Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Bigozhin, Ulan. " Local Politics and Patronage of a Sacred Lineage Shrine in Kazakhstan", *Central Asian Affairs* 5, 3 (2018): 233-252.

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Abstract

Pilgrimage to saints' shrines is an important Islamic practice in Kazakhstan. Kazakhs go on pilgrimages seeking cures for disease, blessings for the future, and a connection to the past. Pilgrimage sites and those who control them are not, however, apolitical. The control of shrines and the business of pilgrimage are both connected to governmental nation-building policies. This paper shows that traditional shrine keepers from sacred lineages (*qozha*) in northern Kazakhstan seek patronage from political and eco- nomic elites in order to build, maintain, and expand shrine complexes. These patrons are often state officials who expect returns in cultural capital for investments of economic capital. The different goals of patrons and shrine-keepers occasionally lead to conflict. This paper examines one such conflict and explores what it reveals about the interplay between religion and local politics in Kazakhstan.

Keywords

Pilgrimage – sacred lineage – *qozha* – Kazakhstan – state-nation-building

Introduction

The aim of this article is to show the dynamics of religious discourses and shrine-related practices in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, where the secular and the sacred are mixed and interdependent. Today, Aqköl shrine complex, near Ekibastuz in the Pavlodar region, not only attracts pilgrims and the support of the sacred family, but has also engaged politicians and become a source for grassroots nation-building. This research is based on participant observation

doi 10.1163/22142290-00503003

and fieldwork data collected during summer 2013 and summer 2014. It demonstrates that the power of shrines and saints attracts the attention of those engaged in state secular projects, as well as that of those seeking a religious experience. At times, there are even tensions between the interests of sacred lineage representatives and those of shrine sponsors/patrons.

The "hero" of this article is a local state politician and wealthy businessman— let's call him Z.—who supports the Aqköl shrine complex, but whose ambitions also provoked resistance on the part of a representative of the sacred family. Why is Z. paying so much attention to and taking such care of the Aqköl shrine complex? Why does he admire Aqköl saint Zhandarbek so much? I surmised that such praise of Zhandarbek must be the result of some personal experience with him, a supposition that turned out to be correct. While having tea together at the shrine, I asked Z. if he had had personal encounters with the saint Zhandarbek, and Z. quickly replied:

> Yes, yes, I met Zhandarbek many times. In the late 1980s, I could walk only with crutches. It was hellish pain in my back, in my spine. I had an intervertebral problem. So one day I came here [to Aqköl] to talk with Ata [Zhandarbek]. I told him that a guy from Ertys area [Kazakh spelling of Irtysh] had had surgery, and his spine was cleaned, and the intervertebral disc was removed. So my friends told me, "Zhake [a respectful short form of the name Z.], we could help you. There are specialists in Omsk, they will do the surgery. We will help you."
>
> So I told Ata that my construction job, where I worked, had no activity during the winter, and thus I could potentially go to Omsk and have the surgery in February. Ata replied, "No, I do not want you to go under the knife [have surgery]. Come here, lie on my bed." So I lay down and he started to massage my bare back. It is interesting how he did the massage. Ata mixed soil from the grave of Ishan Ata [Isabek] with water and he started to write prayers [*dugalar*] with the soil. Ata was writing a kind of Arabic hieroglyphs. Soon Ata finished his massage and told me, "My dear, put on your clothes now. Do not put water on your body for thirty days. Be patient, good news will come by itself." So I came home and fell down almost in a coma. I mean, I was lying on the bed, and could see from the ceiling who was sitting near my body. It looked like clinical death, when your soul is leaving your body and you can see people around you. I was like that. It was funny. It seems that I was lying like that for a week, and some people who had never visited me before paid visits for different reasons. When I returned to consciousness, I asked people, "Why did this person come, why did that guy come?"

My neighbor was a nurse, so she was checking my temperature with a thermometer. She told me that for two days my body temperature was 42 degrees [Celsius]. Humans can live only two hours with this kind of temperature; after more than two hours, the blood starts to clot. My neighbor could not believe it and thought the thermometer was not working properly. I was lying there in huge pain. After 10 days, when I gathered myself up a little bit, I wanted to stand, to stay on my feet. But I couldn't; I had no body strength left. Other people had to dress me and feed me … I was drinking water and tea in tiny portions. Walking 10 meters was a problem, hard for me.

So after 30 days, my mom came. She came quite early, right after sending the cow to the herd. She was crying. I asked her, "What happened, mom?" She answered, "This morning, after finishing milking the cow, I sat down on the sofa for a minute and suddenly right in front of our window I saw Ata [Zhandarbek]. Ata was wearing white clothes, with a staff in his hands. Ata told me, 'Open the window, please.' Then he said, 'Oh my dear, your son [Z.] is lying in pain. Near Tyumen [Russian West Siberia], there is some sacred water [*kiyelikiyeli su*]. You went there several times. Take your son there; he should swim in this water seven times. His healing is there.' I just closed the window, plugged in the electric kettle, and went outside to invite Zhandarbek Ata to have tea, but he had already left. I could not find him outside. So, my son, we should pack up and go to Tyumen."

U.B.: So you went to Tyumen, to the healing waters?

Z.: Yes, we went to Tyumen, where the clinic with radon waters is located. My mom went there once when she was young. So we started our trip [*zholga shyqtyq*]. I was using crutches to walk. We took a bus from Ermak to Omsk first. I felt that my soul was almost leaving me when the bus made stops. So we came to Omby [Kazakh spelling of Omsk], where we took a train. In the train, with a lot of pain and an exclamation of "umph," I took a seat. We reached Tyumen, a place called Zaulokovsk. From there we went to the old Soviet water clinic, about three kilometers from the train station. It took me a whole day. Can you imagine, a whole day to walk three kilometers! I crossed railways and went by some snowy road to the clinic. I was barely walking. So we finally arrived, and we were lucky, because we got the only two available places in the sanatorium. We reached the clinic and the healing started. On the seventh day, I took a swim in the seventh steam bath [*bŭlau*]. Finally, we started walking back from

the sanatorium. It was quite a windy day; a heavy wind was pushing me in the back. I tried to resist it, but it was hard; the wind was even pushing me to jog a little bit. Sometimes I was walking too fast and stopped using my crutch. The second time I was forced by the wind to jog a little bit, I suddenly realized, "Wow, in the last few years I was barely walking. During wintertime, when one of my legs got stuck in the snow, it was painful just to remove it!" So I decided to throw away my crutches [*balpaq*]. I was standing on my two legs and decided to walk. I was walking with no pain. I was jogging a little, again with no pain. Finally, I fell down on my knees and started to cry. I could not believe what had happened. So from this time, pthu pthu pthu [Z. spat over his left shoulder], I have been healthy.

U.B.: Did you have a medical checkup after this?

Z.: Ah, yes. It was funny. What was his name, mmm … I forgot. In Aq-toghai, a friend of mine was working in the tuberculosis hospital. I had had an X-ray [before the healing in Tyumen] in my friend's hospital and on the X-ray picture, cartilage was visible on the connections of my spine and ribs. Cartilage had grown thick there. This friend told me before my healing, "Zhake, you are educated, you see that this [cartilage] should be removed by surgery." So he did an X-ray after my water healing. And the spine was clean, no cartilage at all. He asked me, "Hey, where is your cartilage?" We were sitting and comparing the two X-rays of my spine—one with cartilage and the recent one with no cartilage. It was the result of *Atanyn batasy* [the prayer of Zhandarbek], who had told me to wait 30 days, then go and take baths in the waters of Tyumen.

U.B.: So was it the result of radon water? What do you think?

Z.: It was not just the radon water [*radonovye istochniki*]. It [the successful healing] happened because of the sainthood [*äūlielīk*] of Zhandarbek. Radon could not just destroy and remove cartilage by itself. That was my personal experience with Zhandarbek.

This story is quite remarkable, one of the few detailed stories I collected near the shrines. Most people I encountered whom Zhanderbek healed of different diseases gave fairly short descriptions of their healing. Most of the pilgrims' stories could be summarized as, "I or we (family, friends, and group of relatives) went to Aqköl with such and such disease(s), sickness, or health problem and met Zhandarbek. The *äūliye* gave me or us an oral blessing, or combined

an oral prayer with soil from the graves of Aqköl *Qozha*. I/we consumed the soil or it was rubbed onto my/our back(s), or the soil was bundled and used as a kind of plaster. I/we healed after that." But Z.'s story is important because it provides more detail. It is composed of several healing stages and sheds light on the figure of Zhandarbek as a saint who lived through and was part of Soviet modernity.

According to Z.'s story, he went to Zhandarbek only after a medical checkup and X-ray at a hospital to get final advice from the holy man on whether or not to have medical surgery. Petitions to sacred people—like Z.'s request for advice and/or a cure from Zhandarbek before having surgery—are still widely practiced. During my fieldwork, I met several pilgrims who had serious illnesses, or else their relatives did. They came to the shrine complex at Aqköl to ask a blessing before—or even after—receiving medical treatment in a modern hospital.

One reason for the increased popularity of saintly places and shrines along- side (or as an alternative to) modern medicine is the collapse of the Soviet socialist system that provided free, state-supported medical care to all social groups. This phenomenon, where citizens appeal to traditional medicine during moments of crisis in modern public medicine, is a global one. For example, in the introduction to *Medical Marginality in South Asia*, David Hardiman and Projit Mukharji write that in South Asia, "chronic absenteeism and rampant corruption in the public health system—particularly in rural areas—accompanied by rising costs of private biomedical treatment has encouraged the exponential growth of 'illegitimate' or 'quack' practitioners of biomedicine."[1]

Hardiman and Mukharji's ideas help explain the growth of pilgrimage to the Aqköl shrine complex. In my interviews with pilgrims at the Aqköl shrine, they often expressed disappointment about the work of state hospitals and clinics. Some even accused medical workers of making wrong diagnoses, providing inappropriate treatments, or performing low-quality surgeries. This disappointment with modern state-run medical facilities is one motivation for pilgrimages. Another reason is economic: some pilgrims could not afford modern medical treatment. I heard several complaints that modern pills and drugs were increasingly expensive and that they could not afford to stay in a high-quality private hospital. Some pilgrims said they could not go to Astana's hospitals because the trip to the capital was too expensive, even though Kazakh state hospitals actually provide a lot of free care once patients arrive. But

1 David Hardiman and Projit B. Mukharji, *Medical Marginality in South Asia* (London: Rout-ledge, 2012), 9.

even if finances were not an issue, pilgrims often noted other problems with obtaining free care: the high level of bureaucracy, long waiting lists, etc.

Once, when I went with shrine keeper Erghali to get water from Aqköl village, we rode in his Russian-made rusty old Niva to the water pump in the middle of the village. When we had finished filling our plastic water barrels, Erghali said we should stop by the newly reconstructed medical center to get some paint for the fences of the shrine complex. Upon arrival, I saw an abandoned and heavily damaged building that was under reconstruction. It had been built during the Soviet period, probably in the 1970s or 1980s, and had functioned as a small, all-village *medpunkt* (first aid medical center). A group of workers (mostly ethnic Russians) were painting walls, installing doors and windows, covering the roof, and erecting a new fence. Speaking with the foreman, I got the sense that the village had finally received money from the state to start restoration. Erghali told me that this medical center had not functioned since the mid-1990s. The absence of local medical care in Aqköl has seen villagers compelled to drive to Ekibastuz in emergencies. In marginal, economically deprived zones such as Aqköl, seeking support from sacred family saints such as Zhandarbek was one of the ways locals felt they could be healed. And today, they continue to seek help from Zhandarbek's son, Sagidolla.

My conversations with Erghali and the foreman suggest that the presence of a sacred family in Aqköl gave this village priority among the villages of the area in terms of receiving state support. When local officials applied to the state fund for reconstruction of the medical center, they emphasized the special status of Aqköl as a saintly place where the last saint, Zhandarbek, had lived and where other saints were buried. Some Aqköl villagers, like Myrzaghali, also told me that the rebuilding of the medical center after so long, as well as receiving other infrastructure (roads, water pump, mosques, etc.) sooner than other villages, was a sign that the spirits of *äülyas* like Isabek and Zhandarbek still sup- port their descendants, land, and the village in general.

Z.'s story also illustrates a widespread phenomenon in post-Soviet Central Asia—locals applying for help from sacred families (*Qozha* healers). In *Sovetskii kishlak: Mezhdu kolonializmom i modernizatsiei* (*The Soviet Central Asian Village: Between Colonialism and Modernization*), Sergei Abashin writes that in the Uzbek village of Oshoba in Tajikistan, locals were suspicious of the modern European-style hospital and pediatric facility.2 One family whose child was sick went to a Muslim-educated woman who was a member of a sacred family for healing rather than visit the modern hospital. Oshoba vil-

2 Sergei Abashin, *Sovetskii kishlak: mezhdu kolonializmom i modernizatsiei* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2015), 431.

lagers trusted the experience of this sacred family member, who was believed to have the ability to confer miraculous healings on her patients. Abashin explains why Oshoba villagers applied to this woman for help, and his reasons seem applicable to Aqköl village.3 First, with the arrival in Oshoba of Soviet power, local healing did not disappear; instead, it developed complex relations with modern medicine, a point confirmed by Z.'s story. Second, relations between locals and the traditional healer in Oshoba are based on ideas of established privacy and local ties, compared to official, state-run hospitals and doctors.

It is quite common among Muslim communities around the globe to apply to traditional healers, even when individuals have free access to quality modern medical facilities.4 During the Soviet period, people from different social groups, and even members of the Communist Party, visited Zhandarbek to be healed and obtain remedies for their illnesses, fertility problems, and other situations. When Zhandarbek passed away, his grave (like those of his ancestors) became an object of veneration and a source of healing for people, urban and rural, and with varying levels of education and social positions.

In the healing of Z.'s spine, two local "salient cultural symbols," material and non-material, were combined: soil from Isabek's grave used in a massage and Zhandarbek's prayer. In other words, a "holy thing" (soil) was used by the "holy person." In the eyes of locals, such a combination of sacred elements *must* heal the patient. Soil from the graves of Isabek and his descendants is often mentioned by local and non-local people who had experienced such healing as an important component (if not the only component) of Zhandarbek's healing. Zhandarbek used this sacred soil, usually mixed with water, as a symbolic component in the healings of many of his patients. Since 2011, sacred soil has not been available to pilgrims, because the graves of Aqköl saints Zhandarbek and Isabek have been covered with white tombstones. Now, water from a newly- built sacred well located near the shrine complex is used for healing purposes and is considered equivalent to the sacred soil.

Many pilgrims have preserved soil that they took from the sacred graves long ago. Aqköl locals claim to have saved the soil used to cure their illnesses two, five, and even ten years ago. Often, pilgrims bring the soil back to the Aqköl shrine complex and put it on the white stone surfaces of the graves for a short time. As I understood it, people did this to get a kind of "second blessing" from

3 Ibid., 431–2.

4 L. Eugene Sullivan, *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World's Religious Tradi-tions* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

the Aqköl spirits. Even after the death of Zhandarbek, sacred soil remains a salient cultural symbol.

In general, Z.'s entire story confirms Zhandarbek's mystical image and power via personal interaction—and practically via bodily contact, given that Zhandarbek gave him a back massage. Z. and other locals, who shared many stories of healing in which Zhandarbek touched them, seem to believe in the power of the saint—his sainthood or *qasiet*. In Z.'s story, the person of Zhandarbek was surrounded by an aura, especially in the early-morning meeting with Z.'s mother: he appeared suddenly, gave advice, and in a matter of minutes simply disappeared. This sudden visit, his white clothes, the staff—all these details represent the widespread revelation of ancestral spirits in dreams (*ayan*). Bruce G. Privratsky writes, "Some Kazakhs argue that the *aruaqs* are invisible except in dreams, though Jolbaris Qozha claims to have seen them dressed in white standing by the door of his house."5 In Privratsky's book, he notes that several Kazakhs from the Turkestan area mentioned seeing ancestral spirits in their dreams and in real life; these spirits were often reported to be wearing white.

It is not clear whether Z.'s mother really saw Zhandarbek in white or whether Z. made up this element of the story. What is important is how the image of Zhandarbek has become surrounded by miracles or is "colored" in more sacred tones by locals. The whole process of Z. being healed, from his visit to Aqköl to traveling to the radon water clinic, is a miracle. This miraculous healing made
Z. an active supporter of Zhandarbek: he has produced a surprising amount of media about Zhandarbek and has thereby popularized the saint at the local level. But it is also interesting how local politics has begun to work with the images of saints and the Aqköl shrines.

Local Election Campaign Materials and Aqköl Saints and Shrines

During an interview with Z., he gave me a bundle that contained a DVD bearing the image of *äūliye* Zhandarbek Ishan, an election booklet, and a bookmark calendar, all of which will be discussed in this section. These materials provide valuable insight into how images of shrines are used in local politics.

Z.'s booklet is a bright, colorful paper folder written in Russian (it is entirely possible that a Kazakh version also exists). On the first page is a photo of Z.,

5 Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), 121.

with the emblems of the state and the presidential party Nur Otan printed above his head. Immediately below his picture is the caption "Z. Khamzin is the candidate for the position of regional council [*maslikhat*] deputy from Moildy region number seventeen." In this picture, Z. is wearing an "official- style" classic black suit with a tie, and has state medals on his chest. In his hands, he holds an official-style file case.

At the top of the second page is printed Zhandarbek's personal wish to Z.: "Let the mountain on which you climb be high!" This is a traditional Kazakh proverb for wishing success in life. Right under Zhandarbek's wish is a short biography of Z., including a small picture of him posing near the monument to local heroine Valentina Kuprianova. The biography provides the dates of Z.'s professional employment and educational experience. This brochure provides valuable information to help an observer better understand why Z. helped restore the Aqköl shrine complex and how he presented himself to the local population for an election. The entire brochure portrays Z.'s life as a noble path blessed by Aqköl saints. His biography states the following:

> A young man from a large, rural family chose the profession of gas-arc welder. After finishing professional technical college, he became a student at the sports faculty at Pavlodar Pedagogical Institute. At the Institute, Z. was head of the student construction brigade. It was his idea to take into his brigade Valentina Kuprianova, who died in 1976 during an attempt to save children from drowning in the Pioneer camp "Swallow." A year later, the student unit was named after this heroic student. In 2008,
> Z. installed a bas-relief memorial plate to Valentina Kuprianova on the Sports Department building.
>
> In 1983, the teacher of physical culture [Z.] earned the "Master of Sports of the USSR" degree in boxing and, after returning to his home Krasnokutsk District, started his working life as a boxing and sports coach in sptu-26.
>
> His talent as a pedagogue was noticed, and he was invited into the Komsomol [Young Communist League]. As a young leader, Z. spear-headed several initiatives. Because of Z., the district got a monument devoted to the memory of Soviet soldiers who participated in the Soviet-Afghan war. He created a network of military-patriotic clubs; organized skiing, athletic and biking trips to the graves of Soviet soldiers; and organized sports competitions among youth for prizes given by the socialist pacemakers (high-achievement workers), among many other activities.

Under these paragraphs is a picture of the mosques, followed by this text:

> Since 1991, the most important thing in Z.'s life has been building mosques—one is the mosque of Zhandarbek Ishan, which is in the nearby village of Aqtoghai, and another is the mosque named after Bekbau Ata, in the village of Qozhamzhar. He [Z.] has shown special respect and veneration toward Zhandarbek Ata, who was called Saint during his lifetime; Z. has written a book about him entitled *Äülie Ata Shapaghatï*.

According to subsequent pages in the election brochure, Z. was also celebrated for having built monuments to the memory of fallen Kazakh soldiers during the Second World War, named "Great Patriotic War" in the post-Soviet world. Z.'s team, made up of Pavlodar locals, traveled to Russia to locate and rebuild these monuments thanks to two of his programs, Memory Watch (*Vakhta Pamiati*) and The Road of Heroes (*Batïrlar Zhöly*). In Russia, Z. erected a monument in memory of Pavel Dubovoi, a Russian from Aqtoghai village who heroically fell during the war, and restored monuments to Soviet female war heroes from Kazakhstan, such as Manshuk Mametova and Alia Moldagulova, who are praised in almost all Kazakh state-published history textbooks. He also traveled to Ukraine to erect a monument to Serik Mutkenov, another Kazakh hero of the war. The booklet states that Z. even created a special search team, com- posed of students, to look for unknown graves of fallen Kazakh soldiers. As on the first page, these parts of the brochure contain several pictures of Z. and monuments built or restored by him. There is even a picture of Z. at the head of a column of students on the streets of Pavlodar.

The back of the brochure is devoted entirely to Z.'s recent activity— the rebuilding of the Aqköl shrine complex—and includes four photos of the shrine complex's main objects. The brochure underlines his personal involvement:

> In summer 2011, Kazakhstan chaired the Organization of the Islamic Conference (oic) and Z. returned to the idea of spirituality. He was one of the people who had for a long time thought about building a shrine com- plex named after Isabek Ishan. Under Khamzin's supervision, this large regional spiritual project found sponsorship in only ninety days.

The brochure's penultimate page lists the medals and honors Z. has received during his life. Among these is the "Qurmet" medal, given personally by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev; the brochure contains a photo of Z. receiving the medal from the president as part of an exposition in the Aqköl

village museum. The brochure's last page features a poem written by local Pavlodar poet Mikhail Serbin in praise of Z. It states, in part, "And with raising the names of saints, you are continuing on your difficult path."

Another important document bearing the image of Zhandarbek is a calendar that serves as a bookmark. One side of it has two pictures: one is of Z. holding red carnations (which continue to bear the Soviet connotation of being flowers of commemoration) in front of a monument dedicated to the memory of fallen soldiers; the other is a small picture of the Aqköl shrine complex captioned "Shrine complex of Isabek Ishan." Under the picture is a slogan: "On January 15, vote for Zh. Khamzin!"

The other side of Z.'s bookmark calendar also consists of two parts. The first is a calendar for the year 2012. The second is a photo, taken in the 1990s, of Z. receiving a blessing from Zhandarbek. Z. holds his hands in the traditional form of making or receiving an oral blessing; he wears a traditional Kazakh hat (*taqia*). The saint is dressed in a *taqia* and a traditional Kazakh jacket (*chapan*). This picture is captioned "*Zhandarbek Atanyn batasy*" (The blessing of Elder Zhandarbek).

These materials shed light on the interesting relations between shrines, sacred lineage, and local politics. Putting images of Zhandarbek and the Aqköl shrine complex in his campaign brochure, which was to be distributed in one of the largest sacred areas in the Pavlodar region, paints Z. as a shrine builder, a supporter of the veneration of ancestral spirits, and thus as a devoted Muslim in the eyes of local Kazakhs. Z. is sure to get support from rural voters who respect *aruaqs* and venerate shrines. Adding a picture of the saint Zhandarbek—still considered a moral authority by many people in the area—and having received a blessing from him further increases Z.'s chances of success as a local politician.

Z. thus combines a local religious legitimacy with a broader political legitimacy drawn from referring to the main consensual historical event in Kazakhstan, the Great Patriotic War, one of the most praised periods in today's school textbooks. Even Aqköl, a small steppe village, has a memorial plaque bearing the names of local citizens who fell during the war. Z. not only commemorates fallen soldiers, but also focuses his efforts on national Kazakh and local Pavlodar heroes. Such emphasis on the memory of a war is one way to get support from the local electorate during the election campaign.

In her article "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War ii in Russia," Elizabeth Wood makes an important point that can be applied to Z.'s persona:

> From the beginning Putin distinguished himself from Yeltsin—in his youth, vigor and especially, over time, his masculinity. Close examination

> reveals that Putin and his handlers have structured his rule from the outset as a performance. Of late, historians and observers of Russia have been asking whether Putin and his advisers have been striving to create a new cult of personality. Studying the relationship between Putin and World War ii reveals that they have also been creating an image that aligns him personally with the fate of the country. This persona is deeply identified with the ongoing commemoration of World War ii, the suffering and redemption of the nation. The frequent invocation of World War ii and its leading holiday May 9 have, over the last ten years, increasingly taken on a personal quality designed to identify Putin directly with the holiday and the victory in the war.6

Z.'s brochure is an interesting example of how a local politician can combine sacred figures (Aqköl saints), religious objects (the shrine complex), and secular (Great Patriotic War) heritage to appeal to voters. Z. is thus supporting the Aqköl shrines out of personal religious devotion, on one hand, and due to his career aspirations, on the other. The two factors coexist without being seen as conflictual with each other. However, Z.'s attempt to make the shrine complex a kind of "a launching pad" for his own career goals went against the interests of some members of the Aqköl sacred lineage.

Z. vs. Sacred Family: Conflict of Interests

The second day of Z.'s visit to the shrines provided a surprise that revealed quite complex relations between him as a sponsor of the shrine and the sacred family. After our morning tea and second interview, Z. gathered the people who had come with him (the head of construction and a female assistant) and started an inspection of the shrine complex buildings, such as the *ziaratkhana*, mosque, and holy well. Z. asked shrine keeper Erghali many questions, such as how the shrine complex is maintained, how the heating works during winter, and what condition the walls are in after the winter cold. I got the sense that
Z. was planning to make changes to the structure of the *ziaratkhana*, because his assistant and head of construction were measuring the walls and writing down numbers.

During this activity, a group of local people, led by Zhandarbek's eldest son, A., arrived at the shrine complex on a bus. In his fifties or sixties, A. is the imam

6 Elizabeth A. Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War ii in Russia," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172–200, 173.

of the mosque of Aqtoghai village, with a short, thick beard and sunburnt face. He was wearing a European-style suit with a traditional Kazakh round felt cap (*taqiya*). A. and a group of twenty volunteers, women and teens from Aqtoghai and Bogenbai, had come to the shrine complex to paint walls and do some annual chores. Many of them remembered Zhandarbek Ishan; they had met him and even been healed by him.

A. saw Z.'s team measuring the walls of the *ziaratkhana*. He was already familiar with Z., whom he had met long ago. They greeted each other and began to talk. At the same time, one of the local men who had come with A. began to slaughter and butcher sheep that they had brought with them, then the women prepared traditional Kazakh food (boiled lamb and pastry) for lunch. Everything seemed pleasant, and people were quite busy, working hard to make the shrines and surrounding area clean and neat.

Both Z. and A. remained outside the *ziaratkhana*, where they talked about the past winter, the condition of the pastures, local news, and other things. Z. told A. that he had come to check the shrine complex and calculate how much it would cost to add more space to the *ziaratkhana*. Suddenly, with some angriness in his voice, A. asked Z.,

> What about a house for Erghali? You said that you would build a house for him, near the *ziaratkhana*. He must marry, he is already forty-five. He cannot marry without a house. What kind of woman would stay in the *ziaratkhana*, which is always full of people, eh?

Z. replied:

> *Aqsaqal* [a respectful Kazakh term which means elder], we will think about it. However, I want to build some additional rooms in this building. You know that some high-ranking people, like mayors, deputies, or ministers, would come. They need some separate space, and thus I plan to add some rooms, and for Erghali, or I would probably reserve a section of the *ziaratkhana* to make a one- or two-bedroom house. Why does Erghali not use part of the *ziaratkhana* as his home? There is enough space; we should just build some new walls.

A. did not answer, but it was clear that he was angry. He and another elder, who had come with him, went inside the *ziaratkhana*. Presently, lunch was served, and everyone—pilgrims, volunteers, A., and Z. and his team—went to the *ziaratkhana* to eat. The food was served at two traditional Kazakh round tables. Suddenly, right before the start of lunch, A. and Z. began to talk with

each other. They were sitting at different tables, and this dialog quickly became a heated verbal conflict.

I entered the *ziaratkhana* just as Z., with stubbornness in his voice, said, "I will build what I planned. I will do it. It will be a separate room for special guests, for bosses [*bastïqtargha*]. Moreover, for Erghali's future family I will build some different rooms."

> A., in a harsh tone: Why should there be separate rooms [in the *ziaratkhana*]? When S. [former governor of Pavlodar Oblast] came, we were so prepared, so many sheep slaughtered [*sonshama qoi soildi*], and this guy did not even take a piece of our food. Also, if you want to see Erghali married, you should build him a house.
>
> Z.: First, I will build a separate section inside the *ziaratkhana*…
>
> A., with more anger in his voice: No, I will come, and I will destroy it. You think that we do not have an opinion? You think that this place [shrine complex], my *aruaqs* are toys for you?
>
> Z., with anger and a stubborn expression on his face: No, I will build. Why have you not married off your relative yet, eh?

At this point, a couple of elders asked Z. and A. to calm down, and stop fighting, saying that it is not good or polite to have a fight near shrines. Finally, lunch continued, but it was evident that A. and Z. were quite angry and had their own ideas. This verbal fight is quite remarkable for several reasons.

First, it reveals Z.'s ambitious plans for the shrine complex. He wanted to have separate rooms for high-level officials. The *ziaratkhana* is usually crowded, full of people (mostly middle- or lower-class people), and rooms are often full of the smell of cooking food, human body odors from mattresses (which are piled in the corner of the room when not being used), flies, and many other features associated with rural steppe life. Z. wanted to create some private space for elite guests, high officials who would enjoy their pilgrimage or visit to the shrine complex and then have tea and food in an uncrowded space. Z.'s plan goes against what Victor Turner calls the "liminal stage."7 Turner considers shrines to be places of liminality, where social borders disappear for a short

7 Victor W. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice Institute Pamphlet—The Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974), https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/63159.

period; during a shrine visitation, all pilgrims, despite their origins and social backgrounds, become equal.

Z. wanted to create a social divide by building a visible, material border for upper-class people, an attempt that A. did not welcome. A.'s short but passionate speech contains significant details. First, he mentions a previously planned visit by S. to the Aqköl shrines and how the local people prepared. The sacred lineage family spent resources (slaughtered sheep and spent money on food), but the former head of Pavlodar Oblast did not stop at the shrine complex. However, it was not only the loss of money that made him angry, it was also the disrespect and rejection of sharing food—in other words, the arrogance of the elite toward ordinary people. That is why A. told Z. to stop "playing" with the sacred place and ancestral spirits—that is, to stop using the Aqköl shrine complex for personal, career-motivated goals.

I wrote earlier that Aqköl sacred lineage members do not have the money for extensive restorations; thus, almost all funds and building materials come from wealthy sponsors. Aqköl's sacred family has a feeling that their traditional power and legitimacy over the sacred space is being challenged by non-sacred but influential and rich people, such as Z., who can come at any time and build whatever they want. The conflict I observed between A. and Z. was emblematic of an ongoing clash of interests between the traditional sacred family and local elite.

The third point raised in this conflict that is quite important, if not the most important, is the issue of Erghali's marriage. Erghali is forty-five years old and is still not married. It is quite unusual for a Kazakh man in a rural area to be single at that age. Several times Erghali's mother, Torgai, and other relatives even asked me to "advise" Erghali to marry as soon as possible. After the verbal fight between A. and Z., I asked Erghali's brother, Nurghali, why they had mentioned Erghali's marriage. According to Nurghali, Z. and other sponsors of the shrine reconstruction long ago promised Erghali and members of the sacred family that they would build a separate house for him.

Erghali inherited a house and livestock from his father, but his elder broth- er and his brother's family are living there now. Moreover, the house in the village, 15 km (9.3 miles) from the shrine complex; it would be difficult for Erghali to fulfill his duties as shrine keeper while living there. Having a house at the shrine complex would be an advantage. A. was worried that without his own house at the complex, Erghali would not marry. In his mind, if Z. were to use part of the *ziaratkhana* as a one- or two-bedroom home for Erghali, it would either postpone indefinitely or cancel completely the construction of a separate house for him. At the same time, A. wants to save his and his family's money and avoid building a house for Erghali themselves.

A.'s attempt to get sponsors and patrons to build a house for Erghali was employed by Z. to make an accusation. In a traditional Kazakh rural community, having an unmarried relative with no house demonstrates the weakness or poor status of a lineage. A., as the eldest son of a saint and as lineage leader, feels responsible for younger family members' statuses, marriages, and other important issues. This remark from Z. made A. angry and threatened his sacred lineage.

The confrontation between Z. and A. is part of mutual relations between financial sponsors/patrons and Aqköl's *Qozha*-patronized group. The two sides want to pursue different goals, and they need each other to achieve them. Z. wants to invite influential members of the elite to the shrine complex, and thereby further his career and make new contacts. By contrast, A. wants to keep the sacred place equal to all pilgrims and visitors, but he is more concerned about "his" saint's shrine benefiting Z. more than his own (and the saint's own) family. The shrine complex, in this case, is a "field of opportunities" for both the sacred lineage family and patrons like Z., leading to conflicts of interest.

State Role in the Shrine Rebuilding Process

Along with Z., there were several other important sponsors and patrons. For example, a large part of the funding came from a rich, powerful sacred family led by the Ekibastuz elder Sovet Ata (from a different branch not related to the Aqköl *qozhas*). The state also played a crucial role in the rebuilding effort, becoming directly involved in the process of reimagining Aqköl as a sacred Kazakh symbol. Through patronage of religious sites, the state seeks to control religiosity at the macro and micro levels. This is not a direct order from Astana, but rather a local interpretation of national policy.

Alima Bissenova, in her chapter "Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque of Astana," describes the relationship between state and religion:

> Cooperation between the state and the Muslim community in Kazakhstan springs from mutual understanding and interest rather than Soviet- style control and rigid authoritarian state imposition. The state, in its quest to create its own public from which to generate support, realizes that it is far better to ride the wave of Islamic revival for its own purpose than to try and suppress it.8

8 Alima Bissenova, "Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque of Astana," in *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols and Social Changes*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 212–13.

The Aqköl shrine complex reconstruction is an example of this cooperation between state and religion. The state, along with private businesses, played a crucial role in shrine reconstruction. In the case of Aqköl, the state did not try to oppress, close, or even put tight controls on the shrine complex; activities related to pilgrimages and veneration of the saints were uninterrupted. For example, there is no control on money given by pilgrims to the shrine keeper, nor limitations on the numbers of pilgrims, nor any checking of who visits the shrines and why they visit.

As Bissenova explains, the state tries to "ride the wave of Islamic revival," using the Aqköl shrines for nation- and state-building purposes. State policy may include the involvement of a national body or the regional governor—in this case Erlan Aryn—in shrine building.

Erlan Aryn played a critical role in establishing a fund named after Isabek Ishan to rebuild the shrine complex—his name is explicitly mentioned in the first paragraph of the Fund's protocol. Aryn is described as primarily responsible for ideological work, such as organizing public events associated with shrines and trips to Aqsu and Ekibastuz mosques with Z. Aryn is an important figure because he was rector of the Pavlodar State University at the time, and thus had access to state social tools to spread information and glorify Isabek Ishan's heritage. Being the rector of the largest state university in the region means having significant power and connections to many members of the elite class, at least at the regional level. However, Erlan Aryn had authority before his appointment as rector: he was first vice minister of Education and Science in the early 2000s, and was then appointed governor of Pavlodar Oblast, in which role he organized the Jubilee of Isabek Ishan as a large state-run event.9 The formation of the Isabek Ishan fund raises two main questions: (1) Why were Kazakh officials such as Erlan Aryn and Z. eager to support shrine reconstruction?; and (2) Why did they sacrifice so much for the shrine complex? Answers may vary, but it seems that several factors drove Aryn's support of the rebuilding project.

First, Aryn, like Z., is ambitious. Shrine rebuilding was one way to show upper-level officials, and even the presidential administration, that he cared about developing patriotic, nation-building projects at the local level. In the case of the Aqköl shrine complex, the reconstruction became an ideological object, where both religion and nationalism could be instrumentalized for state purposes, namely developing a sense of patriotism and belonging to Kazakhstan.

Aryn's activity in spreading patriotic propaganda was demonstrated via state-organized and private business-supported student trips to Aqköl and

9 Ulan Bigozhin, "Nation-Building and a School Play in a Kazakh Saint's Jubilee," *Central Asian Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2018): 16–31.

other shrines in the region. In summer 2013, in the middle of a hot day, three large buses suddenly arrived at the Aqköl complex. The buses were full of students, eighteen to twenty years old, all of whom were wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with the logo of the state party's youth wing, Zhas Otan. A young woman, one of the leaders, shared in a short interview (given in a formal tone and style) that this tour was part of a larger *oblast* administration program of "developing a sense of all-Kazakh patriotism and pride in our own region." She indicated that the buses were provided by private companies from Pavlodar. Before arriving in Aqköl, students had visited the shrine of Mäshhür Zhüsip; afterwards, they planned to go to an archeological excavation and another saint's complex. This student tour is one example of how local shrines gradually became integrated into nation-building efforts and programs.

Another state effort—although this one failed—was the creation of a Pavlodar Oblast GIS map of all the chief historical places. The concept of the GIS map was proposed by Erlan Aryn's *oblast* administration. During the summer of 2013, two administration representatives with GIS equipment came to Aqköl to collect data. However, by the summer of 2014, when Aryn resigned, the project had been abandoned.

Thus, for Aryn, promoting ideology is part of his duty to spread state- and nation-building, as well as a way to get promoted to the higher echelons. That is why so many local religious activities became mixed up with post-Soviet ideological slogans. However, besides motivation based on his career goals and official responsibilities, Aryn's support for Aqköl is also rooted in his personal attitude. During one of our trips to Aqköl, Sovet Ata said something that shed light on the dual contractual, sacrifice–reward relationship between officials and Aqköl saints:

> When Aryn and other staff started to support Aqköl, their paths were "opened" [*zholdary ashyldy*]. Aryn became governor of the oblast; other officials became *maslikhat* deputies. Aqköl has *qasiet*, and *aruaqs* of saints do not forget good deeds from people who respect them. One businessperson, the head of the factory, Almaz, was saved from being discharged from his position, and even from a killer's bullet, because he had once received a blessing from Zhandarbek. They [*aruaqs*] showed the officials [business elite] their gratitude [*rizashalygyn korsetty*].

This testimonial has deep significance. First, the Aqköl shrines and Aqköl saints are perceived by Sovet Ata as symbols that have sacred qualities and can legitimate political power. The tradition of legitimating power by applying symbolic capital and even the physical presence of sacred lineage members

has historically been widespread in Central Asia. According to Russian travelers' notes,10 the nineteenth-century khans of Bukhara were elevated on white felt during their coronation ritual. Only certain groups of people had the privilege of holding the corners of the felt, sacred lineage members among them. The patronage of the Aqköl shrines by the Aqköl *Qozhas* and by local political and business elites confirms that this tradition of legitimating political power by applying the symbolic power of sacred lineage is still relevant.

Further, Sovet Ata's statement illuminates the relationship between the secular and the religious. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss write:

> Thus sacrifice shows itself in a dual light: it is a useful act, and it is an obligation. Disinterestedness is mingled with self-interest. That is why it has so frequently been conceived of as a form of contract. Fundamentally there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element. The two parties present exchange their service, and each gets his due.11

Support of the Aqköl shrine complex by a state representative such as Aryn is based in part on his personal belief in Aqköl saints' sacred power, and on some quite materialistic attitudes in the form of "contracts" with ancestral spirits or even with God—but what about political relations? Many pilgrims who venerate the Aqköl shrines and spirits, such as officials, businesspeople, and farmers, demonstrate complex, contractual relations between the secular and religious worlds. They sacrifice something to a shrine (power, resources, money, time) with a hidden expectation of receiving something from a saint or saintly spirits in return, be it health, moral support, financial stability, a better career, or other benefits. (Of course, this may not come to pass if the intention of the sacrifice is insufficiently "pure.")

A material attitude and a moral, spiritual side are equally important, and these two approaches do not contradict each other. Sacrificing is part of the moral obligation of being a "good, religious" Kazakh, who respects ancestral spirits, saints, and God. Z., Aryn, and other officials want to follow these cultural patterns; giving to and supporting the shrines is a way of fulfilling religious duties. Privratsky writes, "The ancestor cult is a contextualization of Islamic belief and ritual that substantially defines the Kazakhs and their acculturation

10 Ron Sela, "The 'Heavenly Stone' (Kök Tash) of Samarqand: A Rebel's Narrative Transformed," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series 17, no. 1 (2007): 21–32, 23.

11 Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 100.

to Islam."12 Aryn knew that he was not related to the Aqköl saints by blood, but he supported the Aqköl shrine complex because Isabek and Zhandarbek were representatives of a tradition of Kazakh Muslimness, and Aryn sought to "satisfy" the mighty spirits of saints and God.

Conclusion

In a post-Soviet country such as Kazakhstan, state-building is a dynamic process. The state uses different historical figures and places as models to create a sense of belonging and illustrate modes of "being Kazakh". Thanks to state efforts at the local level, the Aqköl saints and shrines have gradually gained recognition at the regional and even national level. State ideological activity has caused the Aqköl saints and shrines to be glorified at a higher level, as a perfect image of ancestors, as keepers of ideal Kazakh religiosity (iman), and as symbols of a great past. Through the activity of local officials like Z. and Aryn, Aqköl saintly social capital became part of nation-building policy.

Personal motives behind praising and venerating the Aqköl saints are visible. Both sides—the sacred family and local politicians—pursue several materialistic goals, and the two sides need each other. Despite its often lower social and political status, the sacred lineage does not want to give too much "power" to local politicians like Z. and does not wish to let these people "play" with ancestral spirits and shrines. As a result, tensions exist between these two influential forces, and on occasion they erupt around specific issues, confirming how different agents both combine forces and compete for this *live* creation of Kazakhstan's nation-building.

Acknowledgement

This research was undertaken within frameworks of the project AP05135824 "Investment potential of the sacred geography of Kazakhstan: geospace monitoring, IT technology and historical-cultural analysis in the production of an electronic atlas of the Republic" (2018–2020) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan.

12 Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan*, 114.