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## RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM, SUFISM AND THE ROLE OF ISHANS IN NOMADIC KAZAKH SOCIETY

**Abstract.** The article investigates the influence of the natural-geographical environment of Kazakhstan on the process of rooting Sufi traditions and religious syncretism in the medieval nomadic Kazakh society. The article identifies the main routes of seasonal migration and specific features of the nomadic process in medieval Kazakh society and indicates the cause-and-effect relationship between the theory of geographical determinism and the spread and rooting of Sufi traditions in local culture.

Particular scientific attention in the article is paid to the phenomenon of the later Sufi tradition, known as “Ishanism”, which has been studied in this article in the context of the socio-political developments that took place in the nomadic Kazakh society of the early 18th - late 19th centuries. This gives an understanding of why the religious mission of the Ishans succeeded in the process of reintroducing the Kazakhs to Islamic traditions. Eventually it should be assumed that their religious and missionary activities lay on the fertile soil of the social and political realities, which had matured by that time among the nomadic Kazakh society and thus gave this process a powerful spiritual impulse and dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Kazakhstan, Central Asia, natural environment, Islam, Sufi traditions, nomadic Kazakh society, ishans.*

**Мұхит Асанбаев, Руэлл Хэнкс**

## ДІНИ СИНКРЕТИЗМ, СОПЫЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ КӨШПЕЛІ ҚАЗАҚ ҚОҒАМЫНДАҒЫ ИШАНДАРДЫҢ РӨЛІ

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада қазақтардың ортағасырлық көшпелі қоғамындағы сопылық дәстүрлер мен діни синкретизмнің тамырласу үдерісіне Қазақстанның табиғи-географиялық ортасының қалай әсер еткендігі зерттелген. Мақалада ортағасырлық қазақ қоғамындағы маусымдық көші-қонның негізгі бағыттары мен көшпелі процестің өзіндік ерекшеліктері айқындалып, географиялық детерминизм

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теориясы мен жергілікті мәдениеттегі сопылық дәстүрлердің таралуы арасындағы себеп-салдарлық байланыс анықталған.

Мақалада XVIII ғасырдың басы мен XIX ғасырдың аяғындағы көшпелі қазақ қоғамының қоғамдық-саяси дамуы контекстінде зерттелетін «Ишанизм» деп аталатын кейінгі сопылық дәстүр құбылысына ғылыми назар аударылады. Ишандардың діни миссиясының қазақтардың исламдану процесіне нәліктен ықпал еткендігі айқындалған. Сондай-ақ, аталмыш жұмыста ишандардың діни-миссионерлік қызметінің көшпелі қазақ қоғамында нығаюына сол кездегі әлеуметтік-саяси процестердің орын алуынан екендігі көрсетіліп, бұл процеске қуатты рухани серпін берілуі зерттелген.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қазақстан, Орталық Азия, табиғи орта, ислам, сопылық дәстүрлер, көшпелі қазақ қоғамы, ишандар.

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**Мухит Асанбаев, Руэлл Хэнкс**

## **РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЙ СИНКРЕТИЗМ, СУФИЗМ И РОЛЬ ИШАНОВ В КОЧЕВОМ КАЗАХСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ**

**Аннотация.** В статье исследовано влияние природно-географической среды Казахстана на процесс укоренения суфийских традиций и религиозного синкретизма в средневековой кочевой среде казахов. В статье выявлены основные маршруты сезонной миграции и специфические черты процесса кочевания в средневековом казахском обществе с указанием причинно-следственной взаимосвязи между климатическим фактором и распространением суфийских традиций в местной культуре.

Внимание в статье уделено также феномену позднейшей суфийской традиции, известной как «ишанизм», которая в данной статье изучена в контексте социально-политического развития кочевого казахского общества начала XVIII – конца XIX веков, что дает понимание того, почему религиозная миссия ишан способствовала процессу практически повторной исламизации казахов. Следует исходить из того, что религиозно-миссионерская деятельность ишанов легла на благодатную почву социальных и политических процессов того времени, что придало этому процессу мощный духовный импульс и динамику.

**Ключевые слова:** Казахстан, Центральная Азия, природная среда, ислам, суфийские традиции, кочевое казахское общество, ишаны.

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### **Introduction**

In recent years a number of studies and publications have appeared on the topic of strengthening Islam in the nomadic Kazakh society after the Kazakh lands became part of the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century. Some scholars claim that the strengthening of Muslim religious traditions and institutions among the Kazakhs was due to “external conditions” [Weller, 2014]

which refers to the influence of institutional and educational initiatives taken by Tsarist Russia to regulate religious issues in nomadic Kazakh society. This period is characterized as the era of a new form of state-religious interaction in Kazakhstan and is presented by many researchers of this topic as “Islamic revival” or “Islamic transformation” [see Olcott, 1995; Frank, 2003].

With this approach to the topic of Islam in the nomadic Kazakh society, the study of the influence of Central Asian Sufism on the so-called “Islamic revival” and its role in the life of nomadic Kazakh society remained mostly ignored in the research field. Abashin correctly notes that: “despite the clearly growing number of publications about Sufism, the general level of knowledge about it, especially among the public, remains very low” [2001, p.119]. In particular, the influence of geographic determinants that played a natural role in the spread of Islam and Sufism in the nomadic environment still has not been explored by scholars. The study of geographic determinants allows a more holistic view of the specifics of the development of Islam and Sufism in medieval Kazakh society.

While aware of the pitfalls of using a geographical determinism theory, we nevertheless proceed from the fact that there is a relationship between the spatial environment and the development of Sufi traditions in the nomadic milieu of the Kazakhs. One of the most important research tasks is to determine which routes of seasonal migration of nomads contributed to the spread of Sufism. In addition, the phenomenon of the later Sufi tradition in the form of Ishanism will be considered in the context of socio-political development of the nomadic Kazakh society of the early 18th – late 19th centuries, which gives an understanding of why the religious mission of the Ishan succeeded in the process of reintroducing the Kazakhs to Islamic traditions. We should proceed from the fact that their religious missionary work lay on the fertile ground of the social and political processes that had matured by that time in nomadic Kazakh society, which gave this process a powerful spiritual impulse and dynamics.

### **Research methods**

The author used the conceptual ideas and provisions of geographical determinism theory to reveal the cause-and-effect relationships of the spread of Sufi traditions in nomadic Kazakh society and its interaction with religious syncretism.

The methodological basis of the study is based on such general principles of scientific knowledge as historicism, objectivity and consistency. The method of historical and geographical reconstructions has been used in the article on the basis of archival, ethnographic, and reference materials.

### **The main part**

*The role of the geographical factor in the formation of the religious influence of Central Asia on the nomadic Kazakh society.* In the process of interaction with the natural environment, nomadic Kazakh society adapted to the specific survival conditions characteristic of the predominantly steppe landscape of

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Kazakhstan. Taking into account the natural environment, the main form of livelihood for the Kazakhs, in contrast to the settled communities of Central Asia, was seasonal pasture farming. Seasonal movement in search of fresh pastures for sheep, horses and camels (the Kazakhs did not breed cattle due to their inability to forage in winter) was an urgent necessity. The routes of seasonal movement were developed over many years of interaction with the natural environment and were well worked out by nomads to the smallest detail. They included taking into account all the factors necessary for this, the main one being the presence of seasonal pastures named by the time of year, which is reflected in their name in the Kazakh language: “*qystau* or winter pastures, *kokteu* or spring pastures, *dzhailau* is summer pastures and *kuzeu* as autumn pastures” [Kadyrbayev, 2018, p.89].

It should be noted that although natural conditions forced the majority of Kazakh tribal structures to engage in extensive nomadic animal husbandry, there were also Kazakhs who engaged in a limited type of agriculture. This type of economy did not have any noticeable impact on the formation of the way of life of the Kazakhs, as it had a very limited distribution and was strictly localized in the geographically suitable southern and southeastern regions of Kazakhstan, where, as Kadyrbayev states, “the Kazakhs grew millet, barley and engaged in limited farming, fishing and even melon farming” [2018, p.73].

One result of this rhythm of seasonable movement, with mobile social dynamics, was that it prevented the emergence of complex religious communities and institutions in the nomadic environment. In this regard, the nomadic way of life of the Kazakhs was a natural barrier to the establishment of traditional Islam in the local communities, in contrast to the neighboring sedentary communities of Central Asia, where an important role was traditionally played by the religious clergy, with its religious institutions

However, the southern and southwestern borders of Kazakhstan traditionally had close historical, commercial and religious ties with neighboring sedentary agricultural cultures of Central Asia. Moreover, the natural and climatic conditions of the south and part of the southwestern tip of Kazakhstan turned this strip into a favorable place for wintering of the majority of Kazakh tribes from various parts of Kazakhstan. Besides the inhabitation of southern and southwestern Kazakhstan by local tribes, a number of other tribal associations from central, northern and western Kazakhstan positioned their winter pastures here in the district of Mangyshlak, Ustyurt and in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya river, on the north coast of the Aral sea and nearby medieval towns of Turkestan, Sairam, Sozak, at the middle and lower reaches of the Syr Darya river and in the foothills of the Karatau ridge, in the lower flows of the Chu River, and Sarysu River. It is known for certain that all more or less well-known large Kazakh tribal structures had their winter camps in this region. As Tairov noted in this regard, “the main mass of the nomadic population of the Ural-Kazakhstan steppes and semi-deserts, nomads and semi-nomads of Central Asia was concentrated here in the winter period” [2003, p.160].

Kazakhs used to spend three to four winter months a year in this region, and then with the arrival of spring dispersed to the summer pastures of central, northern and western Kazakhstan, in strictly defined places assigned to one or another tribal association. On average, the length of this route could reach up to a thousand or more kilometers. As Kadyrbayev notes, “the Kazakhs’ migrations went on a wide front, so that those who were in the avanguard could leave the grass and shrubs necessary for those who followed them. “The distance between the units of the moving people might reach up to two hundred kilometers” [2018, p. 70].

Thus, this region should be considered as the main place of winter residence for many Kazakh tribal unions, where the powerful religious influence of Central Asia has been established. Sufi traditions managed not only to concentrate in this region, but also to go far beyond the geographical boundaries of the entire southern Kazakhstan due to the route that ran from the vicinity of mount Karatau and the Syr Darya river valley in the north and northwest direction, since it geographically connected different parts of the Kazakh steppe with Central Asia.

Because of the migratory nature of Kazakh society, the spread of Islam and the rooting of Muslim traditions was a long, sometimes protracted process. Key to this process was the vital role played by Central Asian Sufi traditions in contrast to what might be termed traditional Muslim teachers and scholars, who were practically absent in the nomadic environment of the Kazakhs. In fact, we can say that from the moment the Kazakhs entered the historical arena in the 15th century, the influence of Central Asian Sufi traditions in Kazakhstan was felt until the early 20th century, that is, until the anti-Islamic and atheistic ideology of the Soviet government was established in the region.

*Development of Central Asian Sufi traditions in the nomadic Kazakh society.* Central Asia is said to be the birthplace of a number of famous Sufi traditions named after their founders: Khoja Ahmad Yassawi (Yasawiyya), Abd al-Khalik Gijduvani and Baha ad-din Naqshband (Khojagon-Naqshbandiyya), Najm ad-din Qubra (Qubrawiyya). This region has become the spiritual center where each of the above Sufi traditions has gone through a long path of evolution, from flourishing and rising to stagnation and decline. The sacred space of Central Asia had an extensive influence on the entire perimeter of the region and was felt not only in the southern and northwestern regions of Kazakhstan, but also in western Siberia and the Volga-Ural region, where the Tatar Muslim communities of Khorezm came from. Religious migrants from the Russian Empire, presumably, found themselves on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan for a very good reason. They made use of “Sufi Naqshbandi mujadidi network as a stable channel of communication with their homeland” [Bustanov, 2016, p.185].

At the same time, the evolution of Sufi traditions, as well as various aspects of the religious life in the medieval communities of the region, remain largely unknown. We can only construct certain models of how the process of transformation of Sufi traditions in Central Asia transpired in a nomadic

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environment, since the medieval chronicles and biographical works of Sufis do not contain neither a ready-made nor coherent narratives about “how, when, and why Sufism had arisen and developed in time and space” [Knysh, 2017, p. 3].

Special attention should be assigned to the syncretism of Sufi traditions with local beliefs and views of the pre-Islamic period, which is clearly seen in the example of synchronization of the cult of “Muslim saints” and “ancestor cult.” Moreover, the presence of such forms of coexistence can be found in other nomadic, semi-nomadic and even indigenus sedentary communities of Central Asia. Similarly, the establishment of the practice of hereditary transmission by the leadership of the Sufi community in Yassawiya circles was noted, which allowed them to successfully take root in the nomadic society of the Kazakhs. Syncretism of Sufism and local pre-Islamic beliefs in one form or another can be found in the whole of Central Asia, which indicates the flexibility and high adaptability of the “Central Asian” Sufi traditions in the issue of coexistence with local beliefs and views of the pre-Islamic period.

It is believed that the appearance of Sufism in Central Asia dates back to the 10th century. At the same time, the appearance of its sacred status and the potential for its dissemination became visible from the 14-15th centuries, when more or less complete samples of Sufi literature were recorded, created with the direct participation of representatives of Sufi traditions. It is quite logical to believe that it is from this period that we can talk about the leading social role of Sufism in the life of local communities in the region. Many experts are well aware that since the first organizational forms (khanqah, zawiya etc.) appeared in Sufi fraternities, Sufism has acquired all the signs of a social movement, involving people from different strata of medieval societies in its ranks. The natural stage in the development of Sufism from this point of view was the involvement of the Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) and their leaders into political life [Khurramov, 2016].

It is widely believed that Yassawiyya tariqat was able to show special vitality among the nomadic Kazakh society. At least, it is from this Sufi tradition that many generations of Sufis have grown up and are now revered by Kazakh believers. For centuries, the Yassawiyya tradition was considered the main direction of Sufism, which played a great role in introducing Kazakh nomads to Islam. The bulk of the narrative devoted to the history of Islam in Kazakhstan speaks in favor of its rise in the nomadic Kazakh society. There is still a prevailing opinion in scholarly circles (most often in cultural and ethnographic studies) that the Yassawiyya tradition should be attributed for the most part to the Turkic world. For example, Devin DeWeese argues that in the Middle Ages it was the Yassawiyya tariqat (and not other Sufi tariqats, for example, Naqshbandiyya) that became a noticeable phenomenon for the nomadic population of the Syr Darya river basin and the cities of Turkestan, Otyrar, Sygnak, and Sauran. He proposes that Sufism in the form of the Yassawiyya tariqat played a key role in the spread of Islam in the steppe regions of Central Asia inhabited by Turkic-speaking nomads, “including a group that became known since the 15th

century as the Kazakhs” [DeWeese, 2013, p. 27]. This assumption partly reflects the historical stereotypes about the role of Khoja Ahmed Yassawiyya who promoted, allegedly, the conversion of the Turks into Islam. He also points to the place where Khoja Ahmed Yassawi lived and preached Sufism, in particular the city of Yassa, or modern day Turkestan, located on the border of the urban, commercial environment of the Syr Darya river valley and the steppe: “the presence of a mausoleum in the city of Yassawi (Yassa), known as the main place of pilgrimage since the 14th century, only strengthens the understanding that the Sufi traditions named after Khoja Ahmed Yassawi must always have been strong in the region and among the people directly connected with this mausoleum” [Ibid].

However, today this historical view of Yassawiyya is often disputed and can be considered peripheral, since many ideas on this subject turned out to be interpretations that may be inaccurate. We cannot ignore, for example, the fact that there is still no valuable written sources created in Yassawiyya circles except Diwani-Hikmet that have come down to us. In addition, our understanding of the Yassawiyya tradition is based on biographical information created within the Naqshbandi circles and these date to the middle of the 14th century, i.e., when the influence of the Yassawiyya doctrine weakened in Central Asia, but gets a new round of development outside of the region, namely in Asia Minor. Incidentally, DeWeese in his later work considers that “the traditions of Yassawiyya and Naqshbandiyya have not only common spiritual roots and origins, but can also be considered as complementary “partner” or “fraternal” orders rather than rivals.” [2001, p. 218].

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that in the historical memory and consciousness of the Kazakhs, it is the Yasawiyya tradition that has occupied a sacred niche in the spiritual life of society, most often associated with Islam in the steppe. In contrast to this tradition, no other Sufi tradition has received such recognition and development among the Kazakhs. We argue that there were two reasons for this point.

First, is the wide recognition of the Yassawiyya tariqat in the local environment, the *nisba* of which is associated with the area that had been known as Yassa, which is now Turkestan, a small city in southern Kazakhstan, where the tomb of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi is located (1103-1166). He is considered to be the founder of this tariqat. The life and fate of his first disciples and followers, Suleiman Bakirgani, more often known as Hakim Ata, died in 1183 and Said Ata, died in 1218, as well as a number of other medieval Sufis, especially revered among the Kazakhs, were also closely connected with this tariqat. For example, some sixty kilometers from Turkestan, near the village of Shaulder, there is the tomb of Arystan Bab, who is considered to be the spiritual mentor of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi.

Secondly, the presence of the cult of “Muslim saints” in the Yassawiyya tradition has played a central role in the integration of that tradition into Kazakh group consciousness. This cult was successfully cultivated by Sufi sheikhs in a

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nomadic society, because it was very consonant, close in spirit and understandable to the people's existing spiritual concepts. Unlike other peoples of the region, the Kazakhs from time immemorial especially revered the pre-Islamic "cult of ancestors", which allowed the cult of "Muslim saints" to harmoniously merge into this spiritual atmosphere, become a constant part of local beliefs, alongside with the "cult of ancestors."

While there is no written evidence that Sufi sheikhs from the Yassaviya tariqat cultivated the cult of "Muslim saints," one can assert this by comparing this thesis with the current perception of Kazakh people who perceive such concepts as "the cult of ancestors" and "the cult of Muslim saints" as mutually acceptable. The cult of ancestors has been an important part of culture and ethnic identity of the Kazakhs for centuries, as well as the cult of "Muslim saints." There are many Kazakhs who still believe that the spirits of deceased ancestors, called aruakhs in Kazakh, watch over living relatives, interfere in today's affairs of people and patronize their descendants. The coexistence of the "cult of ancestors" and the "cult of Muslim saints" can be seen in the example of the Kazakh burial ceremony preserved today, despite the fact that it has come down to us, according to Kulumzhanov, Zholdubayeva and Kotosheva, "in a somewhat modified form" [Kulumzhanov et. al, 2018, p.163]. The significance of the cult of "Muslim saints" is mentioned in the work of Allen Frank. Frank describes the cult of "Muslim saints" as "the Central Asian heritage of the Kazakhs," highlighting a number of its characteristic features, such as the veneration of the cult of saints; the presence and significance of related groups of "khojas"; the oral transmission of knowledge about Islam; and the relatively dominant position of customary law [Frank, 2003, p. 264].

But perhaps the main argument is the emergence of new archaeological evidence. In the summer of 2020, in the area known as the ancient Kultobe settlement, which is located close to the city of Turkestan in South Kazakhstan region, scientists revealed a unique archaeological site, which turned out to be an example of the medieval cult building. During further excavations and research, it became clear that the Kazakhstani archaeologists discovered the Sufi khanqah. The facility is located in the protected area of the monument inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Further study held by the archeologists of Kazakh Research Institute of Culture allowed them to come to a conclusion that the Kultobe settlement was an important religious facility of medieval Sufism at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road. The surveyed archaeological site also opens a unique picture: on the western side there was an abode and hujras where pilgrims used to stay. On the southeast side, there was the main room - a rectangular mausoleum of 8 x 11 meters with underground burials. Seven burials were found in the crypt. On the northeastern side, a large undeveloped area was discovered, on which large stones were found, probably the bases of the columns. Apparently, the large terrace is an aivan, on which ritual actions such as zikrs were performed by the dervishes [Galushko, 2021].



The khanqah had rooms with common walls and elongated north-south. All rooms had an entrance from the west side. On the east side, all rooms have one common wall or axial, made of a combined burnt and adobe rectangular bricks. Most of the rooms have heating stoves and small tandoors at floor level. On the north, east and south sides, the walls of two bypass galleries have been preserved. The size of the outer northern wall of the gallery: length 15.8 meter, height 1.6 meter. The size of the central wall of the gallery: length 15 meter, height 1.6 meter. The size of the eastern wall of the gallery: length is 20 meter, height - 1.7 meter. The size of the southern walls of the gallery: length is 9.5 meter, height - 1.1 meter [Ibid].

Erlan Kazizov, a researcher at the Kazakh Research Institute of Culture, who participated in the excavations, notes: "There is every reason to believe that the discovered khanqah is directly related to the Sufi Yassawiyya tariqat. We assume that representatives of the order are buried in this mausoleum." [Ibid].

This, in particular, is evidenced by its proximity to the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi (khanqah is located just 300 meters from), as well as a number of other signs. For example, all those buried with their heads were oriented northward towards the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi. Such an honor could be awarded to extraordinary personalities. The pilgrims apparently visited khanqah, coming from different cities and countries. They worshiped these saints, visited their graves. And small rooms - hujras, equipped with tandoors and stoves, served them for sleeping and rest. There were eight such rooms in total, located from north to south. The mausoleum itself is 8 by 11 meters. At the same time, the height of the preserved walls in some places reaches two meters.

According to numismatic materials found during excavations on the territory of the khanqah, archaeologists have established that this monument was built in the 17th century. Presumably in the 18th century, the mausoleum was desecrated and plundered, which clearly corresponds to written sources, according to which during this period the city of Turkestan and its environs were captured and plundered by the Dzungars. By the second half of the 19th century, when the Kazakh Khanate became part of the Russian Empire, the khanqah had already been abandoned. Over time, a hillock formed in its place, on which new buildings appeared towards the end of the 19th century. Stratigraphy showed that the mausoleum on the khanqah was completely covered with construction waste: fragments of ceramics, ash, animal bones. Probably, having freed themselves from the Dzungars, the local population, knowing about the burial of saints in this place, deliberately covered the mausoleum in order to preserve it from further destruction and desecration.

No doubt, further study of the found Sufi khanqah will reveal many aspects of the life and activities of representatives of the Yassawiyya tariqat and its relationship with similar khanqahs found in Uzbekistan and in the region of the Lower Volga region, Russia, on the lands that were once part of the Golden Horde.

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At the same time, the thesis of the primary role of the Yassaviya tradition in the spiritual life of nomadic Kazakhs was formed against the background of the stagnation in the 15th century of the Naqshbandiyya tariqat, another influential Sufi tradition in this region. It must be assumed that if there was no decline in the Naqshbandiya tradition, the modern interpretation of the Sufi Yasaviya tradition would differ dramatically in favor of the Naqshbandiya. The significance of the Naqshbandiya tradition for the nomadic society of Kazakhs would logically be magnified, since a number of prominent Sufis of the late period (18-19th centuries) who preached among the Kazakhs are associated with this tradition. Kazakhs called them by name with the obligatory addition of the postfix “Ishan”, for example, Maral Ishan, Et-zhemes Ishan.

In general, the problem of the relationship between various Sufi traditions and, in particular, the competition between them is an artificially created problem, cultivated among modern researchers, since the medieval chronicles and biographical writings of Sufis themselves do not hint at this, with much of the narrative concerning the evolution of Sufi traditions standing as a modern interpretation of the past. It is much more important to understand why, over time, hereditary transmission by the leadership of the community began to be practiced in Sufi circles. This moment, in fact, is the most significant factor that led to a chain of events that predetermined the weakening of the influence and authority of all Sufi traditions without exception.

Indeed, the hereditary transfer of authority had a profound impact. If we consider it from the point of view of the social hierarchy of nomadic Kazakh society, we can assume that the hereditary leadership over the community was beneficial not only to Sufis, but to the whole class, descended from the prophet Muhammad (Sayyids) and from the first four people who have held the title of the righteous caliphs (Khojas). The Seyid and Khoja classes, known collectively as the “a group of Khojas”, was considered a nobility. Being outside of the Kazakh Zhuz system, but holding roughly the same status as the ruling Genghisids’ dynasty originated from Genghis Khan, they were an important and privileged social group among the Kazakhs. The Khoja group was extremely interested in strengthening the cult of saints, since this was one of the necessary conditions for preserving their privileged position in the social hierarchy: “They did not have significant political significance among the sedentary population of Central Asia and among the Turkmen. But the Khoja group was undoubtedly an important and privileged group among the Kazakhs, performing a role similar to that of the mullahs among the settled communities. The group of Khoja was important among all the Kazakhs, but it has been particularly concentrated and influential in the Syr Darya region” [Muminov, 1998, pp.139-142].

The most famous and revered representatives of the Sayyids and Khojas, as well as Sufi sheikhs, were often entitled simply “Sufis” among the Kazakhs, which was a kind of title that characterizes their authority among the common masses. But the truly powerful development of Sufi traditions in the nomadic Kazakh society occurred much later, with the absorption of the Kazakh lands into

the Russian Empire, when there is a weakening of the power of the Chingizids and the collapse of the relatively centralized system of power of the Kazakh Khans over tribal associations. It was during this period that “Ishanism” entered the historical arena. In contrast to earlier Sufism in the form of tariqats, ishanism, which appeared at the turn of the 19-20th centuries, was found to be a more flexible direction of Sufism, adapted to the challenges of modern times.

This was especially evident in the conditions of the collapse of the power of the Khans in the steppe and rapidly changing economic and political realities, when extensive stockbreeding, as the basis of the nomadic Kazakh society's economic structure, could no longer function fully. The gradual alienation of fertile lands and the reduction of pasture lands in favour of farming within the framework of the policy of colonization of Kazakh lands carried out by Tsarist Russia undermined the age-old way of life of the nomads. This circumstance pushed Kazakhs to search for a new system of values and guidelines for the future. Having appeared in the steppe, the network of disparate small groups of Sufis promoted anti-Russian aspirations and were against the penetration and influence of Tsarist Russia in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, which had contributed to the strengthening of Muslim propaganda among the Kazakhs. Islam in one way or another, was a response for a nomadic society that had been at that time in a civilizational impasse. Razdykova notes: “The increased colonization of Kazakhstan, the impoverishment of the masses, the decline of the economy and morality, the protest against colonization and loss of a land - these are the roots of the popularity of Islam” [Razdykova, 2007, pp. 162-163].

Not surprisingly, Islam became the main value system, the main vision of the future for the nomads. “The driving force of Islamic transformation,” as Allen Frank notes, “was the Kazakh nomads themselves, who sought to improve their practice and understanding of Islam” [Frank, 2003, p.263]. Meanwhile, the Ishans conducted not only missionary, but also educational and propaganda activities in the wake of favorable historical and political events that helped to strengthen the Muslim identity in the disintegrating nomadic society.

*Ishans as heirs of Sufi traditions in the nomadic Kazakh society of the late 18-19th centuries.* Since the end of the 18th century Sufi tariqats of Central Asia had become adisunited and begin to rapidly degenerate, breaking up into small communities. Sufism took the form of “Ishanism,” when each Ishan as the head of the community has his own students and followers.

“The word “Ishan” is the Persian third-person plural pronoun, i.e. “they”, which came from the Muslim tradition not to speak for the oldest directly” [Ostroumov, 1896, p.206]. It is quite difficult to determine how familiar the ishans were with the rich mystical and philosophical heritage of medieval Sufism today due to the lack of written sources and information on this topic. However, information from regional archives and magazine publications from the time of Tsarist Russia, as well as field research materials from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods indicate that religious missionary work, as well as healing, educational, and propaganda activities of the ishans, were well established in a

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nomadic environment. The Ishans were the champions of moderate ideas and values, and they were practically not an organized political force. But their views, opinions, and proclamations were a source of spiritual inspiration and an alternative understanding of socio-political processes. The common masses had a special respect for the Ishans, because their worldview was a kind of vision of the future in conditions of socio-political stagnation, negative attitude to the ruling class and fear of the unpredictable future.

There is no doubt that the Ishans were not required to have a deep knowledge of the philosophy of medieval Sufism. The people preferred to interpret and compare the moral and ethical aspects of the teaching at the domestic level, since the literacy rate of the population was quite low. In addition, the wide acceptance of the Ishan in the nomadic environment was due not so much to their knowledge, reading and religious missionary work, but rather to their favor for local pre-Islamic beliefs and their ability to fill them with Muslim content. The positive perception of the Ishan among the common population was also due to the fact that the mysteries of their religious mystical practices, as well as their ability to heal and lead an ascetic lifestyle, contrasted strongly with the wealth and avarice of the mullahs, who represented the traditional Muslim clergy. This is evidenced by the Kazakh proverb: *Do only what the Mullah says, but don't do what the Mullah does*. This old Kazakh proverb, as well as its various variations, has not lost its relevance today. It reflects, to some extent, the scepticism accumulated among the people towards representatives of the traditional Muslim clergy, who were considered associates and dominated mainly among the sedentary communities of the region. Despite the fact that traditional Muslim religious clergy were absent in the nomadic society itself, due to the lifestyle and type of power structure among the Kazakhs, it should be understood that the Kazakhs lived in close interaction with sedentary communities, forming a secure social bond with them. Therefore, both nomads and sedentary communities had a fairly clear idea of the traditional Muslim clergymen. It is no accident that similar sayings were used among the sedentary inhabitants of the region, although the negative attitude towards Mullahs was more pronounced in the nomadic environment of Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kirghiz and Turkmen.

Meanwhile, the growing network of Ishans began to actively fill out the vacuum created in the region due to political uncertainty, the weakening of the power of local ruling circles and their subordinate communities in the contrast to the growing influence of Tsarist Russia. Referring to the archival data, Nurtazina notes that in every city and settlement of Central Asia there was at least one Ishan. Each Ishan had up to two thousand followers or *Murids*: “At the same time, *Murids* were considered not only those who lived directly with the Ishan in his khanqah, but also all of those who recognized the spiritual guidance of this Sufi leader. The entire Kazakh tribes were spiritually associated with Sufis, as a rule, from the kind of Khojas” [Nurtazina, 2012, pp.26-27].

In addition to cultivating Muslim religious traditions, the Ishans, as noted above, treated and performed sacred actions. Popular rumor attributed to them supernatural abilities, such as treatment of the terminally ill, bringing rains during a drought, etc. The Kazakhs especially revered the Ishans, considering them people endowed with sacred properties. According to the testimony of historians of that time, if “a beloved son got sick, livestock death happened or in case of other disasters, a Murid gives a pledge to gift Ishan with his best horse, a couple of sheep or even to donate something valuable for God’s blessing. Most Ishans increase their personal wealth, considering it a just reward for their exemplary piety” [Geyer, 1909, p.30].

The sacred space of the Ishan was not limited only to the Southern and South-Western regions of modern Kazakhstan. Starting from the vicinity of present-day Tashkent and the lower stream of the Amu Darya river, where the Kazakhs lived side by side with the Karakalpaks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks, it extended to the northern regions of modern Kazakhstan, Western Siberia, and the Volga-Ural region.

In every locality of modern Kazakhstan, there are legends about Sufi saints for these particular places. Local folklore is rich in legends and tales about them. There are quite concrete evidence of Sufi life in the form of graves and burials of their descendants and disciples. Moreover, there are readers and keepers among the older generation who remember by heart samples of stories dedicated to the lives of saints for this area of Sufis, as a sample of collective consciousness and memory. These stories function as almost mythical biographies of Sufi leaders.

For example, Ishan Maral Kurmanuly (1780-1841) was widely known among the Kazakhs of the Aral sea basin (the territory of the current Kyzylorda oblast). Kazakh by origin, he was popularly known as Maral-Ishan. He studied Muslim literacy and Sufism in Bukhara and very actively preached Islam [Nurtaiuly, 2004]. According to popular belief, Maral-Ishan not only interpreted and taught the basics of Islam, but also cured, performed sacred actions in the form of causing rain, and even alterig the course of rivers. The phenomenon of Maral-Ishan, with a description of his life and religious practices, is widely covered in religious, scientific and near-scientific publications published in the Kazakh language in the 1990-2000's.

The great influence among the Kazakhs who lived in the vicinity of Tashkent was enjoyed by Ishan Baba Akhund Shadman Khoja Ishanov, nicknamed by the Kazakhs as Yet-zhemes, which is in Kazakh means “not eating meat”. *Yet-zhemes* was famous for his spiritual patronage over Kazakhs and Uzbeks and small local ethnographic groups that have since been assimilated by the Kazakhs and Uzbeks. This Sufi Ishan, who belonged to the order of the Naqshbandiyya, was especially held in high esteem in the nomadic environment. It is known for certain about his healing in the steppes from Shymkent to the Aral sea, which were subjected to cholera infection. He has been known for his multi-day prayers, donations to the poor and irrigation of the land with his murids in the vicinity of Tashkent” [Nurtazina, 2012].

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In the vicinity of Tashkent, Ishan Abdul-Kasym Khan was particularly respected one. He maintained a madrasah and taught about 150-200 students, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tatars, etc. [Ostroumov, 2015]. In Aulie-Ata district of Syrdarya region, which is now Taraz city, Ishan Tajihan Hajji Shah-Ahmad Maksum had a great influence among the people. He belonged to the order of Kadiriya and was famous for practicing Zikr or loud praying known “Zhagriya” [Ibid].

Among the Kazakhs and Karakalpaks of the lower basin of Amu Darya river, there was Karakum-Ishan, who enjoyed authority and significance. His nomadic flock was a large Sufi community. In Perovsky district there was Ishan Akhmet Orazayev (1861-1927), a resident of Tugulum area, in Turgay region (Northern Kazakhstan). Having been educated in Bukhara, he made pilgrimage to Mecca twice, healed local people and was “known among the local population as a saint” [Shalekenov, 1966].

Visiting the Kazakh pastures, the activity of the Ishans often concerned the Tsarist Russian authorities, as they represented a social and cultural force outside of Tsarist control. For example, the reports of Russian colonial officials repeatedly mention Maral-Ishan regarding “his miracles in healing the sick, predictions and agitation against Russia, which spread throughout the steppe” [Kireev et al., 1964, p.197].

In addition to the hereditary Ishans, who were descendants of famous saints and non-hereditary Ishans, ordinary charlatans often began to appear in the spiritual sphere. If a number of reports indicate that the Ishan contributed to the development of Muslim religious traditions, both among nomads and among the settled population, then another part of the information indicates that the Ishan often abused the trust of the ordinary masses, exploiting the religiosity of the illiterate local population for their own selfish purposes. Some of them used to turn Ishanism into a banal means of profit. According to a scholar working at the end of the nineteenth century, with the onset of spring, the Ishans disperse to the Kazakh pastures: “The Kazakh steppes of Turgay, Akmola and Semirechinsk regions are the most favorable soil for beginners and small Ishans. Every year, from the cities of the Turkestan region, the groups of Ishans rush to the Kazakh steppes and return with herds of camels, horses, and sheep and with money” [Ostroumov, 1896, p. 222].

In later reports, Russian officials begin to systematically issue directives to Kazakhs engaged in spiritual mentoring and preaching Islam. Correspondingly, the lists of Muslim religious figures distributed by officials of Tsarist Russia, as well as circulars and directives on measures to be taken in their regard are still of great scientific interest.

## Conclusion

The concentration of medieval Sufi shrines in the areas of traditional winter pastures of Kazakhs in the South and South-West of modern Kazakhstan indicates the cause-and-effect relationship between the geographical determinism and the

development of the religious sphere among Kazakh nomads. Natural conditions not only determined the nomadic form of management, but also had a significant impact on the spread of Sufi traditions in the nomadic Kazakh society of the early 18th to late 19th centuries.

In addition, Sufism was more flexible in relation to Islamic traditionalism and in this respect was close to the mentality of nomadic Kazakhs, who were in constant interaction with the traditional Islam of the sedentary communities of Central Asia, which determined the harmonious adaptation and sacralization of Sufi traditions in a nomadic society. The coexistence of Sufi traditions with Kazakh beliefs and views of the pre-Islamic period only contributed to the establishment of Islam in the steppe. The spread of the cult of Muslim saints among the Kazakhs, which occurred without any special difficulties and consequences, well illustrates this circumstance. Since the life of nomads was closely intertwined with the life of the sedentary communities of Central Asia, the study of the legacy of late medieval Sufism in the nomadic society of the Kazakhs is of current scholarly interest. This interest is reinforced by the fact that the degradation of Sufism in the 19th century and its transformation into Ishanism contributed to the emergence of many people who used to associate themselves with Islam and, in particular, with Central Asian Sufism. Despite the fact that many facts and processes in this issue are still to be analyzed in the future, the strengthening of Islam in the Kazakh steppes during this period as a result of the active religious activity of the Ishans is no longer in doubt.

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