

Kazakh Muslim Background Believers' Response to Ancestor Practices: Contextual Approach

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what Kazakh Muslim¹ background believers (KMBBs) believe about their dead people from their culture and from the church to which they belong. In order to achieve this goal, the study will review the biblical and theological sources to find answers to the questions coming out of ancestors' practices. These investigations will enable KMBBs to innovate appropriate practical responses to their Muslim ancestor rituals. Moreover, this paper attempts to propose how Kazakhs pastors, leaders, or missionaries guide their congregations into ancestor practices that are faithful to the Christian faith when they celebrate their ancestors who have died. These suggestions will depend upon guidance from theological and missional discoveries. In the end of the paper, I will explain why I believe that these answers to the issues will solve the problem.

Kazakhs' Question about the Dead

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of ethnic Kazakh Muslims have come to faith in Jesus Christ. The Joshua Project reports that ethnic Kazakh churches have increased from 10 to more than 6,000 churches.² But there are several obstacles to such reported growth. One of the obstacles is participating in a memorial meals. Many Kazakh Christ-followers are invited to memorial meals in honor of their dead ancestors. Their Muslim families and relatives expect them to fulfill their filial responsibilities. To refuse to participate in ancestral veneration means that one no longer belongs to his/her family. Thus, understanding veneration to ancestor spirits is a key issue for Christian evangelism in Kazakhstan based around cultural and familial expectations.

How, then, should KMBBs deal with ancestor practices, which are prevalent in Kazakh societies? How can followers of the Messiah in Kazakhstan creatively find forms to express union with Jesus and their Muslim family as alternatives to ancestor practices? How can KMBBs transform this Islamic culture that emphasizes devotion to ancestral spirits? As a formal

¹ Arab Muslims were the first to bring Islam to Kazakhstan in the 8th century. While people were discouraged from practicing Islam during the Soviet Union regime, Islam is now the largest religion in Kazakhstan. According to a national census, almost 70 percent of the country's population identifies as Muslim. Kazaks Muslims are mostly Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school.

² Joshua Project, accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=12599&rog3=KZ>

missionary to Kazakhstan, I realize that it is important for missionaries to help KMBBs relate to their Muslim families by preserving their Christian identity and remaining consistent with the Scripture.

To get the answer of these questions, one should know where ancestor rituals came from. Rabban Sauma notes that devotion to ancestor spirits is observed across the world. For example, ancestor practices can be found in East Asian as well as in Central Asian and African cultures. In these regions, food is prepared in memory of the dead, the family practices ancestor rites, and visits to ancestor's cemeteries are included.³ Given these factors, ancestor practices are seen as residues of primal religions. animism.

However, this is not to say that Kazakh ancestor rituals are semantically the same as East Asian ancestor traditions. They have distinct differences. East Asian ancestor practices involve prostrating oneself before ancestral pictures and genealogy. Another difference can be found in the act of burning incense. East Asians such as Koreans burn incense to guide the ancestor spirits to their house, and the essence of the East Asian ancestor cults centers on genealogical table.⁴

In contrast, in Kazakh ancestor practices there are no ancestor altars. This is because Muslims are not allowed to associate anything they do with ancestor worship. They are also not permitted to prostrate themselves before ancestor spirits. Instead, what Kazakhs do in ancestor practices is light some candles, recite the Qur'an, invite ancestor spirits, and offer food to their ancestors and the Qur'anic prophets. At the end of ancestor rite, a mullah says a benediction in the Kazakh language. Kazakhs believe that this ritual performance invokes the blessing of God and receives the merit of Qur'anic recitals in the afterlife and on the Judgment Day.

Investigation of Kazakh Ancestor Practices

There are various suggestions in addressing ancestor practices among Kazakh scholars. To begin with, Pawel Jessa, who wrote on religious renewal in Kazakhstan, insists that the veneration of saints and ancestor spirits is certainly a unique Kazakh tradition of Islam derived from an un-Islamic past and complicating Kazakhs Muslim's links with the larger Islamic world.⁵ Mustafina, a post-Soviet Kazakh scholar, also contends that the ancestral rite is the residue of pre-Islamic Kazakh practices.⁶ Nevertheless, many Kazakhs identify asking for the support of ancestor spirits as distinctly Kazakh.⁷ Sultangalieva, a researcher of Islam in Kazakhstan, makes a similar assertion that Kazakh Islam has distinct features such as saint and ancestor veneration distinct from official Islam. While official Muslims condemn saint and

³ Rabban Sauma, "Ancestor Practices in the Muslim World: A Problem of Contextualization from Central Asia," *Missiology* 30, no. 3 (2002).

⁴ Chuck Lowe, *Honoring God and Family : A Christian Response to Idol Food in Chinese Popular Religion* / Chuck Lowe (Wheaton, IL : Evangelical Missions Information Service ; Bangalore, India : Theological Book Trust / 2001).

⁵ Pawel Jessa, "Aq Jol Soul Healers: Religious Pluralism and a Contemporary Muslim Movement in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 362-363.

⁶ Wendell Schwab, *Islam in Print: The Diversity of Islamic Literature and Interpretation in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* 2011. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

ancestor veneration as folk Islam, the fact is that many Kazakhs practice household rituals as frying bread and devotion to ancestor spirits.⁸

In sum, Kazakhstan ancestor veneration is seen as a part of Kazakh ethnic traditions, and it has also been understood as syncretism between un-Islamic Kazakh beliefs with official Islam. This dichotomous interpretation indicates that official Islam has not been pervasive in the social and cultural spheres of Kazakh society.⁹ Additionally, the variety of interpretation suggests that Kazakhs are searching for security, protection, purpose in life, healing, and acceptance in community through ancestor veneration. Kazakhs have a significant proverb for ancestor spirits: “If the dead are happy, the living will prosper (*Oli riza bolmay, tiri bayymayday* –Kazakh language).”¹⁰ Simply put, Kazakhs regard remembering their ancestors and dedicating the Qur’an to them as good deeds.¹¹ Accordingly, the interpretations on ancestor veneration shows that God, ancestor, and one’s well being are interwoven in a relationship of reciprocity.¹²

Biblical and Theological Response to the Ancestor Practices

Thus far our discussion has been limited to questions of contextualization, but what light might Scripture shed on these questions? Biblically, Deuteronomy 18:9-15 and Acts 19:18-20 articulate a position in which spiritism of any kind and magical healing is portrayed as detestable to God. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses commands the people of Israel not to go to a shaman; rather, they are to listen to the Word of God. In Acts 19, people converted from sorcery burned their scrolls and confessed their evil deeds. Both scriptures denounce spiritism. Paul emphasizes that Jesus Christ has rule, power and authority over all principalities and dominions, and Jesus has defeated the work of Satan bringing freedom from fear.

Theologically, we could say that Kazakhs are surrounded by shamanism in general and “the fear of the spiritual realm” in particular.¹³ Hebrews 4:15 aptly describes this spiritual situation of Kazakhs: enslaved life based around fear of death. Their lives are held captive by ancestor spirits.¹⁴ Due to this spiritual causality, Kazakhs’ lives are riddled with fear of spirits, or manipulation by the power of spirits. To prevent bad fortune in this world and receive blessings from God, they practice ancestral rituals. Therefore, it can be assumed that the spiritual

⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Wendell Schwab, “Islam in Print: The Diversity of Islamic Literature and Interpretation in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan” (ProQuest Information & Learning, 2012), 130.

¹¹ Edward Burnett Sir Tylor, *Primitive Culture : Researches into the Development Ofmythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* / by Edward B. Tylor (London : J. Murray ; New York : G.P. Putnam's sons, 6th ed., 1920).

¹² Schwab, “Islam in Print: The Diversity of Islamic Literature and Interpretation in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan”, 163.

¹³ Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God : Church Planting among Folk Muslims* / Rick Love (Pasadena, Calif. : William Carey Library, 2000), 17.

¹⁴ Bill A. Musk, “Popular Islam : The Hunger of the Heart,” in *Gospel and Islam*(Monrovia, Calif: Missions Advanced Research & Communications Ctr, 1979).

orientation of the people opens them to ancestor practices. How, then, should KMBBs deal with ancestor practices associated with spiritism? We now turn to pastoral suggestions.

Pastoral Suggestion

Many KMBB churches tend to reject contextual possibilities for memorial meals where the food and Qur'an recital are offered to ancestor spirits. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that they are heavily dependent on foreign teachings, which are not congruent with Kazakh culture and tradition. For example, some KMBB churches uncritically accept Western church teaching, which rejects any suggestion that Kazakh believers attend memorial meals in honor of dead ancestors. Other Kazakh churches passively follow the teaching of the Russian Protestant church, which maintains that attending ancestor spirits rites is idolatrous, and that the Muslim memorial feast is "the Corinthian table of demons."¹⁵ Ironically, many of the Russian pastors and foreign missionaries encourage Kazakh language to be used as a vehicle of the gospel. They grant that Kazakh believers may have worship services structured around sitting on floor mats, borrowing from the typical Islamic style. Regarding ancestor rituals, however, contextualization is more difficult for mission practitioners on the field.

Why, then, do many foreign missionaries show a legalistic response to ancestor practices that have seeped deeply into Kazakh society? There have been several attempts to account for this anti-contextualization. Some suggest that foreign missionaries regard ancestor practices as animistic superstitions.¹⁶ Others attribute that the Russian Protestant leaders and foreign missionaries do not understand the Scriptures, especially 1 Corinthians 10. In this passage, Paul prohibits Christians from joining pagan banquets held in idol temples. Foreign missionaries and local Christian leaders extend Paul's prohibition to Kazakh funerary meals in honor of their ancestors.¹⁷ Others attribute anti-contextualization to lack of sensitivity to Kazakh context.¹⁸

However, all the previously mentioned suggestions suffer some serious limitations. These argumentations fail to consider KMBBs' socio-cultural assumptions. Kazakh Muslim families expect KMBBs to participate in memorial meals and to fulfill their filial responsibilities through the performance of ancestor practices. Considering evangelism, it is crucial for KMBBs to continue to relate to their Muslim families by participating in ancestor practices. If they refuse to attend ancestral practices, they will lose their opportunity to share their faith. The Scriptures do not prohibit Christians from showing respect for the religious traditions of others. In the same way that Elisha allows Naaman freedom to enter the temple of Rimmon, missionaries and local Christian leaders should take into account KMBB social-cultural circumstances. Paul also does not forbid believers to accept hospitality when they are invited to meals in pagan homes. Since Kazakh ancestral practices are always held in homes, there is no reason not to attend Kazakh ancestor memorial meals and accept their hospitality, thus fulfilling filial responsibility.

¹⁵ Sauma, "Ancestor Practices in the Muslim World: A Problem of Contextualization from Central Asia."

¹⁶ Ibid., 341.

¹⁷ Ibid., 330.

¹⁸ Love, 187-194.

All things taken together, I propose that missionaries and Kazakh Christian leaders should bring the issues of cultural encounter to the forefront. Specifically, I would promote the notion that Kazakh converts should invent biblical memorial feasts, which meet people's psychological, social and spiritual needs. Stephen Bevans notes that Christian leaders should "look for God's revelation and self-manifestation within the values, relational patterns, and concerns of a culture."¹⁹ Thus, in light of the socio-cultural and spiritual difficulties faced by KMBBs in regard to ancestor practices such as memorial and funeral meals, I propose the following pastoral suggestions: (1) permitting KMBB members to attend memorial meals when KMBBs are invited for the purpose of Christian witness; (2) a culturally relevant funeral meal in which both divine truth and social honor are preserved; (3) contextualizing memorial rituals that reach out to meet Kazakh converts' and folk Muslims' biophysical, psychological, social and spiritual needs; and (4) substituting prayer in memorial meals with deliverance prayer and healing prayer that can reveal the presence of the living Christ as an essential experiential reality.

This is because Kazakh Muslims regard remembering their ancestors and dedicating the Qur'an to them as good deeds. They believe that Allah's blessing is conveyed through the souls of ancestors and saints. If they do not respect their forefathers, they would be isolated from their Islamic community. Accordingly, KMBB churches must create Christian communal meals that meet the felt needs of Kazakh Muslims as suggested above. I believe that God intends for humans of every nation and all tribes, peoples and tongues to honor their ancestral heritage. God's will is not that local Christians demonstrate foreign Christian influence. Rather, His plan is that KMBBs would strengthen their traditions by transforming them. If our Kazakh Muslim background brothers and sisters understand what God says about ancestor practices in the Bible and take a contextual approach to the problem of ancestor spirits as this study suggests, they will unlock doors to reaching their friends and relatives.

Conclusion and a Way Forward

The purpose of the current study was to respond in various ways to the problem of Kazakh ancestor practices. These findings suggest that in general the Bible gives us freedom in limited ways to attend ancestor practices and teaches us to show respect for the religion of others. The pastoral responses of this study particularly attempted to advocate a balanced approach based on biblical, theological, cultural, and spiritual precedents. Because Kazakh Muslims and KMBBs alike are shaped and influenced by the traditional religious and cultural worldview, taking a legalistic approach to Kazakh ancestor practices may dismiss the possibility for contextualization of the gospel in the life of KMBB and Kazakh Muslims. Additionally, to reject to attend ancestor practices may serve to dismiss all of the Kazakh cultural elements. Thus, I proposed that God's word allows KMBBs to attend Islamic ancestral rites as Naaman did for his Syrian king, and that ancestor practices of the Kazakhs should be understood in light of cultural encounters associated with the social and cultural life of the Kazakhs.

¹⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* / *Stephen B. Bevans*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY : Orbis Books, Rev. and expanded ed., 2002).

These pastoral guidelines may stand as either a bridge or an obstacle to the KMBB engagement with nonbelievers. When it comes to challenges, if KMBBs fail to consider spiritual warfare with the principalities and powers of evil in ancestor practices, chances are high that they are in danger of remaining enslaved to evil spirit powers. Furthermore, if KMBBs fail to understand the richness and depth of the Bible and fail to apply it to the problem of the ancestor spirits, inner conflict in the church and outer persecution from family might result.

On the other hand, if KMBBs respect Kazakh socio-cultural ancestral rites and attempt to seek the contextualization model for funeral rites or memorial meals, persecution from family may be less intense and the opportunity of interreligious conversation may arise, making evangelistic opportunities likely more effective. Additionally, since Kazakh ancestral rites emphasize particularly temporal matters such as blessing of material gain or guidance in life decisions, it is through blessing that Christians may reflect God's salvific power and deliverance. Moreover, since Kazakh ancestral rites anchor individuals within families of belonging, it is through modified ancestral rites that KMBBs can honor the dead while at the same time fulfilling the law of God.

Therefore, these pastoral suggestions might be appropriate for engaging KMBBs' ancestor practices while remaining consistent with biblical and theological precedents. However, current pastoral responses were unable to analyze various variables involved in the problem of ancestor veneration. The current research only suggested individual courses of action for Kazakh ancestral cults. Consequently, the pastoral responses that I proposed alone are not enough to counteract magical attitudes toward ancestor spirits. As Paul Hiebert recommends, further pastoral responses in Muslim ministry should feature the following: 1) healing ministry; 2) holistic ministry; 3) teaching ministry.²⁰

²⁰ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion : A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* / Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tienou (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 162-174.