Of Culture and Religion: The Conversion into Christianity in the XIXth-century Kazakh Steppe (1800-1850)

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Introduction

1 According to the historical facts, the affirmation of Russian empire's influence in Central Asia has officially begun in 1731, when the khan of the Small Žuz of the Kazakh Steppe Abulkhair-khan and his subjects acknowledged the suzerainty of Russia. Subsequently, the territory of Small Žuz that bordered the Russian lands became a range ground where the main principles of Russian policy towards its new Asian subjects began to evolve and be put into practice. One of the important aspects of Russian colonial policy was religion. It had two dimensions.

2 On the one hand, it aimed at elaborating the religious policy of inclusion rather than exclusion. The main point was that for all inoercy (other believers or those pursuing other that Orthodox Christianity beliefs), Russia should become the highest patron and protector. Such policy of tolerating all beliefs, laid by Russian Imperatriz Anna Ioannovna and Catherine the Great, became a specific characteristic of their reign and resulted, for instance, in the institutionalisation of Islam.2 As an example, the Orenburg Mohammad Spiritual Assembly set up in 1788 became the first organised and State supported body, which was perceived as a tool to use the religion in strengthening the State. As such, it had to follow the example of Synod as the highest governing body dealing with all Orthodox religion affairs.
On the other hand, during the process of governing over the new Asian subjects, the evolvement of 
inovercy into the orbit of the Christian Orthodox religious model, traditional for the Russian society, had also began to take its shapes.

These two dimensions, more or less, became the key elements of Russian empire’s religious policy in Central Asia at the beginning stage of this process.

For scholars this particular theme and historical time are of a great interest due to several reasons. From a historian point of view, it allows to trace and reconstruct the undisclosed pages of the nation’s past which were a terra incognita during a nearly whole century. For sociologists of religion and cultural studies researchers, it gives a clue to understanding the interplay between culture and religion in general, as well as limits and abilities of different socio-cultural systems of both colony and Metropolis to interact with and reflect each other. And more precisely, it helps to understand the role of traditional culture and beliefs in questioning new challenges that were aimed at shaping a new socio-cultural environment. In a broad sense it explains how religious beliefs are culturally conditioned and vice versa.

Several questions could be raised in this regard. How the cultural systems of colonial Central Asia which were based (although unevenly in space and time) on a specific Islamic model – a mixture of pre-Islamic beliefs with Islamic elements – reflected the new vector of development which Russia inevitably promoted on its new territories? How and to what extend the sociocultural spaces of both colonies and Metropolis handled the process of adaptation and acculturation while dealing with the ‘we-other’ identity issues? These questions are of an importance especially with regards to the issues of forming a colonial identity and mentality.

**Historical Background of the Religious Specificity in the Steppe**

The Kazakh Steppe – or Dešt-i-Kipčak as it is known in historical sources – as well as the whole region of Central Asia, has been a meeting place for various religions and beliefs. The pivotal force and starting point for Central Asian historical space were the ancient nomadic traditions, later diversified by the religious conceptions spread along the settled population of oases and towns and particularly, along the Great Silk Road. The primordial pool included Tengrism, Shamanism, Totemic and Animistic cults, conventionally referred to as pre-Islamic beliefs. They were later completed with Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Manicheanism, Mithraism and Islam. This continuous interflow was a remarkable feature especially at the time of dominance of the terrestrial space over the sea. It coincided with the functioning of the Great Silk Road as a bright manifestation of this dominance. By its very nature, the concept of Great Silk Road itself reflected and promoted further the flourishing of religious pluralism and syncretism making it a vibrant feature of that time.

As regards Christianity, it was historically characterised by numerous branches: the Eastern Syrian (Nestorian), the Western Syrian (Jacobite), and the Catholic (Melkite) Churches. The divisions among them were mainly theological and differed with their interpretation of the relation between the deist and human nature of Jesus Christ. The Orthodoxy was a main religion of Byzantium, the Jacobites dominated in Armenia, Egypt...
and Western Syria, while the Nestorians were predominant in the East, i.e. in Eastern Syria, the Sassanid empire, Parthia, Sogdiana, Margiana (Central Asia), China and India.

The origin of the Nestorian and Jacobite extension in the region was due to their persecution by Byzantium and further ousting to the East – including China – as referred to in the IV-V century AD. The first mention of Merv episcopate (near the town of Mary in modern Turkmenistan) that was later transformed into the Metropolis, is dated back to 334 AD. Merv was an important centre of Christianity spread under the Sassanids. In the Vth century, the Merv episcopate was elevated to the rank of Metropolis, becoming one of the highest hierarchies of the Christian Church in the East. It is interesting to note the activity of Ilâ, the Metropolitan of Merv, who was also known as the ‘Apostle of the Turks’ because of the fact that he was the first who converted into Christianity many Turkic tribes populating the Steppe near the oasis of Merv. As one of the cultural centres of that time, Merv also hosted an Orthodox (Catholic) Metropolis.

In the middle of the XIIIth century, Samarqand as well became a residing place for Nestorian Metropolis. In Semireč’e and Southern Kazakhstan, the Nestorian Church became widely spread in VII-VIIIth centuries. This was marked by the opening of Christian Churches in Taraz and around: Merke, Nevaket and other places.

During the Arab conquest of the region, there was a competition between Christian Church branches. The Arabs mainly favoured the Nestorians. In the XIth century, “the Caliphate has decreed that the episcopes of Jacobite and Melkite Churches should subdue to the Nestorian Catholicos and fulfil its edicts; since 987 the Catholicos was approved and supported by the Caliph, despite the willingness of episcopes.” The conciliation between Nestorians and Jacobites took place only in 1142. However, these two Christian branches were popular mainly in oases and along the Silk Road trade routes, as were Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichean. Therefore they had not been totally mainstreamed and step by step, by the XIII-XIVth centuries, they were pressed back to the periphery of religious thinking and practice in the region.

Speaking of Christianity, it should be mentioned that the Roman Catholic Church came to the region in the XIIIth century. The missionary and strategic tasks set before the special missions headed by Friars Plano Carpini (1245-1247) and Willem (Guillom) de Roebruck (1253-1255) became a wonderful page in the book of history between East and West. Plano Carpini, an Italian born Franciscan monk and close friend and follower of Francisco Assisi, was given the bulla of the Pope Innocentius IV on the one hand to establish favourable relations with the Mongol-Tatars, whose empire had reached its climax by that time with an expansion to Central and Eastern Europe and, on the other hand, to learn the religious environment and to spread Christian teaching among the nomads. The second mission was led by the Minorit monk Willem (Guillom) de Roebruck (1253-1255) who participated in the VIth Christian Crusade. He was even more successful not only in depicting the beliefs and traditions of the people of Central Asia, but in spreading the knowledge on Catholic creed among the Mongols as well as among the Nestorians, who formed the near circle of the Mongol Great Khan, Mangu (Munke) Khan.

Another wave of Christianity came with the Russian colonisation of Central Asia, starting from the middle of the XVIIth century and in the course of which Orthodoxy began penetrating into the region along with Russian and Cossacks settlers concentrated mainly on the Frontier lines. With the establishment and reinforcement of new Metropolises, as well as with the slow but continuous inclusion of the local population into the orbit of
colonial development, the contours of political, socioeconomic and sociocultural influences started to evolve. The Orthodox Christianity has played a significant role in this process since the sociocultural system of the Russian empire adapted to the so called ‘religious line.’ Religion was able to make this space a steady one in a new environment and, at the same time, was aimed at transforming this space according to its own algorithm.

The spread of Christianity was a prolonged process experiencing the ups and downs and depending on the political situation of the empire. The relative success of early stage evangelisation at the beginning of the xixth century was due to several factors. First, one should mention the syncretic worldview of the nomads of the Kazakh Steppe, the low socioeconomic status of newly convert, which was aggravated by crop failures (džut). This can be explained by the broader political context, when the empire endeavoured to position itself as a faith protecting State. This policy of peaceful inclusion, based on the early principle formulated by Catherine the Great and then generally supported by the Alexander I, stated the following: “We own you, you subdue to us and pay the taxes; for all this you may live and believe as you want.”¹⁴ In Eurasia this aspiration towards religious and social quiet had historical parallels with the Mongol Golden Horde. Its sovereigns proposed the same views to allow the vast and multi-religious population of the conquered land to adopt the new reign eagerly (for their own cultural systems).¹⁵ As for the Mongol-Tatars themselves, to build the safe system of socioeconomic management and administering.

At the end of the xviii century, the religious policy of the Russian empire tried as well to reflect this principle mixed up on the ideas of enlightenment and humanism. As a gaining factor, the Russians intended to outspread their political protectorate to receive the status of great colonial power and stability on their far borders. As mentioned above, in practice, these ideas were reflected in the policy of favouring Islam that became officially institutionalised.

The local context and the specific way of life of the nomads have played significant role too. Their perception of the world followed the ancient ecological paradigm of cosmic rhythms in their economic, social and spiritual life. Their philosophical conceptions of nature rested on a syncretic, holistic dimension and were characterised by tolerance, openness for inclusion of new elements, a favourable perception of the ‘other’ and the strong influence of archaic primordial layers at the same time.¹⁶ These conceptions had clearly a purely ecological dimension.

This characteristic paved the way of a symbiosis between old cosmic cyclic Tengri-Shamanic beliefs and new religious conceptions like Islam at the time of its spreading in the Steppe. This caused the inevitable adaptation of both religious conceptions to each other, as well as the wide preservation of archaic non-Islamic layers in new Islamic religious practices.¹⁷

The particularity of social links in the nomadic society was deeply connected with its general economic model of activity and was characterised by maintaining traditional kin relations within the vast dispersed space. This led to the division of the three Žuz, which brightly reflected the specific contacts of each Žuz with its neighbours. The contact zones became a place of co-existence and inter-influence between numerous paradigms of development. It is not surprising that the openness and favourable perception of the ‘other’ have simultaneously resulted in a wide interaction with it. For example, the
existing division along the ‘nomadic-settled population’ line in contact zones was washed away and led to a special type of economic activity,\textsuperscript{18} while the dispersed groups of the same ethnos drew into the orbit of neighbouring cultures. Geographically and historically the contact zones of the nomads varied ranging from sociocultural spaces of the Russian empire (based on Orthodoxy) to Bukhara, Khiva, Samarqand and Eastern Turkestan (based on Islam). All this could not help reflecting the quality, the pace, and the borders of inter-influence and inter-absorption of various cultural and, subsequently, religious models.

19 The analysis of Christianity spread in the Steppe is most vibrantly expressed on the sample of the Small and Middle Žuz, which were both in close contact with the Russian empire. On the contrary, Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand were annexed to the empire later in the 1860s. This interaction was not highlighted due to totally different period and sociocultural paradigm. In the last case the focus was made on the ways and possibilities of adaptation and connections of Metropolis toward an Islamic-based sociocultural model.

20 Thus the implementation of other types of colonial policy, i.e. the inclusion of the ’other’ (the nomads) into the Russian orbit was made possible in the Western and Northern contact zones of the Kazakh Steppe. This is a reason to refer to this particular geographic location in our analysis. However the conditional character of this division is fully acknowledged by the author – as elsewhere in the world there were a multitude of forms, colours and semitones reflecting different cultures. Rather it should be stressed that the particular division shows only the key, mainstreamed trends of both religious policy and religious status-quo of the region.

21 Chronologically the research embraces the first half on the xix\textsuperscript{th} century, due to the fact that this period has a limited coverage in research literature. The few existing works on the spread of Christianity in the region concentrate on the second half of the xix\textsuperscript{th} and early xx\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{19}

**Trends of Evangelisation and Perception of the ‘Other’**

22 The main institutionalised agencies in the imperial religious policy field were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Asian Department, set up in 1819) and, following the consolidation of new territories, the Ministry of Home Affairs (first as the Chief Administration and later as the Department of Spiritual Affairs Related to Foreign Beliefs). Apart of this, there were two main bodies located in the town of Orenburg, in the Volga river region: the Orenburg Spiritual Consistory and the Orenburg Frontier Commission. The first one was in charge of religious affairs while the second had implemented since 1799 a judicial power towards new subjects. Both of them played a key role in administering everyday life in the new territories.\textsuperscript{20}

23 At the initial stages of colonisation, the Metropolis has just prepared the ground and defined a general frameworks for proselytism. The accent was made on the associated attempts of some priests settled down along the border lines. The creation of organised missions and separate eparchies on the new territories was still a matter of time. At the end of xvii\textsuperscript{th} – beginning of xix\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the conversion of the Kazakhs in Christianity was mostly the result of socioeconomic factors: their calamitous situation and the loss of kinship relations. In contact regions – mainly along the special Frontier Line, a buffer
zone between the nomadic and settled population – the interaction has led to the
dissolving of all borders – geographic, behavioural and mental. Under the pressure of bad
harvests and cattle plague (dżut), Kazakhs entrusted their children to Russian border
officials or Cossacks in order to save them. At the same time, people asked for “eternal
Russian citizenship” to avoid the economic calamities. The prerequisite for this was the
conversion to Orthodoxy.21

The other category of those appealing for “introduction into the faith of the Christian law
” was also the indigenous population who, unlike the first ones, had no relatives. They
expressed their desire to “take in the saint christening and to remain in the local place in
the Cossack cavalry” or “to take in the faith of the Greek belief and stay in the Russian
citizenship.”22 The acceptance of Christianity was considered by them as one of the ways
to relatively stable economic situation, either within the Cossack service or as a serf (krepostnoj).
Here one could eagerly draw a parallel with conversions in other parts of the
world. For example, in the Indian subcontinent, the converts mainly belonging to the low
caste or to untouchables (Harijan in Hindustani) considered their conversion to
Catholicism or to Islam as an opportunity to upgrade their economic and social status.23

According to many cases of the Orenburg Frontier Commission, in 1800–1810 poverty was
the main reason for which parents were forced to sell their children.24 The wide spread
feature of this phenomenon has paved a way to its institutionalisation: the sale of
children by poor Kazakhs was legalised in 1808. This sale was made possible to Russians
such as border officials or Cossacks who had no children or who had retired and wanted
to educate children;25 as well as to foreigners, missionaries even if they were from a
competing Christian branch, for instance Catholics.26

The latter case is very prominent and is worth mentioning since it shows firstly, the
active work of non-Orthodox missionaries in the Kazakh Steppe and the delta of Volga
(especially in Astrakhan27); secondly, it shows the relatively tolerant attitude of Russian
authorities towards non-Orthodox missionaries at the time; and thirdly, it confirms the
fact that Russian authorities considered the baptising of the ‘other believers’ (inovery) –
even into other Christian branches – more desirable than to “leave them in the faith of
Mohammad.” From the Russian standpoint, the adoption by Kazakhs of Christian values –
especially in towns or in stanica (large Cossack villages) – would help rooting out their
habits and adapting to a totally different way of living. These measures were viewed as a
way to promote their loyalty to the empire and their eventual Russification.

The change of religion became a key element of their new sociocultural identity. The
conversion to any branch of Christianity was regarded by the Metropolis – at least at the
beginning – as strengthening the State power. In such cases the State itself observed
closely the destiny of baptised Kazakhs within a rather long period of their life. Studying
such a process helps therefore portraying a general picture of the administration and
governance of religious issues by the Russian empire in the first three decades of the XIXth
century. This is in particular the case of the following story: Ivan Petrov Baleev, an
inhabitant of Astrakhan of Armenian origin, bought in 1815 two children named Kul of
four years old, and Erembek of three years old. To fix the deal he received a consent letter
from the boys’ father – the Kirgiz-kaisak (Kazakh) Kušumbaj Suûndukov. The letter had
been verified by the administrator of the Small Žuz Karimov and by the uezdnyj
(administrative unit) court of Astrakhan. After getting the permission, he later resold the
children to the Catholic priest Pater-superior Ėsif Surin. The latter, in its own turn,
registered this deal by appealing in February 1817 to the Orenburg Frontier Commission
to be granted the permission to have rights on the children. In accordance with the
Imperial Decree of 1808, he had the obligation to take care of the children until they turn
twenty-five years old, after which they would decide by themselves whether they stay
with the Pater-superior or leave him. During seven months the Frontier Commission
addressed the case of the two boys by verifying the statements of Baleev (the first buyer),
inquiring about the copies of the documents from the administrator of the Small Žuz. In
September 1817, the Frontier Commission gave a final permission to the Pater-superior.
However, the story was not completed yet. In 1837, when the children turned twenty-five,
the State reopened the case, as stipulated by law. The Frontier Commission asked the
provincial (gubernskoe) body “to search for father Surin and take away the Kirgiz boys
along with the written permission.” Further the town police of Astrakhan reported that,
according to a certain catholic Grigory Miritarov, the Pater-superior Surin left Russia in
1820 and entrusted him his older boy Kul. As for the younger brother Erembek, he had
died by that time. Kul was converted to Catholicism, received a new name – Petr Grigoriev
– and “during the revision, has been listed by the provincial body to the lower middle
class (mešanskoe obšestvo).” The police also reported that now “Petr is a service man of one
bureaucrat named Ākov.” As a result of all this, the provincial governing body decreed to
search for Petr Grigoriev, took him to the Orenburg Frontier Commission to make a
decision on his future life. This is where the archive case is interrupted.

On the basis of this story, it could be concluded that religious issues, especially those
referring to non-Orthodoxy, were observed very thoroughly by State authorities.
Governing bodies were involved at all levels: Frontier Commission, provincial
administration and town police. While conversion to Orthodoxy was mainly left to local
authorities and has been fixed in relatively few cases, it was the opposite for the Catholic
mission. After christening, the Kazakhs were given new Russian names and surnames.
In case of appeals from elderly persons, they were sent for settlement in Russian villages or
Cossack stanicy. These measures had far-reaching consequences: on the one hand the
general system of kinship was destroyed; on the other hand, the convert was given the
opportunity to escape the condemnation of his kin members. In other words, the
traditional sociocultural environment had totally switched.

As mentioned earlier, the conversion was regarded by Kazakhs as a measure against
economic hardships and especially against hunger. The material support provided by
Christianisation was considerable. For example, elderly Kazakhs willing to “take in the
faith of the Greek belief” were sent to remote Cossack villages and were offered five to
ten roubles and tax privileges for three years. Young children could be adopted or taken
for upbringing provided their obligatory christening. The decree of the Orenburg
Frontier Commission of 18 June 1804, as suggested by the military general-governor duke
Volkonsky, appeared to be the main legal document regulating this situation at the early
XIXth century.

Later, the decree of 1822 extended the tax privileges from three to six years. The decree
of 1836 stipulated that those who were converted to Christianity “should be given from
the State treasury twenty-five roubles in assignation.” The amount could go up as to a
hundred roubles, for instance in the following case of the conscription of Kazakhs to a
Cossack Cavalry of the Ural regiment: two brothers Kopzasar and Torūbaj Mataev
expressed their willingness to be conscribed to the Cossack Cavalry, to “acquire
household items.” Archival materials state that they were conscribed to the Ural
regiment and were given one roubles each, only after the two brothers “have taken in the
saint baptising and were renamed Gavril and Stepan.” In this particular case, the Ural regiment authorities were able to get money for both of them, so the final sum was rather important.

31 The cases of conversion at the beginning of the XIXth century are interesting also in connection with the social relations and the religious and cultural interactions taking place in the Steppe. For example, the appeals on conversion to Christianity were made not only by Kazakhs, but also by Persians34 and Kalmyks.35 After being captured by the Kazakhs, the Kalmyks managed to escape from the Steppe and appealed to Russian border authorities to settle in Astrakhan, a multicultural metropolis of that time. As it became a common practice of all inovercy, they had to take in the Christian faith. According to the official protocols of the Orenburg Frontier Commission, the Kalmyks were not converted to Islam when they were living under the Kazakhs. They were not forced to do so because, for the Kazakhs, the issue of strong observance of a faith was not a core principle. To live and work with non-Muslims was not forbidden, rather, it had a pure utilitarian character (housekeeping, cattle-breeding, etc.). In this part of the Steppe, the political protectorate of the Russian empire was not related to dar al-Islam or dar al-Kharab. Unlike Bukhara’s and Ferghana’s theologians, who were troubled by the rapprochement between the theological dogmas of Islam and their new status within a non-Muslim Russian empire,36 in the Kazakh Steppe the question was not raised. This reflects the specific loose character of Kazakhs’ Islam, where archaic Tengri-Shamanic beliefs continued to frame a tolerant perception of the ‘other.’ Rather than excluding it, the inclusion of the ‘other’ in its ‘own’ sociocultural system did not aim at totally transforming the ‘other.’ Rather, the new ‘other’ only had to be slightly adapted while its main key religious and cultural elements were allowed to be the same.

32 For the captives of the Steppe this approach meant that being economically and socially involved into the new way of living, however, their basic religious symbols have not been lost at all. As for the Kazakhs this approach had two consequences: on the one hand, the tolerance towards the ‘other’ and the enrichment of its ‘own’ sociocultural system; on the other hand, the possibility to dissolve and – in extreme cases – lose their’own’ identity, especially in the periphery of their sociocultural system (i.e. in contact zones) or in a totally different sociocultural environment. This explains, among other reasons discussed earlier, the relatively favourable attitude of the Kazakhs towards conversion at that time, and why geographically this practice became possible in the North-Western and not in the Southern contact zone of Russian Central Asia.

33 It is worth mentioning that, in the Russian sociocultural environment, those who escaped from the Steppe had by all means to appeal for conversion in Orthodoxy. This shows us a totally different type of interaction between religion (State religion) and culture (sociocultural system). The religion here fully performs the causal function obliging newcomers to change their relation to faith and acquire a new one. The cases of the escaped Kalmyks who converted to Christianity perfectly illustrates this process.

34 In this regard, a parallel can be drawn between Christian and Islamic models, each of them trying not only to include the ‘other’ but also to transform it according to their own algorithm. The causal function of both Christian and Islam religions shows their high potential and vitality along the course of their interaction with local practices. However, these beliefs previously spread in the Steppe had also a hidden but high potential. For instance the original forms of Islam, as they were perceived in Arabia, had been considerably transformed in the Steppe and were given a new dimension influenced by
Shamanic beliefs. As such the Central Asian Islam, especially among the nomads, had acquired new dimension and forms.

35 As another sample of the causal function of religion and the approach to transform the ‘other,’ this time, by the Islamic tradition, here is a telling case. It states about Alexander Ivanov, a corporal of the Orenburg Cossack regiment, who had been imprisoned in Bukhara but escaped and managed to return home. At the time, the capture and auction of Russians and Cossacks in Southern contact zones such as Bukhara was a frequent practice. According to the archives, Corporal Ivanov was captured by four Kazakhs, then was sold to another man who, in its own turn, has resold him to a citizen of Bukhara. There, the corporal told his new owner that he was “of Mohammad law.” As a result, he became free. Later he managed to join the Russian trade caravan, being guarded by the Kazakhs, and headed back to the city of Troitsk, a fortress on the Orenburg Frontier Line. During his interrogation at the Troitsk border commission, he explained that “in Bukhara he deliberately called himself a Muslim so that, thanks to his knowledge of the Tatar language, he could escape from captivity.”

36 Interestingly in this case, the corporal had the ability to speak Tatar and a perfect command of local traditions. It is worth mentioning the initial uneven status of Islam among the Kazakhs and the people of Bukharan. When for Kazakhs the status of ‘being a Muslim’ did not produce any effect, then for Bukhara’s dwellers it meant a lot, mainly the necessity to guarantee freedom to their co-believer. The Orenburg Frontier Commission has suitably rewarded the corporal and gave him “a compensation of eighty roubles for the endured material hardships” and for “his patience and nowadays poor condition.”

37 However such happy ends were not common. In another case, the captured Russian peasant Ivan Avvakumov, living among Kazakhs for more than twenty years, has been accustomed to local culture to such extent that he married a Kazakh girl, took in Islam and was circumcised. The Frontier Commission made a rigorous decision towards him. The conversion to Islam from Orthodoxy was not only unfavourable but nearly prohibited. This was caused by the general framework of imperial ideology stating a symbiosis or “symphony” between State and religion. According to it, the Orthodoxy was granted an official religion status while the monarch was considered as its custodian. In accordance with the 1845 Penalty Code (uloženie), “conversion to Islam resulted in the abolition of all property rights and the exile to hard labour (penal servitude) for a period of 8-10 years. In special violent cases, the term went up to 12-15 years.”

38 The above mentioned case of Ivan Avvakumov’s conversion to Islam was the only one reported in the available materials of the Orenburg Frontier Commission during the first half of the XIXth century. Following the ideological framework, the Commission tried to tear him out of his new Kazakh culture and to re-include him again in the previous Orthodoxy-based sociocultural environment. In practice Ivan Avvakumov was resent to his native village of the province of Simbirsk in spite of his age – at that time he was sixty years old – his new family and three children and also despite the fact that he had practically forgotten the use of Russian language. He spoke with the Commission representatives through an interpreter (tolmat'). This case reveals that the State, represented by the Frontier Commission, tried to severely restore the traditional status-quo, i.e. the religious and sociocultural identity of a convert.

39 These two cases are telling of the causal function of religion, the high degree of transforming the ‘other’ or restoring the previous status by both Islamic and Christian
traditions. The policy of the Metropolis towards its subjects who happened to be in other
cultural (i.e. Muslim-based) environment was dependent on the degree of their inclusion
into the ‘other’ culture or, on the contrary, of its rejection. In the first case, Corporal
Alexander Ivanov preferred to return to the previous status of being a Russian and a
Christian, thus rejecting his incorporation into the cultural context of Islam-based
Bukhara. The second case showed the opposite. The State used different policies, either as
a carrot or a stick. One of the facets of the State religious and administrative policy was
strict control over the cases and the maximum cooperation with local elites.

Material and bureaucratic resources became the significant stimulus for the interaction
with the Steppe elites. In the case of Ivan Avvakumov who, initially, was not a fugitive but
a captive, the sultan and two high ranking judicial officials (biji) who found him were
granted by the Frontier Commission “five arşin41 of broadcloth, by fifteen roubles each to
the first, and ten roubles to the second; while bij Manku Kulov who has previously
rendered such services was promoted to the title of tarkhan.”42 The other stimulus
measure was, for example, the promotion of a mullah into the military rank.43 As such,
this could be considered as an extraordinary measure. But bearing in mind the State-
religion symbiosis it could also be regarded as a partial display of the extremely high role
of the State in the religious sphere and vice versa.

It is impossible to present precise figures on baptising due to the lack of accurate report
of all cases, especially at the beginning of the process. Later, in the second half of the XIXth
century the new tendency evolved into the so called de-evangelisation or exit of the
Kazakhs from Orthodoxy. However, according to the Orenburg Frontier Commission, in
1804-1840 there were more than fifty cases of christening of Kazakhs. Such cases included
the liberation from serfdom of a christened Kazakh, the runaway of a baptised Kazakh
slave, the dismissal of a christened Kazakh from the Cossack army, the promotion to the
rank of gentlemen (nobility) to baptised Kazakhs, etc.44 In each case the number of people
varied from one person to the whole family. According to the Omsk regional governing
body (oblastnoe pravlenie) in 1822-1838 there were only twelve cases of conversion of
Kazakhs.45 In the middle of the XIXth century, the Steppe Commission counted 127
converts among the Orenburg Kazakhs (in 1855-1864) and 109 converts among the
Siberian Kazakhs (in 1860-1864);46 according to the Tobol eparchy, there were 149
converts in 1860-1865.47

At the initial stage of colonisation, the number of Kazakh converts was incomparable with
the later period (the middle and second half of the XIXth century) because of a lesser
geographical expansion of the empire and a relatively weak institutionalisation of
religion – i.e. specially organised missions, missionary societies, independent eparchies in
the Steppe, vigorous State support and Russification policy. All this powerful
administrative resource of the State in support of the Orthodoxy will be activated as from
the middle of the XIXth century. This will have two effects: on the one hand, it will result
in the increase of the number of neophytes; on the other, it will trigger the opposite
process of rejecting the ‘other’ and strengthening the ‘own’ traditional religious identity
of the Kazakhs, thus leading to de-evangelisation.
Conclusion

According to the archival materials, the conversion of Kazakhs in the first half of the XIX\textsuperscript{th} century was not widely spread. Still it became a wellknown process for those Kazakhs who lived along the Frontier Line and the nearby fortresses. The highest numbers of reported conversions date back to the first decade of the XIX\textsuperscript{th} century which was mainly caused by economic poverty and financial hardships among the Kazakhs.

How reasonably and consciously the neophytes considered their conversion? Because of their longstanding experience of tolerance towards religions, the Kazakhs did not view Christianity in hostile terms. The religious (Orthodox) meaning and symbolism of the Russian sociocultural system was considered by ordinary Kazakhs as a practical element, rather than a spiritual challenge to their traditional values. As a rule, notably during the initial period, they regarded Christianity and conversion as a utilitarian event that did not torment the soul but safeguarded the families from economic hardships, especially hunger. Later towards the end of the XIX\textsuperscript{th} and early XX\textsuperscript{th} century, the rise of nationalistic movements and new perception of religious and national identities (combined with the new ideologies of socialism, class struggle and public participation) altered the attitude of the Kazakhs towards Christianisation. The general policy of the Russian empire towards its nationalities (repressions and Russification) paved a way to the negative perception and the consequent rejection of Christianisation.

Converts were mainly economically deprived poor people, while the most stable position of traditional religion – Tengri-Shamanic-based Islam – was observed among the wealthy population of the Steppe. This religious division along the ‘elite-common’ people line was not specific to Orthodox evangelisation. An analogous situation took place in South Asia when the least advantaged untouchables converted to new religions. In Central Asia, during the first centuries of Islam spreading (up to beginning of the second millennium AD), the first Islamic preachers made also a wide use of the economic factor. As Bartold states, the Arabs paid two dirkhem to each person attending service in the mosques. Meanwhile the most fervent opponents to Islam were among the wealthy people.\textsuperscript{48} It is revealing that in the above mentioned case of Ivan Avvakumov, the captured peasant was sold to a wealthy Kazakh man, fervent follower of Islam, who in fact had accepted him into his own circle through the marriage of his daughter and his conversion to Islam.

The examples of religious interplays in the Kazakh Steppe from early XIX\textsuperscript{th} century illustrate the inner logic of culture-religion interaction. During this process, both the effect and causal functions of religion (and culture) were fully performed. For the Kazakh culture, based on Tengri-Shamanic Islam, the effect function of its religion took place in the maintenance of a traditional way of living, which was given the unconditional preferences. This is not surprising, bearing in mind the definition of the cultural system embracing by itself all walks of life, and rather slow pace of changes undergoing in it. From a historical viewpoint, a century and a half is quite a short period. Unlike Islam, which came in a region characterised by polyreligious background, poly-theistic views and limited national identities, Christianity was less ‘fortunate’ here. By the time of its appearance the local arena was already occupied by the same monotheistic religion which actively took part in the process of national identity building. Thus, Islam has been interwoven in the Kazakh culture and became a considerable part of the Steppe cultural identity. In this regard, Christianity had relatively few chances and could not expect
quick results. Religious transformation took place only among the peripheral part of the Steppe, both in a geographical and strata meaning. At the beginning of the XIXth century, Russian authorities tried to adjust themselves to a new situation and elaborate a corresponding policy within the strict frames of the State-religion symbiosis ideology. In no way the Russians were forcing evangelisation. Later in the second half of the XIXth century, they changed their approach and advocated a powerful and more aggressive conversion, actively performed by such Statesman as N. Ilminskyj (in the educational sphere) and G. Kolpakovskyj (the general-governor of Turkestan kraj).

47 As for the causal function of religion of the Kazakh, only one case stated the change of belief within the ‘other’ culture, i.e. the conversion into Islam of Avvakumov. Since such cases were very sensitive for the Russian Metropolis, the converts were severely punished. This may explain the fact that they were not widely spread, at least at that time, or they could have been filed in separate archives.

48 In the Russian cultural system, the causal function of religion cannot be addressed only through the Christianisation policy. Its achievements were due to both economic and cultural factors. The material hardships experienced by poor Kazakhs, especially during the first decade of the XIXth century, were combined with the open, cosmic and holistic character of the nomads’ perception of the world, which played a significant part in their modus vivendi. This has paved a way to religious tolerance and enlarged the frames of perception of the ‘other’ and the knowledge of the world in general. That is the reason why Christianity among the Kazakhs, notwithstanding its limited results, had gained the right for existence. One could even acknowledge a relative success of Christianisation in the Steppe, in comparison to Southern contact zones, where the Metropolis adapted itself to Islam and was not aiming at changing the religious environment. The effect function of religion in the Russian empire context was manifested in the spread of its religion, culture, values and way of living on the vast territories of the region. After October 1917 revolution, this general model – although it changed considerably from ideological and religious stances – strengthened its position and dominated the local cultural landscape for decades.

49 Throughout its long history, the Kazakh Steppe was an arena of constant interactions between various ethnic and religious groups, both local and external. An experience of numerous religious and cultural interactions was able to make an input in the formation of the historical memory of the ethnos, its own and shared cultural heritage. These constant interlinks framed the habit of respecting the ‘other’ and strengthening the ‘own’ identity at the same time. The open-minded nomads of the Steppe were inevitably influenced by new cultural waves, as well as by their traditional bases that best reflected the nomadic way of life. Their own culture had a vast potential to perform its own development even in case of some changes undergoing in their system periphery.

50 The spread of Christianity in the Steppe is a clue to understand more generally the structure-agency interaction, particularly the culture-religion interplay which are inseparable but at the same time rather autonomous when religion and culture interpenetrate into each other and become mutually conditioned. Following the Vajrayana Buddhism theology, the transforming power takes place when:

51 “the intellectualism of the Sutras melts and reappears as a vast array of symbols moulding and transforming within our mind’s eye, a transformation that we become a
part of. By sharing in the mystical nature of the transformation, we ourselves arise as the deity to perform the mantra recitation that releases a wave of enlightened energy."[49]

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NOTES

1. The Small Žuz – or Small Horde – covered the Western and North-Western parts of contemporary Kazakhstan.

2. The policy of pacifying Islam became a turning point in governing religious affairs after the previous periods of repressions against it and so called pagan beliefs. This tough stand was accompanied by the forced conversion of the Upper and Central Volga river region pagans and Muslims into the Orthodoxy in the XVI-XVII centuries.


4. In China starting already since 635 there existed a Nestorian community founded by A-lobeng. More in: Lomanov, 2002; Bartold, 1964, p. 275. Datsyshen mentions that there are the assumptions that the visits of Syrian missionaries to China could take place as early as in II century. See: Datsyshen, 2007, p.16.

5. After Oecumenical Council in Efes (431), the Nestorian patriarch has sent Nestorians with their families to Malabar Coast of India to set up a Nestorian community, which throve there during IX-XIV centuries. See: Matveyev, 1968, p. 124.


9. Bartold, 1964a, pp. 275-278; Bartold, 1964b, pp. 317-318. As Bartold suggested, the Christians have already had in VI century their own episcope in Samarqand.

10. This interesting fact could be interpreted as the inclination of the Caliphate to establish a specific monopoly on governing all religious affairs and not only Islam. At the same time it shows a specificity of Islam and Islam-based governance connected with the junction and non-separateness of two spheres – religious and political.


12. According to some researchers, the Nestorian Church existed in Semirče relatively long, till the end of the XIVth century, as indicated the archaeological discovery of numerous religious artefacts (Orynbekov, 2005, pp. 174-185).

13. Carpini, Roebuck, 1993, pp. 128-146. Although the Great Khan Mangu ( Munke) Khan (1251-1259) was inclined to Christianity (known to him in a form of a Nestorian teaching), he continued following the Shamanic beliefs. As Guillom de Roebuck witnessed, Mangu Khan kept the fast in some days, celebrated Easter. However everyday he followed auspicious rites, using the sheep’s shoulder-blade to tell fortunes: “Khan doesn’t do anything in this whole world without preliminarily finding a council in these bones” (Carpini, Roebuck, p. 131). This episode is a bright sample of primordial beliefs so deeply embedded in culture that they became culturally justified and culturally sanctified tradition with which other new beliefs should be reckoned with. This explains that the Khan’s Christian beliefs could be defined as nominal ones. From the normative Christian (Catholic) standpoint he was still regarded as a pagan.

15. Under the first Mongol-Tatar rulers, the basis of the sociocultural systems of Central Asia and Rus (Ancient Russia) – namely the religion – was in fact unchanged. As such, “the Mongols, like all Shamanists, equally treated and respected all religions and equally freed the Muslim, Christian and Buddhist clergy from all kinds of taxes and duties. In Mongolia itself, Christianity was spread as long as before Genghis Khan. The strong tribe of kereit was known to follow the Christian faith […]. The most favourable condition for Christians was during the reign of the great khan Guûk (1246-1248), who had received the Christian upbringing” (Bartold 1964a, p. 316).

16. The archaic primordial layers were influential also because of the fact that the way of living of the nomads of the Steppe had in fact not basically undergone any radical changes till the end of the xixth century.

17. For details, see Toleubaev, 1991 and Valikhanov, 1986, pp. 298-318

18. Khazanov, for example, states the inter-targeted influence of nomadic and settled societies that has led to such phenomenon of nomadism as its inseparable and indispensable link with the outer world (Khazanov, 2002, pp. 68-69).


20. Since the introduction of the Decree on Orenburg Kyrgyzs and the abolition of the khan’s power in the Small Žuz, the Orenburg Frontier Commission conducted the whole spectrum of governance, ranging from administrative to judicial. The same referred to Middle Žuz, after the introduction of the 1822 Decree on Siberian Kyrgyzs. It is worth noticing that after the inclusion of the Southern part of Central Asia (Bukhara Emirate, Kokand and Khiva khanates) into the Russian empire in the second half of the xixth century, the judicial power remained initially within local elites.

21. TGA RK, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 63.

22. TGA RK, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 63, 604.


24. The sale of children by poor families was rather a widespread phenomenon not only in the Steppe, but also in other parts of the world at that time (even in the xxth century for example, in Asia and Africa the sale of children to missionaries and wealthy people, especially during calamities and revolutions, was considered as a way of saving them from hunger). In the Russian empire till 1861 the practice of serfdom commonly consisted in selling serf people (krepostnoj) or whole families and even villages to wealthy owners.

25. See for example, TGA RK, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 98, 98 oborot.

26. TGA RK, F. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 246, sv. 171, l. 1-17.


28. TGA RK, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 246, sv. 171, l. 1-17.

29. It is revealing that as a result of the first wave of Christianisation among ancient Turks of Central Asia, the newly baptised were given new Christian names which were used along with their own Turkic names. According to Orynbekov (2005, pp. 174-185), this phenomenon was widely spread on the territory between Talas and Issyk-Kul, inhabited by the Kangly tribe, in modern Eastern Turkestan, where Uighurs live, and on the land of the Naimans in today’s Western Mongolia. In general, the assumption of a new name as a result of baptising reflects the general tradition in Christianity as well as in other religions, aimed at showing the new status and new life of a convert. This phenomenon could be referred to the concept of identity in general, notwithstanding the type of identity (religious or national) and the historical time. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Soviet Kazakhstan had a widely spread tradition of naming Kazakhs with Russian names in a process of socialisation with the Slavic population. For example, Kazakhs named Borabaj or Turganbaj could be given informally the Russian name Borâ
or Tolk. On the one hand, this trend could be regarded as a linguistic simplification and the reflection of the ideological tasks of that time – the creation of a “unified Soviet people”. On the other hand, it clearly represents the affirmation of one culture – and all its symbols – in a different cultural environment. It shows the causal function of a dominant culture in its long-term interaction with another culture. This can be seen also today in independent Kazakhstan, where the affirmation of the State identity encourages Kazakhs to change their Russified family names (ending with ‘ov/ova’ or ‘ev/eva’), into a more traditional naming.

30. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 75, 75 oborot.
32. In the 1830s, one hundred roubles was a rather big amount of money: for ninety roubles, one could buy two horses, and a good embroidered caftan cost twenty roubles (TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 321, sv. 191, l. 9 oborot).
33. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 2030, sv. 345, l. 1, 1 oborot, 2.
34. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 439-440.
35. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 672, 672 oborot.
37. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 205, sv. 147, l. 675, 676, 676 oborot, 680, 685, 685 oborot.
38. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 1537, sv. 295, l. 2-19.
40. By the end of the XIXth century, the number of such cases began to increase. This was caused, among other reasons, by the general political context, the growing crisis of the Russian empire in its ruling of peripheries, the rise of ethnic and religious identities among the local population and the influence of all these processes on the Orthodox citizen.
41. The aršin is an old measure of length equalling to 0.71 meter.
42. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 1537, sv. 295, l. 18.
43. TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 1178, sv. 276, l. 1, 1 oborot, 2, 2 oborot.
44. See, in particular: TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 1898, sv. 330; TGA Rk, F. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 2109, sv. 353 TGA Rk, f. 4, op.1, kn.1, delo 341, sv. 196.
47. Cited in Sadvokasova, 2005, p. 94.
49. Meditations on the Lower Tantras, p. ix.

ABSTRACTS

This chapter deals with the spread of Orthodox Christianity among the nomads of the Kazakh Steppe during the first half of the XIXth century, a time when the Russian empire began to formulate on its periphery a policy towards the religious sphere. Although this policy was still vague, it met a spontaneous reply from the local population. Based on the archival materials of the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, many of which are introduced for the first time, the chapter analyses the process of interaction between the ‘own’ and ‘other’ cultural systems, as well as the results of such inter-influence.
Ce chapitre traite de la diffusion de la chrétienté orthodoxe au sein des populations nomades de la steppe kazakhe dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle, à une époque où l’empire russe commençait à développer dans sa périphérie une politique vis-à-vis des affaires religieuses. Bien que cette politique fût encore imprécise, elle rencontrera un accueil spontané de la part des populations locales. Basé sur un corpus d’archives provenant des Archives centrales d’État de la république du Kazakhstan, dont beaucoup sont présentées pour la première fois, le chapitre analyse le processus d’interaction entre les systèmes culturels de « soi-même » et de « l’autre » ainsi que les résultats de leurs influences réciproques.

INDEX

Mots-clés: systèmes culturels et sociaux, fonctions religieuses, steppe kazakhe, chrétienté en Asie centrale, conversion vers l’église orthodoxe, catholicisme, chamanisme, tengrisme, islam, administration tsariste des religions

Keywords: cultural and social systems, functions of religion, Kazakh steppe, Christianity in Central Asia, conversion into Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Tengrism, Shamanism, Tsarist religious administration

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