

## **Religion in the Kazakh Khanate**

Islam became the official religion of the Kazakhs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its main centres were Turkestan, Khwarazm, Bukhara and Astrakhan. Merchants played an important role in the spread of Islam among the Kazakhs. While describing the events of 1508–9, Ibn Ruzbihan wrote that ‘Kazakh merchants study the precepts of Mohammedanism... and now their khans and sultans are Muslims. They read the Qur’an, say their prayers and send their children to school.

Islam did not, however, strike deep roots among the ordinary people, most of whom remained unaffected by its dogma, tending instead to cling to the beliefs of the pre-Islamic period, based on the worship of Tengri. The concept of Tengri was adapted to the new conditions: the deity gradually took on a monotheistic form and began to be identified with Allah. It is not by chance that the dual concepts of ‘Tengri–Allah’, ‘Tin–Aruakh’ and ‘Martu–Shaytan’ came into popular use.

Despite the teachings of Islam, the people long continued to worship their ancestors and kept images of them. The old rites were especially observed by the nomads, who were little affected by Islam. All these beliefs were denounced by the Islamic clergy (culama’). The shaykhs (head men, tribal leaders) and qazis (judges) of Bukhara, acting at the instigation of Shaybani Khan, drew up a fatwa (legal opinion) in which it was asserted that since the Kazakhs were idolaters, the khan should proclaim a holy war against them.

The Kazakhs worshipped the spirits of the earth (Zher-ana) and water (Su-ana), to whom they consecrated unusually shaped mountains and cliffs, caves, groves, lone trees and springs. They also continued to worship the tutelary spirits of sheep (Sholpan-ata), cows (Zengi-ata), horses (Kambar-ana) and camels (Oysil-qara). Offerings of mare’s milk were made to the moon and sun, with prayers for obtaining the life-giving gift of water and dew. Fire worship (Ot-ana) played a very important part in the life of the Kazakhs. Fire was regarded as the tutelary spirit of home and hearth.

Some elements in the burial customs of the Kazakhs also dated back to ancient beliefs. On the death of a warrior, his bow, spear, saddle and the head of his favourite horse were placed beside him in his tomb, and food and drink were left for him. The custom of the wake was observed when a man died at home. On the following day the deceased was subjected to purification by fire, after which he was buried. Nobles were buried in holy places: for example, near the mausoleum of Khwaja Ahmad Yasawi in Turkestan, mausoleums called kumbez (Persian, gumbad, dome) or sagana-tam of richly ornamented fired brick were built for members of the nobility. In the Mangishlaq and the north Caspian regions such mausoleums were built of coquina.

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