

picture-making, and their common link to power, authority, and cultural practices.

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Central Asian Encounters of the Middle East: Nationalism, Islam, and Post-Coloniality in al-Azhar

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A dramatic resurgence in religious identification in Central Asia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been termed "Islamic renaissance"

in regional scholarship. However, in the study of this "renaissance," much attention has been paid to the "political Islam" of radical Islamic movements,

which, although much feared by the national governments and the US, remain marginal in terms of their social base. At the same time, few scholars have looked into the ways in which Islamic knowledge and culture are being reestablished in the region. How is revived Islamic identity being accepted and negotiated in post-Soviet societies? What is the specificity of a post-Soviet Islamic identity and how does it interact with other social identifications? What does "Islamic renaissance" mean in people's everyday life? If we can describe this "Islamic renaissance" quantitatively in terms of the number of newly opened mosques and madrasas, as well as mosque attendance, how can we describe it as a social imaginary?

All these are the questions that I am engaged with in my larger research on Islamic revival in Kazakhstan. I began fieldwork among Kazakhstani students in al-Azhar assuming that these students would return home to become empowered agents of Islam. As higher Islamic education for Kazakhstanis is taking place largely outside the country, with hundreds of students going to Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, an internationalization of Islamic discourse in Kazakhstan is inevitable, and outside influence on Islamic revival in the country cannot be underestimated.

Based on information from my interviewees and some embassies, there are somewhere between 900 and 1,000 students from the former Soviet Union, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Muslim regions of Russia, studying at the colleges and schools of al-Azhar.¹ All of these students have come to Egypt to pursue education in religion or Arab philology. The fact that thousands of students from around the world come to study at al-Azhar speaks of the high standing that al-Azhar enjoys in the Sunni Muslim world. At the same time, it is widely known that al-Azhar suffers from major inadequacies such as poor material-technical base, overcrowding, and deteriorating quality of teaching. Incoming students very soon become aware of these shortcomings, as well as of the low prestige that al-Azhar has at home as an institution for the underprivileged.

¹ In modern day Egypt, al-Azhar is not just a university, but a whole system of religious education, which exists along with the secular education system. As such it includes not only colleges but also secondary and high schools all over the country, where people who lack access to secular education can study.

As a rule, because of their poor Arab language skills, students from the former Soviet Union do not go directly to the college, but start with *'adadiyya* (primary school), *thanawiyya* (high school), or even *dirasa khasa* (preparatory school). This means that to get a bachelor's degree from al-Azhar they should spend a total of six to nine years in the Azhari system.

The first group of 20 students from Kazakhstan came to al-Azhar in 1992. In accordance with an Egyptian-Kazakhstani intergovernmental agreement, al-Azhar would take about 20 Kazakh students annually, who would be provided with a place to stay in the Madinat-al-Booth, and receive free board and a monthly stipend of \$25. Between 1992 and 1997, about 100 students from Kazakhstan came to study in al-Azhar within the Azhari quota. However, most of them (about 90) dropped out after two to three years. More recently, in 2001, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan sent another 12 students to al-Azhar; only four of them are still pursuing their studies. I did not have the chance to talk to drop-out students; however, those who remained listed poor living conditions, the different system of education, language problems, and the harsh climate among the major reasons for dropping out. I also think that the prospect of spending six to nine years in Cairo may not have appealed to them. To be fair to al-Azhar, it should be mentioned that there were about as many drop-outs from Egyptian secular universities (particularly Cairo, Ayn Shams, Helwan, Tanta, Alexandria), where in the mid-1990s the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education also sent a large group of students.²

Although a significant percentage of Kazakhstani students in al-Azhar receive a scholarship from al-Azhar and free board at the Azhari Mission for Foreign Students, the majority of the students come to al-Azhar independently (i.e., beyond the quota). Education at al-Azhar is free, and several religious trusts and foundations from the Gulf, such as the Kuwaiti Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation, provide students with a modest stipend. Also, a number of students from Russia and Kazakhstan cover living expenses in Cairo on their own.

² A professor of Arabic at the Eurasian University in Kazakhstan told me that he was in the group of 140 students sent by the Kazakh Ministry of Education to Egypt in 1994. Only eight of them, he said, graduated.

As of today, three people from Kazakhstan have received a bachelor's degree from al-Azhar, the most recent having graduated in September 2004. All of them returned home. One is teaching at the Nur-Mubarak University³ in Almaty and another is a regional level official at the Spiritual Board of Muslims.

Currently, about 140 students from Kazakhstan study within the Azhari system (this includes not only ethnic Kazakhs, but also Uyghurs, Dungans, and Uzbeks); about 20 of them are at the college level.⁴ Between five and seven students are expected to graduate this year. I presume that the impact of Azhari students on Islamic revival and Islamic discourse in Kazakhstan will be felt as more and more students return home with a degree from al-Azhar.

One of the most interesting issues that has arisen in my research is the transformation of identity on an individual and group level that occurs when Central Asians travel to the Middle East. If we assume that they come to the Middle East with the manifest purpose to rediscover and reinforce their Islamic identity, what happens after people have studied and lived in the Middle East for a period of time?

As a theoretical framework for my interpretation of students' experiences I used anthropological literature on identity. At the simplest level identity formation is about how individuals and groups define themselves and their relations to others (Schwedler 2001: 2). Like individuals, groups strive to positively distinguish themselves from other groups (Seul 1999: 556). For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, the "other" from which to distinguish themselves would usually be Russians who now constitute about 30 percent of the population. One should not discount the role of religion in this "othering" process. Although in a secular environment of Kazakhstan people might relate to Islam on a very symbolic and nominal level, Muslimness as such remains part and parcel of Kazakh identity, an essential attribute that makes the Kazakh distinctive from the Russian. However, in interaction with the Muslim "other" in Egypt,

acculturation in Russian comes forth as a specific characteristic of Kazakhstani students, as well as of many other Muslim students from the former Soviet Union.⁵

The rest of this paper will discuss some results of fieldwork conducted in Cairo in winter and spring 2004. My interviews with Azhari students revealed that Kazakhstani, while appreciating al-Azhar's Muslim cosmopolitan environment and the knowledge it provides, have been quite reluctant to borrow anything from the Arab culture apart from the language and religious texts. Most of the Kazakh students I talked to draw a distinct line between themselves and the Egyptian environment around them. The general attitude among students was that they have come to Cairo to learn the language skills and religious know-how that would confer certain "cultural capital" upon them back home. Although they regarded Egyptians as their co-religionists, they were eager to emphasize their difference from "Arabs."

Learning Religion but Keeping the Culture

Marat is one of the married Kazakh students in al-Azhar. He is 40 years old and when I interviewed him in February 2004 he was a fourth year graduating student at the Kuliyyat Usul-ud-Din.⁶ He came to al-Azhar some eight years ago and received a scholarship from the Kuwaiti Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation, which paid the rent, a monthly \$40 stipend, and reimbursed him for an air ticket home once a year. Marat is a professional flute player. He lived in *Hai Thamin* [literally, the "Eighth Quarter," in Madinat Nasr, Cairo] with his wife, Reza, also a professional pianist, and two small children. Marat and Reza consider themselves to be the most educated and "advanced" among Kazakhstani students, as they were raised in the city of Aqmola (now Astana) and had a good education prior to coming to al-Azhar. Marat did not get along well with the cohort of the students (about 20 people) from rural regions of southern Kazakhstan who took on responsibility of "supervising" the Kazakh community. Perhaps here, the north-south division

³ Nur-Mubarak University, named after presidents Nursultan Nazarbaev and Hosni Mubarak, was founded in 2001 by the Kazakhstani-Egyptian intergovernmental agreement. It is considered to be an affiliate of al-Azhar.

⁴ Kazakh students are studying at the colleges of Usul-ud-Din, Shari'a wa Qanun, Da'wa, and Lughat-al-Arabiyyah.

⁵ Most of the ethnic Kazakh students in al-Azhar are bilingual, but they speak Kazakh as their native language at home and among themselves.

⁶ By the time of this publication, Marat had already graduated from al-Azhar and is back in Astana with his family.

within Kazakhstani society came into play.⁷ Marat said southern student leaders (from the first wave of students sent to al-Azhar), who were designated by the Embassy to help incoming Azhari students and represent Kazakh students before sponsoring foundations, abuse this power by getting scholarships for their relatives (e.g., wives,⁸ brothers, etc.) and do disservice to young students by preventing them from socializing within al-Azhar's cosmopolitan environment under the pretext that they might join some "radical" foreign groups.

Like wives of many students in al-Azhar, Marat's spouse Reza went to study Arabic and religion on her own and excelled in learning the whole Quran by heart. She has a certificate of *Hafiza* [woman who knows the Quran by heart] from a *markaz* [center of religious learning] and is very knowledgeable in interpreting religious issues. She was popular among Russian-speaking women who lived in her area and they often came to talk to her and seek her advice. However, despite her enthusiasm in learning Arabic and religion, Reza adopted quite a critical attitude towards Egyptian society. In our conversations she indicated that she was wary of some Egyptian customs. For instance, she said she did not like extensive kissing when greeting people and she thought of Egyptian hospitality as fake. She also said she was suffering from the low hygiene standards of the people who lived around her. In one of our women's meetings she and several other female students were expressing distaste for an Egyptian Aid-al-Idha custom when a whole family gathers to watch the act of slaughtering the sheep. They recalled how in Kazakhstan, the act of slaughtering is only men's business, performed in the backyard, while women or children never watch.

Turkish Islam versus Arab Islam

During fieldwork in al-Azhar, I unexpectedly came across the issue of Central Asian-Turkish Islamic connections, because many Kazakh students in al-Azhar are associated with the Turkish community there.

⁷ There is a widely acknowledged division within Kazakhstan between the industrial, developed north and the traditional, agrarian south (the same situation is in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). This perceived division, in my view, is not always true, as there are pockets of more and less developed places both in the north and the south.

⁸ Most of the Kazakh students in al-Azhar who are over 25 are married.

One of these students is Erkenar, 22, a third year Kazakhstani student in Kuliyyat Usul-ud-Din. He came to al-Azhar right after high school and, like Marat, received a scholarship from the Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation. He must be very bright, as he finished 'adadiyya and thanawiyya in just two years. He can read Arabic, Turkish, and Ottoman Turkish. Erkenar lives with Turkish students and apparently is a Nurcu network member.⁹ He said that he lives in an apartment with five Turks and one Kyrgyz. Talking about education in al-Azhar, he complained that students lack opportunities to talk to professors, ask questions, and critically discuss the material. He also said that unlike Cairo and Ayn Shams Universities, al-Azhar does not teach its students research skills. When we talked about Central Asian-Arab and Central Asian-Turkish Islamic connections, he said that Turkish Islam is more "modern" and better applicable to the situation in Central Asia.

Nurcu students in al-Azhar hold traditional gatherings [*suhbat*], where they discuss political, religious and social issues in the light of Said Nurci's and Fethullah Gülen's teachings. From my conversation with Kazakhstani students, I understood that the Nurcu take good care of their recruits. They move to live with the Turkish Nurcus, which usually means living in better conditions than they otherwise could afford on their stipends. It seems that the Nurcu organization tries to create an environment conducive to study and learning processes, and Nurcu students usually do well in the schools/universities. Reportedly, a couple of Kazakhs even left al-Azhar for study in Turkey.

Central Asians appear more inclined to borrow from Turkish culture and Turkish Islam, which can be partly explained by the cultural and linguistic affinities with the Turks and partly, perhaps, by a certain entanglement of Turkish Islam with

⁹ Nurcu is a Turkish-based transnational Islamic network, named after Said Nurci (1873-1960). Anchored in the idea that Islam is compatible with modernity, Nurcus assert that education and science should play a pivotal role in the revival of Islam. In Kazakhstan, Nurcu *cemaat* runs 28 high schools and the Suleyman Demirel University (Balci 2003: 152, 157). Somewhere between 20 and 30 Azhari students from Kazakhstan identify with the Nurcu movement. According to accounts of students who were not Nurcu, Turks are very selective in whom they choose from Central Asian students and invite to live with them. Reportedly, they recruit the brightest and most promising students, which is reminiscent of Turkish (Nurcu) schools' recruitment practices in Kazakhstan.

secularism, which better suits secular conditions of Central Asia.

Gendered Perspective: In Search of a Moral Order

During my fieldwork in al-Azhar, I came to know two young single Kazakh women — Roza and Gulnar — who, after studying Islam in one of the newly opened Islamic universities in Kazakhstan and being active and practicing Muslims for a long time, decided to come to al-Azhar to learn Arabic and expand their knowledge of religion. By the time of my fieldwork in spring 2004, they had been enrolled in *dirasa khasa* for about a year. Their experience in Cairo is particularly interesting as it provides a gendered perspective.

I had many conversations with Gulnar and Roza on a wide range of issues such as religion, society, social relations, and marriage. As we had a common reference in “knowing” Egyptian and Kazakh societies, we spent some time discussing these societies in “comparative perspective.” In one such discussion we talked about the growing gap between the rich and poor and escalating crime rates in Kazakhstan. Roza said that the high crime rate was a manifestation of a breakdown of social order and morality, and that justice and “moral order” would be achieved when people become more religious (Islamic). In response to my devil’s advocate’s question of why Egyptian society is filled with religion, but also with poverty and inequality, she answered that from an Islamic point of view the well-being of society is not measured by wealth only.

Although Roza and Gulnar now lived in what could be called an Islamic community, of course it was far from the ideal “moral order.” From time to time, problems would arise which caused Roza to question the connection between the moral and the religious. When confronted with these problems Roza would “rationalize” that it is written in the Quran that there are so many *munafiqun* [hypocrites] among Muslims, who look and act like Muslims, but, in fact, they are not.

Renegotiating Identity

In interviews, I asked Azhari students what the term “Islamic renaissance” meant as applied to Kazakhstan. Most said that with the Soviet collapse a “spiritual vacuum” emerged, which is being filled with Islam. At the same time, they also

disapprovingly admitted that nowadays it is not only Islam which is filling the “vacuum,” but a whole range of other religions and sects. In this regard, most of them felt that the government is not doing enough to stop the onslaught of foreign missionaries from the West.¹⁰ Some also expressed their religious concern in terms of a “conspiracy theory”: that the whole country is being run by American and Jewish businesses, which are supposedly anti-Islamic by their very nature.

In conversations with female students, we again talked about a “spiritual vacuum” and “crisis of morality” in Kazakhstan. Once, I pointed to a certain contradiction in this reasoning saying, “If the vacuum has been the problem created with the collapse of the Soviet Union, does it mean that under the Soviets there was no vacuum, and there was spirituality?” Interestingly, women agreed that there was more spirituality under the Soviets than currently. Reza, for instance, said that “then people believed in the future, and the attitude of the people to one another was different.”

So, to say the least, there is this strong ambiguity among Azhari students, especially among the women, in their attitude towards the Soviet past and Russian influence. On the negative side, there was atheistic propaganda and education, and reprisals against the clergy and pious Muslims. On the positive side, there were public services provided by the Soviet state, accessibility of quality education, medical care, and even Communist-propagated egalitarian ideology, which is becoming valued in the light of growing class stratification in Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

The translocal position of the Kazakhstani Azhari students helps to crystallize their individual quest for identity, which might be indicative of the same quest for identity on a wider social level. These students came to al-Azhar to reinforce their Muslimness, which in a sense can be interpreted as strengthening

¹⁰ Kazakhstan has a very liberal law on religious associations, adopted in 1992, which allows all religious associations, after going through a somewhat simple registration procedure, to proselytize. Since then quite a competitive religious market has been created, with many so-called “sects” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hare Krishna, Baha’i, and Ahmadiyyah freely operating in Kazakhstan. This has caused strong anxiety among nationalists and “Islamists” about potential conversion of Kazakhs into other religions.

their opposition to “the other.” However, in Cairo they find themselves in the midst of the new “other” — Arabs. To position themselves vis-à-vis this new “other” they have to renegotiate their relation with the Russian “other.” Thus, experiences of Kazakhstani students in Cairo reveal the character of the post-colonial situation and discourse in Kazakhstan. In light of Chatterjee’s thesis on how the post-colonial world imagines its modernity by reinventing the distinctness of its spiritual culture, while acknowledging the West’s superiority in the domain of the material (Chatterjee 1996: 217), we can assume that Kazakh students’ coming to al-Azhar to study Islam is an expression of their drive for ultimate “de-colonization of consciousness” from the remnants of Russianness, atheism, and communism. However, their experience in al-Azhar slows down these negative sentiments to an extent that students are fair enough to give the communist colonial project certain credit for spirituality.¹² While in Kazakhstan, Kazakh identity is usually constructed vis-à-vis Russian identity; in Cairo, it becomes clear to what extent Russianness has been internalized and, in fact, has become an integral part

of post-Soviet Kazakh and post-Soviet Muslim identity.

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Report on Research Conditions

Surveying Risk in Kazakh Agriculture: Experiences and Observations

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This report provides some observations about conditions for field research that emerged from two intensive periods of fieldwork in Kazakhstan in 2003 and 2004 conducted by the joint German-Kazakh research project, “Crop Insurance in Kazakhstan — Options for Building a Sound Institution Promoting

Agricultural Production.” This research is financed by the Volkswagenstiftung (Volkswagen Foundation) and carried out by the Institute of Agricultural Development in Central and Eastern Europe (IAMO) and the Agricultural University in Astana.¹ This report is confined to fieldwork conditions. Publications dealing with the substantive outcome of the project are available elsewhere (e.g., Bokusheva and Heidelberg 2004a, 2004b).

¹² This positive assessment of some aspects of the socialist past by the students of Islam might also be a manifestation of certain ideological affinity between Communism and Islam, noted by many scholars (Maxime Rodinson as quoted in Rywkin 1990: 87). Both Islam and Communism have a certain moral vision of society, the achievement of which requires restrictions on individual freedom. In this sense, both of them are anti-liberal.

¹ The survey was conducted in cooperation with the Agricultural University in Astana. The conceptual planning of the survey and implementation of the questionnaire was done by IAMO.