases of incitement and provocations to anti-Soviet speeches; d) complaints about the actions of representatives of local Soviet authorities; e) facts of bringing ministers of worship to court; f) facts of illegal claims and anti-Soviet attacks; and others.” (SAPO. F. 646. Inv. 5. C. 13. Sh. 12). These and other instructions served as the main guide in the work of the Commissioners with religious communities. It is worth noting that, according to scientists, in the era of the “Khrushchev decade,” when the Council for Religious Affairs did not yet exist, de-registration acquired the character of a mass campaign of closing churches (Dashkovsky & Dvoryanchikova, 2017). So, only “in 1959, 8 Muslim mosques, 1 church, 16 houses of worship of Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists were closed” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 33. C. 125. Sh. 135). The authors of the article note the bias and ideological predisposition of the commissioners towards the cultural life of believers. This circumstance necessitates researchers to objectively analyze and critically verify the information provided. At the same time, it is worth recognizing that the present ideological bias does not reduce the value of the information presented in the memos and gives a certain idea of the role of Islam in the daily culture of the population of Kazakhstan.

### *The religious culture of Muslims in Soviet Kazakhstan*

In the 1950s and 1960s, Islam, due to its religious policy, was unable to fully realize the possibilities of its own development and was excluded from direct influence on the cultural policy of the Soviet state. At the same time, it managed to maintain its position in the peculiar forms of popular Islam, in the lifestyle of the population – especially among women. “Thanks to this, a peculiar triangle of relations has developed: the Soviet government – official Islam – popular Islam. The movement within it went in one direction, from top to bottom, from power structures to religion” (Jumayev, 2009).

In the Soviet Union, Muslims primarily lived in six union republics: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. They also resided in four autonomous republics of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic: Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Tatarstan, as well as in the regions of Chkalov, Kuibyshev, Ulyanovsk, Gorky, Penza, Stavropol, and Krasnodar.

Historically, representatives of various religions and confessions lived on the territory of Kazakhstan during the period under study. Among them: Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants and others. See Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of the number of religious societies, clergy, and active believers. Compiled according to the data of the Commissioners of the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of Ministers of the USSR (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 67).

Name of religious cults in the Kazakh SSR	at the end of 1947 quantity:			at the end of 1950 quantity:			at the end of 1953 quantity:		
	societies	clergy	active	societies	clergy	active	societies	clergy	active
The Muslim faith	19	19	380	20	20	400	20	20	400
The Jewish faith	1	1	20	1	1	20	1	1	20
Evangelical Christians-Baptists	8	8	160	8	8	160	8	8	160
Total	28	28	560	29	29	580	29	29	580

It should be noted that there was no special accounting of active believers. This summary shows the number of active believers taken from the calculation of 20 people in each religious society. This figure was taken based on the fact that there were at least 20 people of believers who initiated the organization of a religious society.

The religious culture of Muslims in Soviet Kazakhstan manifested itself mainly in the following forms. They engaged in collective prayer meetings on the two main religious holidays – Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha – and weekly on Fridays. Additionally, they observed the 30-day fast preceding the Eid al-Fitr holiday, known as Ramadan. The practice of giving voluntary alms, the so-called “Fitr sadaqah,” was obligatory for believers and was usually given for religious needs in the last days of Ramadan. Sacrifices were made on the religious holiday “Eid al-Adha.” Muslims also engaged in reading the Quran at home with believers on Muhammad’s birthday and participated in religious rituals, primarily performed at home with fellow believers. The main ones were: funerals and commemorations for the deceased, circumcision, naming a newborn, marriage (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 2). In addition, Muslims often made pilgrimages to “holy places.”

The materials of the commissioners show that in the 1950s there were 20 registered Muslim societies operating on the territory of the republic, which had their own mosques and ministers of worship. Of these: in Almaty region, there were 2 societies; in Aktobe region – 1 society, in Dzhambul region – 2 societies, in Akmola region – 1 society, in Karaganda region – 2 societies, in Kyzylorda region – 2 societies, in West Kazakhstan region – 1 society, in Pavlodar region – 1 company, in Semipalatinsk region – 2 companies, in North Kazakhstan region – 2 companies, in South Kazakhstan region – 4 companies.

The religious activity of Muslims living in southern Kazakhstan, mainly in South Kazakhstan and Dzhambul regions, was greater in comparison with the activity of Muslims living in Northern Kazakhstan. This circumstance was explained by the fact that in the south of the Kazakh Republic, a significant part of the population were Uzbeks, whose religious sentiments were higher than those of the Kazakhs. In addition, Uzbek believers more zealously performed collective prayers in mosques, while Kazakhs showed their religiosity mainly in rituals.

There were Muslim special settlers in Kazakhstan, Chechens and Ingush by nationality, who also showed greater religiosity than Kazakh Muslims. For example, the Chechen Ingush made a concerted effort to perform all five prescribed daily prayers, with many adhering meticulously to the practice. They observed the Eid fast with great exactingness to themselves, actively celebrated Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mavlud (Muhammad’s birthday, according to the authors), and more fervently performed the rituals prescribed by Islam (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 18).

Festive divine services on the days of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Mawlud were held collectively by both registered societies and unregistered groups of believers – those who observed religious rites without proper

registration. During the period under review, there were approximately 40 unregistered groups of Muslim believers in the Kazakh SSR who regularly assembled for collective worship on the annual Muslim holidays. However, it is important to note that these figures are approximate. According to the commissioners' notes, the number of believers in unregistered groups has been consistently on the rise. "The growing religiosity of Muslims, as well as believers of many other cults, over the past 2–3 years, is a valid fact, and it alone should explain the increased participation of believers in fulfilling religious requirements" (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 10). Thus, the registration of persons engaged in religious activities was not completed everywhere, but the available data showed that there were a lot of them and they enjoyed influence among believers. Some of them kept in touch with the registered clergy, others acted completely independently (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 10).

All other religious rites (funerals and commemorations, naming a newborn, circumcision, marriage) were conducted by the clergy not in a mosque, but at the homes of believers. The rite of circumcision and burial, according to the Council's commissioners, was performed by almost all Muslims, including those who did not fulfill all other requirements of Islam and did not even go to the mosque.

According to the commissioners, in the 1950s, Kazakh believers began to perform rituals that they had not previously followed. The notes give examples of Muslims inviting "wandering mullahs" home during the celebration of Mawlut (Muhammad's birthday). "Under the influence of the active propaganda of the clergy, Kazakh believers also began to perform rituals that had not previously been performed by believers in Kazakhstan. For example, reading prayers dedicated to the birthday of Muhammad (the so-called "mawlud") at the homes of believers with the obligatory invitation of ministers of worship, who perform the prayer in chorus and accompanied by musical instruments. Many people come to listen to the fulfillment of this prayer" (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 16). For example, in 1953, the believer Berdyayev, who lived in the city of Dzhambul, arranged for the clergy to perform the prayer "Mawlud" in his house with the invitation of 100 guests and spent 3,000 rubles on treating them (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 17). According to the commissioners, the singing of the prayer "Mawlud" at the homes of believers began to be practiced not only on the day of the Muslim holiday "Mawlud", but on any occasion. For example, a resident of the city of Shymkent, Ergen Abdulaev, arranged for the singing of this prayer on the occasion of his purchase of a new house. In 1952, in one city of Shymkent, there were 186 cases of the performance of the prayer "Mawlud" in the apartments of believers (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 17).

In areas without registered religious societies, unregistered ministers of worship conducted rituals among believers, with 515 people officially registered in the Kazakh SSR. Most of them are individuals who previously held lower positions as ministers of worship in operating mosques or come from a religious background (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 17).

The largest number of such cultists was observed in areas where the Uzbek population resided, such as the Sairam district in the South Kazakhstan region of the Kazakh SSR, where 70% of the population were Uzbeks.

In the South Kazakhstan region, each of the 10 village councils had one or several unregistered ministers of worship who performed religious rites for believers. In the Mankent village council, for example, there were four such ministers of worship. They divided the village council into their "zones of activity" according to the degree of their influence among the religious population.

The commissioners, intending to prevent the deepening and expansion of religious influence, used the tactics of delaying and sometimes rejecting the solution of issues raised by Muslim communities. For example, the Commissioner for the North Kazakhstan region, V. P. Lyapunov, reported in an information report for 1957 that there was a desire among Tatar Muslims "to open a second mosque in Petropavlovsk. This is explained by the fact that the existing mosque with its small area, which hardly accommodates 175–200 worshippers, forces some of them to be located not in the prayer hall, <...> forcing worshippers to bow not to the ground, but on the backs of the sitting row" (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 306. Sh. 85–86). The repeated requests of the Muslims in the Petropavlovsk community were rejected with the following reasoned conclusion from the commissioner: "Confirming that worshippers can hardly be accommodated



in the mosque building even on the days of individual ‘zhuma namaz,’ I do not see the need to open a second mosque in Petropavlovsk. The existing mosque can be rebuilt to increase its area” (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 306. Sh. 86). The believers of the village of Sairam have also repeatedly filed petitions for the opening of a mosque, which were rejected by the commissioner of the Council (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 670. Sh. 18). The registered and operating mosques made efforts to expand their flock by creating an attractive image that stood out against secular buildings: “The mosque has an appealing appearance, covered with iron, painted, with a good fence, and is kept clean and tidy. The club, on the contrary, has a neglected, not attractive appearance, is polluted and cluttered. The roof is wooden, dilapidated, in cracks, the porch is broken and in places the boards are torn off, there is no sign” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 705. Sh. 162).

The restrictive policy towards Islamic culture has created a rift in the culture itself and the cultural consciousness of the population. In their reports, the commissioners noted that the social composition of believers was quite diverse and heterogeneous. They were mostly ordinary employees and workers. Semi-legal holidays and rituals were observed not only by ordinary believers and communists, but even by some party figures and major officials who provided patronage to Islamic cultural centers. Thus, the execution of religious rites by communists and Komsomol members, representatives of the intelligentsia, was of particular concern to state bodies” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 6). There were cases when communists openly, without hiding, participated in general worship services held in mosques, as was the case, for example, in Guryev (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 7). Some communists, not limited to the performance of religious rites, initiated the opening of the mosque, “openly pandering to the clergy” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 7).

Among the religious activists were: former chairmen of collective farms N. Aliyev and I. Tulyaganov. The members of the CPSU A. Mukhammedov and A. Gaibov were part of the founders of the religious association. During a month-long fast, Communist H. Papakov led the “tarawih namaz” in an unregistered mosque, attended the “Iftar majlis” held in the homes of believers, and on the day of Eid al-Fitr, he delivered a sermon and, together with two other confessors, divided the money collected during the festive divine service (RGANI. F. 4. Inv. 22. C. 1836. Sh. 22). The participation of communists in festive prayers was noted in many regions of the Soviet Union (RGANI. F. 4. Inv. 22. C. 1836. Sh. 22).

Judging by the reports submitted by the commissioners, there were many such examples. This circumstance caused particular concern to the CRC not only that employees of the state party apparatus took part in rites and rituals, but also used their official position to help imams open mosques and solve other issues of daily life of Muslims of the republic. These facts suggest a deep crisis in Soviet policy towards Islamic culture and religion in general.

Exercising their right to explain legislation on cults, the commissioners not only clarified the essence of its individual provisions to officials of the regional executive committees but also actively participated in the work of the executive bodies. So, in February 1957, Commissioner V. P. Lyapunov attended a closed-door meeting with the secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, I. O. Omarov, where the issue of the activities of unregistered religious groups was discussed. On March 9 of the same year, “he attended a meeting with the deputy chairman of the Executive Committee of the Regional Council, Comrade Drozdetskaya from a representative of the State Security Committee and a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs” (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 306. Sh. 79). The main leitmotif of V. P. Lyapunov’s speeches was the thesis about the emergence of a significant number of Muslims who opened illegal mosques not under the control of the structures of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 13). For example, among the Chechens and Ingush, there were supporters of Kunta-Hadji Kishiev (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 67), there were cases of teaching children the basics of Islam in schools: “...a religious school was discovered with 23 students studying at a comprehensive school at the same time. The children studied religion after school, in solitary order. They were provided with religious books wrapped in the covers of high school textbooks” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 39).

According to the analysis of the commissioners' notes, local executive bodies suggested that mosque attendants encourage Muslims to observe labor discipline on religious holidays to avoid disruptions to work plans caused by absenteeism on those days.

In the information note "On the celebration of the religious holidays 'Eid al-Fitr' and 'Eid al-Adha' by Muslims of the Soviet Union since 1955," the Council for Religious Cults reported to the Central Committee of the CPSU the following: "During the holidays, there are violations of labor discipline on the part of believers in a number of cases. These violations are especially evident in rural areas. In some collective farms, Muslims do not go to work on all days of holidays, or work only part of the day. On Eid al-Fitr day in the city of Semipalatinsk, individual workers from the Zagotzerno base, a ship repair plant, a carpool, railway stations, and an industrial artel did not go to work with the permission of the enterprise administration. Religious holidays are also reflected in the work of educational institutions. So, in the urban Kazakh secondary school in the city of Petropavlovsk, 32 students were absent from classes on the first day of Eid al-Fitr" (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 16. C. 705. Sh. 163).

The attention of the authorized bodies to Muslim holidays is closely related not only to ideological reasons. During their implementation, there was a drop in production and mass slaughter of livestock, which led to an increase in retail prices by 3–100% (Akhmadullin, 2019). So, in the city of Petropavlovsk, the sacrificial delivery of cattle in 1957 amounted to: 14 cows, 16 rams, 8 goats, or, when translated into rams, a total of 122 rams" (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 107). As can be seen from the figures below, this figure increased annually and peaked in 1957. See Table 2 (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 107).

**Table 2.** Number of slaughtered cattle.

years	cows	sheep	total transferred into rams
1953	6	21	63
1954	5	15	50
1955	15	13	58
1956	11	17	94
1957	14	24	122

These figures, in our opinion, reflected an incomplete picture of Muslim sacrifices. It is worth concurring with Commissioner V.P. Lyapunov that "there is no doubt that, in fact, the number of cattle slaughtered for sacrificial purposes in the city of Petropavlovsk is higher than the figures given, as some of the skins of these cattle were not handed over to the mosque and are not reflected in its accounting" (SKGA. F. 22P. Inv. 5. C. 906. Sh. 107).

The state authorities appealed to the clergy with instructions to explain in sermons the need to observe labor discipline during the period of coincidence of the harvest season and religious holidays. It should be noted that "the clergy in registered mosques convinced believers that observing Eid al-Fitr is not necessary for individuals engaged in heavy physical labor, and that this category of persons can and should fast at another, more favorable time for them, etc." (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 33. C. 23. Sh. 56).

The government's frontal attack on all manifestations of Islam led to a search for compromise and cooperation between religious institutions and the secular state. It is no coincidence that the reports of the commissioners indicate that there have been cases when mullahs publicly identified Islam with communism, while the sermons of the registered Muslim clergy also contained a kind of "propaganda" of Soviet legislation on cults. "The principle of equality among all nationalities and races observed by our state closely aligns with the principles of our religion, which has tirelessly fought against racial and national degradation since its inception." Examples of the symbiosis of religious and secular sermons by spiritual leaders led the CRC commissioners for the Kazakh SSR to an important conclusion: "This practice leaves in the minds of many believers the idea of the 'unity' of the goals of the mosque and the Soviet government, of the great

'benefit' brought by the mosque to the cause of building communism" (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38). In our opinion, the emergence of innovations in the sermons of the clergy is associated not only with external pressure on religion, but also with real changes in the consciousness of Soviet people, which occurred as a result of the secular policy of the Soviet state.

Party and government functionaries believed that in the near future, "as we move towards communism," religion in Soviet society would be finished. Soviet culture, secular in its content, will eventually change the attitude of believers towards religion and its role in the cultural life of society. Nevertheless, the commissioners, knowing the real religious situation on the ground, declared the continued importance of traditional culture and religion for believers. To separate the Soviet present from the Islamic past, to counteract archaic folk forms of religion and culture, they initiated the publication of propaganda articles, books, and pamphlets in the Kazakh language: "The Quran and its dogmas," "Origin, essence of Muslim religious rituals, fasts and holidays," "Islam and Woman," "Scientific and atheistic upbringing of children in the family," "Rituals, customs, cult of saints in Islam."

#### *Regarding the "wandering Mullahs"*

Muslim believers were especially zealous about observing religious rituals and traditions. According to the commissioners, during the Khrushchev atheistic campaign, the Soviet government monitored the celebrations of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the performance of Muslim rituals of Janaz, naming, circumcision, tracked the movements of imams of registered mosques and "wandering mullahs" (cultural forms of popular Islam). In Soviet Kazakhstan, unregistered mullahs were quite common – "out-of-mosque," "self-appointed," "wandering mullahs," "illegals" who operated in those settlements where there were no mosques. It is worth agreeing with Guseva that "the Soviet legislation on cults was prohibitive in nature and, in fact, created the basis for the formation of unofficially operating religious groups and spiritual leaders within the USSR" (Guseva, 2013).

In 1955 mosques were registered in the cities of Alma-Ata, Semipalatinsk, Karaganda, Petropavlovsk, Dzhambul, Shymkent and Turkestan (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 33. C. 55. Sh. 46), but in the 1960s there were already four mosques in Kazakhstan, registered in accordance with the procedure established by law (Kokchetav, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk and Tselinograd) and 39 unregistered religious associations (Astana City GA. F. 185. Inv. 2. C. 24. Sh. 5). The decrease in the number of official mosques has consistently led to a positive growth in the number of unregistered clergies. It can be assumed that Islamic culture and pre-Islamic practices closely related to it passed into the sphere of family influence and continued to persist in the life of the believing part of society.

The commissioners tried to find any justification for suppressing the activities of mosqueless mullahs. Meanwhile, "wandering mullahs" appeared in various places of Kazakhstan, massively conducting Muslim rituals, and then disappeared in an unknown direction. Thus, the commissioner of the Council for Religious Cults at the regional Executive Committee A. Tishkov reported: "There are over 100 so-called wandering mullahs operating in the region. The largest number of wandering mullahs operates in the North Kazakhstan and Tselinograd regions. There are wandering mullahs in almost every district of the region. They are engaged in the propaganda of Islam, perform Janazah over the deceased, take part in commemorations on the 1st, 3rd, 7th, and 40th day after the death of the deceased, organize and conduct prayers on the occasion of religious holidays, 'Eid al-Fitr,' 'Eid al-Adha,' collect a religious tax 'fidya' from Muslim believers during the fast 'uraza'." (Astana city GA. F. 185. Inv. 2. C. 17. Sh. 4).

It should be noted that in their memos, the commissioners invariably drew the attention of the authorities to the growing number of "wandering mullahs." They visited the homes of believers, "conducted individual treatment of people, poisoning their souls." Among the rites popular among believers, which were performed by "wandering mullahs" was the rite of circumcision. "In March of this year, a mass circumcision of boys was organized at the Dzhambul state farm of the Ermakov Production Department in front of the party organization. Among the children subjected to this humiliating religious rite, 11 children were the children of communists" (RGASPI. F. 17. Inv. 93. C. 572. Sh. 19).



The activities of the “wandering mullahs” have repeatedly been the subject of statements by Commissioner A. Tishkov. In one of his memos to higher authorities about the activities of the “wandering mullahs,” he wrote the following: “According to the statement of the director of the Kazakh secondary school of the Bestube mine in the Tselinograd region Comrade Kanapin, 90% of Kazakh boys’ students have been circumcised. The rite of ‘sunnet’ (*circumcision* – authors) is flourishing and is a profitable means of mullahs” (Astana city GA. F. 185. Inv. 2. C. 17. Sh. 5). In the same note, to confirm his arguments, he refers to another example of the “profitable business” of “wandering mullahs”: “Some mullahs are engaged in organizing pilgrimages to the south of Kazakhstan, to the so-called holy places, and perform Sunnets. In the summer of last year, Alpysov Jarmukhambet Mambetovich, a resident of Petropavlovsk, born in 1915, a former medical worker, performed a sunnet to 20 boys in the village of Daukara in the Volodarsky district of the Kokchetav region. He took 10 rubles for each child, earned 200 rubles in one day” (Astana city GA. F. 185. Inv. 2. C. 17. Sh. 5).

In addition to religious practices, another area of activity of the “wandering mullahs” and registered clergy caused concern on the part of the authorities. The fact is that the latter have not unsuccessfully inspired believers with the idea that by performing certain religious rites, they thereby demonstrate their belonging to the nation (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 29). As a result, not only believers, but also a significant part of non-believers considered some religious and cultural rituals to be national, obligatory for all people belonging to a particular nation. This was especially true of naming, religious weddings, funeral services, and ritual circumcision. In many localities, in areas of traditional spread of Islam, especially in rural areas, not only from the mouths of elderly people, but also from the mouths of a young educated person, one could hear: “Not circumcised is not Uzbek” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 30). According to the commissioners, such ideas were sometimes so widespread that the children themselves, “noticing during bathing that a fellow villager of the same age had not been circumcised, begin to laugh at him, saying that he had abandoned his nation” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 30). A questionnaire survey conducted by the authorities showed that 80% of the population supported the conduct of this ceremony. As a result, the chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers of the USSR V. Kuroyedov came to the conclusion that “since childhood, the religious rite has served to isolate people of different nationalities, and in the modern world, contributes to the penetration into human consciousness of the idea of some kind of exclusivity of those who are subjected to ritual circumcision” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 30).

It can be seen from the documents that the commissioners tried to “respond in time” to each such case and, as a “moral argument” for initiating the persecution of “wandering mullahs” who secretly conducted traditional religious rituals and spiritual rites, cited the following arguments: “activity is not as a service in the name of Allah, but as a means of obtaining material benefits” and “unsanitary conditions” (Astana city GA. F. 185. Inv. 2. C. 17. Sh. 4).

Noting the depth of Islam’s penetration into the consciousness and everyday culture of Soviet society, the commissioners noted in their reports that in practice it was combined with traditional pre-Islamic beliefs and ideas.

It is no coincidence that the commissioner of the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR B. Dzhumashev, in a directive letter to the commissioner of the Pavlodar region on February 12, 1953, pointed out the actions of “wandering mullahs” that went beyond the usual rituals for the Muslim religion. He drew attention to the transfer to the prosecutor’s office of the case on the religious practices of those mullahs who were engaged in “imaginary treatment, healing of the sick, sale of so-called ‘healing’ water at mazars and ‘holy’ places, various prophecies and predictions, etc.” (SAPO. F. 646. Inv. 1c. C. 4. Sh. 123–4).

“Wandering mullahs” often organized pilgrimages to holy places. 20 places of pilgrimage of believers were identified in the Kazakh SSR. The vast majority of these pilgrimage sites were located in cemeteries and existed in the form of separate holy graves, holy trees and springs, which were visited by believers on the days of annual Muslim holidays. The number of pilgrims was small. Along with this, there were many holy

places of mass pilgrimage for believers in the republic. For example, in southern Kazakhstan there is the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and others. Several thousand pilgrims gathered to these and other similar holy places during the annual Muslim holidays. In some of these holy places, mullahs operated, who were engaged in healing from diseases and performing religious rites.

The authors of the article conducted interviews among the adult population of the former Semipalatinsk region in the course of field research, which allow, among other things, to identify several popular types of treatment with “wandering mullahs.” Let us mention some of them.

From an interview with Kuat Tazabekuly (born in 1953). “My father, Tazabek Kapsametuly, studied in a madrasah as a child, knew the Quran well, read prayer even in Soviet times, held an oraza, mastered Arabic graphics. We had a good library of books in Arabic at home. My father did not recognize the registered clerics of the mosques of that time, considering them illiterate, who colluded with the Soviet government. He had a negative attitude towards the Soviet government. He had never worked on a collective farm. He received remuneration for religious and healing practices. He used such healing practices as *tamyr ustau* (determining the diagnosis by pulse), treated various diseases by reading surahs from the Quran.”

From an interview with Aliya Ospanova (born 1964). “My father Seitkazy Besetayev lived in the Ayaguz district. He was considered a man possessed by an aruah (spirit). He inherited his spiritual and healing talent. He wore white robes, knew the Quran, and spoke Arabic. He was engaged in such healing practices as *ushyktau*, *ushkiru*, and reading surahs from the Quran. He knew the healing properties of herbs, prepared infusions from various medicinal mixtures. He did a spiritual practice – dhikr. After the death of my father, people in search of healing from diseases come to his grave, tie a white cloth.”

In addition, “wandering mullahs” often practiced the use of amulets with sayings from the Quran, spells and prayers embedded in them in the treatment of patients.

Soviet policy towards different peoples promoted an international culture of communication and behavior. However, despite all the ideological tools used, the unregistered Muslim clergy formed their own religious format of a culture of communication with secular society and with representatives of other religious denominations. This can be clearly seen on the example of religious funerals. “And the point here is not so much the funeral rite performed by an unregistered minister of worship, but rather the separation of cemeteries according to the principle of religion. <...> one can see cemeteries divided into several parts or several separate cemeteries – ‘Muslim’ (respectively ‘Kazakh,’ ‘Chechen,’ ‘Ingush’), ‘Christian’ (or otherwise it is popularly called ‘Russia’ or ‘international’) and ‘Jewish’ (‘Jewish’). Moreover, as a rule, both believers and atheists of those nationalities who professed Islam in the past are buried in the “Muslim” cemetery, and all people of those nationalities, respectively, whose representatives for the most part used to profess Christianity, are buried in the ‘Christian’ cemetery” (RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 62. C. 38. Sh. 30). The ministers of worship, who held control over funeral affairs and cemeteries in many places, vigilantly ensured that no Russian was buried in a Muslim cemetery, and conversely, that no Kazakh, Dungan, Uighur, Uzbek, Ingush, Chechen, or Tatar was buried in a Christian cemetery.

As a result, it turned out that people of different nationalities lived throughout their lives in a “friendly international family of peoples,” worked hand in hand for the “triumph of the international ideals of communism,” and after their death they were bred to “national” cemeteries, most likely using them to preserve religion and cultural isolation in the eyes of those who remained alive.

## Conclusion

Analyzing the place and role of Islam in the everyday culture of Kazakhstan in the 1950s–1960s, it is necessary to note some displacement of Islamic institutions from the public life of Soviet society into the “other world,” where it has continued to exist to one degree or another up to the present time. This is due to the fact that Soviet culture, secular in its essence, instilling its values in society, over time changed the attitude towards religion and its functions in the cultural life of citizens. In turn, the policy of the Soviet

government pushed religious institutions to seek compromise and cooperation with the authorities. However, despite the secularism of society, Islam maintained its position not only in officially registered religious institutions, but also in the cultural forms of popular Islam. Judging by the official data presented in the memos of the Council's commissioners, the cultural life of believers covered an increasing number of people every year. A striking example of which is the vigorous activity of the "wandering mullahs," places of mass pilgrimage and worship of Muslims, who did not cease to exist even during the period of a powerful anti-religious campaign. Thus, the 1950s–1960s can be called a time of "agreement" and symbiosis of authorities and Islam through popular Islamic traditions and the secular culture of Soviet society.

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## List of abbreviations

F. – Fund.

I. – Inventory.

C. – Case.

P. – Pile.

Sh. – Sheet.