Nation-Building and a School Play in a Kazakh Saint's Jubilee

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Ulan Bigozhin
Nazarbayev University
ulan.bigozhin@nu.edu.kz

Abstract

This article focuses on a theatrical play performed during the Jubilee, the anniversary feast of Isabek Ishan, a local Kazakh saint. The state-supported celebration at Isabek's restored shrine is an example of the nation-building processes of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The Jubilee brought together pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet themes, including narratives of sainthood and the significance of local sacred lineages. The play depicts Stalinist repression of religion, pointing to the importance of religious nationalism in contemporary state ideology. Despite occupying a relatively small space in the celebration, the play demonstrated how Stalinist trauma continues to inform local Muslim beliefs and practices, emphasizing the association of Kazakh nationalism with religious practices.

Keywords

post-Soviet Kazakhstan – state – religious nationalism – Islam – sacred families

Introduction

Islam and nationalism are important factors in the state- and nation-building practices of post-Soviet Central Asian states. The Kazakhstani state, for example, created a new Ministry of Civil Society and Religious Affairs in 2016, largely to promote a particular brand of Islam with a specific role in society. This ideological work occurs at different levels, from promoting media companies in urban centers to organizing small-scale events in the rural hinterland.

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This article attempts a local ethnography of the state. It analyzes micro-level state practices in order to provide a window on modern nationalism and religion in Central Asia.

There is a growing body of academic interest and scholarship on Islam, the state, and nationalism in Kazakhstan. Alima Bissenova, who focuses on sermons at the Astana Central Mosque,[1] argues that relations between the state and the Muslim community in Kazakhstan, long based on a Soviet-era model of control, are now moving toward greater mutual understanding and cooperation. Wendell Schwab has shown how the Muslim Spiritual Board (Muftiate) uses national dress to promote its understanding of a specifically Kazakhstani Islam and a middle-class Islamic culture in line with official statements on proper economic development.[2] My article contributes to this literature on Islam, nationalism, and the state in Kazakhstan by focusing on rural areas of northern Kazakhstan, a region that has not been studied by Soviet, post-Soviet, or Western ethnographers but that demonstrates a significant reworking of interactions between religion, nationalism, nation- and state-building at the grassroots level.

My case study is a high school play performed during the jubilee of Isabek Ishan (1792–1871), a popular festival for a Sufi saint revered in northern Kazakhstan. The performance was not a life-changing event. It did not attract national media coverage and the wrestling matches also present during the festival were much more popular. However, this play was one of many commemorative events put on in Kazakhstan in 2012. This festival/jubilee exemplifies how small-scale state events combine local culture with national ideology. Here I argue that: 1) village and *oblast* (district) officials connect Isabek Ishan to a larger nationalist story and thus bind local national and religious identity to the Kazakh state or the phenomenon of religious nationalism; 2) Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet values and traditions are intermingled in present-day Kazakhstan; and 3) the jubilee and play are part of how the state works on the "ground level" to promote the official ideology.

1 A. Bissenova, "Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque of Astana," in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *Kazakhstan In the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2016), 211–28.

2 W. Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam in Kazakhstan: The Case of Asyl Arna's Social Media," *Central Asian Affairs*, 3, no. 4 (2016): 301–29.

Isabek Ishan and the Kazakh Tradition of Funerary Feasts

Jubilees and other forms of commemorations are important signs of identity building in the post-Soviet space. Julie Buckler and Emily D. Johnson, in the introduction to their *Rites of Place*, write:

> Jubilee and anniversary celebration, memorial rites, and commemorations of key political transitions consecrate "sacrilized" landscapes that bind disparate individuals together into communities with shared symbolic vocabulary. In returning time and time again to signal locations to perform elaborately choreographed sequences, participants articulate a common vision of an imagined past and shore up solidarity in present.3

Buckler and Johnson point to jubilee, celebration, and landscape as three elements that create a common vision of an imaginary past and a sense of solidarity among participants in such events. These three components were visible and bound together in the event devoted to the memory (ancestral spirit) of Saint (*aūlie*, *ishan*) Isabek (Ġaisabek, Ġisabek) Ishan, of which the theatrical play discussed in this article was one part.

Other saints are likewise praised at the national level in Kazakhstan. For example, Qozha (Khoja) Akhmed Yasawi, today considered a legendary Sufi, is an all-Kazakh saint who lived in the city of Yasy (today called Turkestan) in the 10th and 11th centuries. The imagined Sufi path and teaching of Akhmed Yasawi have been described by high-ranking officials, including President Nursultan Nazarbayev, as a "Kazakh path of Islam."

By comparison, the shrines of Isabek and his descendants, located in the small village of Aqköl, 90 kilometers from the town of Ekibastuz, enjoy less national recognition. Yet their popularity is on the rise. They are well known at the regional level of Pavlodar *oblast*, and my field research revealed that more pilgrims from different parts of the country visited the shrines in 2014 than in2013.

In this paper, I focus first on the context of the play: the Jubilee of Isabek Ishan (1792–1871). Little is known about Isabek Ishan's early life, although the famous Kazakh writer Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyulï wrote a poem praising him in

3 J. Buckler and E.D. Johnson, "Introduction," in J. Buckler and E.D. Johnson (eds.) *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston, il: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 7.

1871.4 In this poem, Isabek Ishan was painted as a saintly descendant of sacred lineage and a famous, powerful Sufi leader of local Kazakh tribes.

Qozha aulia (veneration of ancestors) is a deeply rooted tradition in the Kazakh Steppe. Isabek Ishan's descendants continued a tradition of sainthood, acting as the religious leaders of local Kazakh communities. Local descendants of Isabek told me that in the 1930s, one of Isabek's grandsons, Zhandarbek (1907–1996), was arrested and sent to a labor camp in southern Kazakhstan. However, Zhandarbek survived the Stalinist purges, served in the Red Army during World War ii, and continued the family tradition of sainthood during the latter half of the Soviet period. Others of Isabek's descendants suffered during collectivization and the Stalinist purges. Two families migrated to other areas of Kazakhstan in the 1930s and eventually made their way to Omsk, in the Russian SFSR, to escape the famine ravaging Kazakhstan. Despite the radical reforms and repressions of the Soviet era, the sacred families of Aqköl man- aged to survive and maintain their sacred capital, genealogy, shrines, and com- munity affiliations with local Kazakh tribes.

Bruce Privratsky defines saint veneration as:

> an irreducible link to the sacred past. The link is preserved in three ways: (a) formally, in Qoja [Qozha] lineages, because the Qojas are, by tradi- tion, the descendants of the saints (*äuleyening urpaġi*); (b) devotionally, in the architecture of the saint`s tomb; and (c) hagiographically, as Qoja families transmit legends of the act of their saintly forebears.5

Isabek's legacy includes all three of these components. His grave and those of his descendants are places of pilgrimage, his living descendants are venerated as holy, and stories of his deeds continue to circulate, even playing a role in the construction of collective memory of Stalinist repression of Islam (discussed below).

The commemoration of the 220th year of Isabek's birth took place in 2011 in an open pasture near his shrine. This "jubilee," a Soviet term, combined secular practices common in the Soviet era with Kazakh traditions. The atmosphere was akin to that of a Soviet May 1st celebration: there was a large state

4 A.J. Frank, "Sufis, Scholars, and Divanas of the *Qazaq* Middle Horde in the Works of Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeyulï," in N. Pianciola and P. Sartori (eds.), *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th–Early 20th Centuries)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 226–27.

5 B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), 156.

presence, and police and bureaucrats wore their official uniforms, providing a visual representation of state power in local life. State officials organized the jubilee and conscripted local state employees to work at the celebration. But there was also a sense of popular celebration: locals came to gather, flirt, and gossip. Loudspeakers blared estrada music and people were excited to see the day's entertainments, including wrestling matches, horse races, and musical performances.

State actors played a central role in the jubilee. Official speeches full of state ideology, pro-state slogans and posters, flags, and other state symbols were all around. Some posters were even displayed on *yurts*. The head regional official, Erlan Aryn, and other important state officials visited the village of Aqköl, where they officially opened a new state museum devoted to the memory of Isabek and his descendants and planted a tree in the village park to commemorate the jubilee.

Many rural Kazakh villages have museums dedicated to local heroes. But this museum is unusual in that it is almost entirely devoted to the sacred lineage of Aqköl, family members' shrines, and the veneration of sacred burial sites. For instance, Zhandarbek's personal belongings, such as his jacket, hat, and even his World War ii identification papers, are prominently displayed inthe museum.

Kazakhstani state involvement in the jubilee, not to mention "state promotion" of the image of Isabek Ishan and the Aqköl shrine in general, confirm that current state policy sanctions popular support for shrines and shrine veneration. Dubuisson and Genina found that state funds have been used to support and promote sacred sites and famous ancestors across Kazakhstan.6 Such state patronage of shrines is widespread in Central Asia: according to Abramson and Karimov, local political elites in Uzbekistan also promote shrines.7 Based on my fieldwork in Kazakhstan, I contend that the phenomenon of shrine patronage—and the shrines themselves—form a part of the state's official nationalism policy.

At Isabek Ishan's jubilee, Kazakh religiosity and state-run nationalism were both publicly represented. Peter Van der Veer argues that many scholars reject the idea of religious nationalism because it goes against Western theories

6 E.-M. Dubuisson and A. Genina, "Claiming an Ancestral Homeland: Kazakh Pilgrimage and Migration in Inner Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 3/4 (2011): 472.

7 D.M. Abramson and E.E. Karimov, "Sacred Sites, Profane Ideologies: Religious Pilgrimage and the Uzbek State," in J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca (eds.), *Everyday Life in Central Asia* (Bloomington, in: Indiana University Press, 2007), 319–38.

of modernism: "religious nationalism builds on these earlier frameworks and transforms them. My argument is that conceptions of a larger world emerge both in religious travel, pilgrimage, and in migration."8 By theories of nationalism, van der Veer means the ideas of Ernest Gellner and other scholars on religion, nationalism, and modernity.9 For example, in his book *Muslim Society*, Gellner assumes that "the scripturalist style of faith is modernisable; the tribal and saintly one is not."10 Sergei Abashin critiques Gellner's ideas regarding modernity and so-called tribal and saintly faith, pointing out that Gellner is only partially right: particularly in Central Asia, descendants of saints and sacred lineages became part of the Soviet modernity project.11 Though it is hard to call this jubilee a representation of "religion nationalism" in van der Veer's sense, religion and nationalism were tightly linked in this event.

Van der Veer's idea on nationalism builds on earlier frameworks and can be used to understand nationalism and state formation processes in modern Kazakhstan.12 Even before Russian colonization, Kazakhs revered sacred lineages and their symbolic capital. Patron-client relations and communal affiliations between *qozhas* (sacred lineages) and Kazakh tribal groups are indeed quite "modernisable" and still have a role to play in current nation-building processes. Just as van der Veer argues that Indian nationalism contains concepts from Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism, I claim that Kazakhstani nationalism reproduces societal frames evident in Islam. This religious nationalism is partially produced via Islamic practices, such as the jubilee of Isabek Ishan.

Alongside its similarities to Soviet practices, the jubilee has features that echo the Kazakh tradition of commemorative feasts or *as*. A comparison of contemporary jubilees and traditional Kazakh feasts (as documented by Russian ethnographers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) flags up many commonalities. Levshin writes that:

> rich people spend a lot on one-year commemorations. Many guests are invited. Then, after praying for the soul of the deceased and a narration of his best deeds, a white horse is slaughtered and its meat is boiled. Then

8 P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, ca: University of California Press, 1994), xii.

9 van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 15.

10 E. Gellner, *Muslim Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 58.

11 S. Abashin, "Gellner, the 'Saints' and Central Asia: Between Islam and Nationalism," *Inner Asia,* 7, no. 1 (2005): 65–86.

12 van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism.*

> everybody eats and drinks fermented horse milk. As during wedding celebrations, people start to play games, race horses, sing, and engage in entertainment where they show agility and professionalism and receive gifts from the hosts, often very expensive ones.13

This description is analogous to the jubilee of Isabek Ishan. The head of the *oblast*, Erlan Aryn, decided to stage the jubilee in an open field near the shrine of Isabek Ishan. When I arrived, this large area was already covered by beautifully ornamented *yurts*. Many large private companies and state organizations in Pavlodar *oblast* sponsored decorated *yurts*. The *yurts* bore the organizations' names, quotations from presidential speeches, and even pictures of Isabek Ishan. Several poles also displayed large posters of Isabek Ishan, in which he was depicted as a heavily bearded old man with a Muslim turbanon his head.

The *oblast* mayor and his administrators did a short recitation from the Qur'an devoted to the spirit (*arūaġ*) of Isabek. A wrestling tournament and a concert of traditional Kazakh music followed the recitation. Food was cooked in large kettles outside the *yurts*. People walked around, visited each other's *yurts*, and shared food while laughing and greeting friends and acquaintances. Several locals with decorated, traditional Kazakh saddles rode on horseback through the crowds.

The celebration also included several Soviet and post-Soviet innovations. For one thing, the regional administration had never had a jubilee for Isabek Ishan before: the shrine restoration was finished in late fall 2011 and the first Jubilee of Isabek Ishan was held on July 6, 2012, which is also Capital Day, an official national holiday. During this national celebration, all official state organizations are closed and people have one or two days' vacation. Choosing this date for the jubilee was significant in at least two respects: firstly, it connected Isabek Ishan and his legacy to the current nation-building agenda of the state; and secondly, it enabled as many guests and visitors as possible to attend. The debut of a theatrical play about the arrest of Isabek's descendants during the Stalinist period, performed by Aqköl high school students, meanwhile, offered a new twist on state-led celebration. This combination of tradition and change is a fascinating development. Though the jubilee functioned as a feast for many visitors, it also tied the traditional feast to contemporary political culture, a culture distinctly changed by the Soviet era.

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13 A.I. Levshin, *Opisanie kiergiz-kazach'ikh ili kirgiz-kaisatskikh gor i stepei* (Almaty: Sanat, 1996 [1832]), 115. Author's translation.

Connecting Isabek to the Stalinist Era, and the Stalinist Erato Today

Staging a play about the Stalinist repression of Isabek Ishan's descendants demonstrates that memories of that harsh period in Kazakh history are still alive and have deep traumatic significance for people. But this play is also part of a newfound religious nationalism. It shows how images of a sacred family and the oppression of Islam have become connected to post-Soviet nationalism. Remembering Stalin`s repressions through commemorative speeches by the Kazakh president, theatrical plays in city theaters, movies, large memorial complexes, and museum exhibitions is a widespread phenomenon in post- Soviet Kazakhstan.14

Yet the Aqköl play was a fully local initiative; it offers one way in which the Stalinist period and associated repressions are understood at the grassroots level. The play was performed at midday, immediately after the first part of a Kazakh folk music concert, on a large open wooden stage. The stage had been specially constructed near the shrine complex a couple of days before the jubilee. The play was very simply introduced by a young Kazakh man and woman as a dramatization of the tragic history of Isabek Ishan's descendants. The couple led the entire performance; neither the author of the play nor the actors (10th- and 11th-grade students) were named. This anonymity indicated that the main organizers of the jubilee play did not see the actors as being worthy of attention.

The play focused on how Stalinist repression had interrupted the lives of Isabek Ishan's descendants. Isabek's descendants, a husband and wife, sat near their infant, who lay in a traditional Kazakh cradle. The wife rocked the cradle and sang a lullaby while the husband kneeled and prayed, reciting the Qur'an. Both husband and wife were dressed in long-sleeved, stereotypically Middle Eastern white robes, which had probably been brought back from the *hajj* and borrowed for the performance. The husband wore a modern-style white Muslim cap, and his wife's head was covered by a white scarf.

This peaceful scene was interrupted by two armed men, who broke down the door and entered the room. These armed men were members of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police force that preceded the KGB. The soldiers were dressed

14 A. Mayemirov, K. Khalykov, and B. Nurpeis, "Ethnic and Cultural Aspects in the Development of Kazakh Theatres during the Independence Period: The Problems of Human Existence," *Folklore,* 62 (2004): 201–24; Z. Kundakbayeva and D. Kassymova, "Remember- ing and Forgetting: The State Policy of Memorializing Stalin's Repression in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers*, 44, no. 4 (2016): 611–27.

in remnants of old Soviet Army uniforms. They wore old boots, Soviet military caps, and jackets, and carried old hunting rifles. This costume choice made it obvious that Aqköl High School did not have the resources to create an authentic NKVD uniform, but the use of Soviet military gear added to the overall impression that the Soviet state—not just the NKVD—had oppressed Muslims in general, and Isabek Ishan's descendants in particular.

The NKVD soldiers interrupted the prayer of Isabek Ishan's descendant and mocked him, shouting atheistic remarks: "To whom are you praying? Do you really believe in God's existence?" They eventually handcuffed the husband. Toward the end of the play, Isabek's descendant gave a short but passionate, prophetic-style speech, stating that one day religion and freedom would be returned to the Kazakh people and the Kazakh steppe, Kazakhstan would become independent, and the heritage of Isabek Ishan would be restored. Then the whole family was arrested and the play ended.

This play connects the late 19th century to the contemporary era of nation-building through an imaginative representation of Stalinist repression. The play is based on a legendary prophecy made by Isabek Ishan. This story is quite widespread in the Aqköl area; it was told to me, with slightly different details, by several interlocutors. The version below is paraphrased from an article entitled "On the Holiness of Isabek Ishan (Isabek Ishanyn Qasiety)," by Adylbek Amrenov:15

> One day, Isabek Ishan was traveling with a small group when he met a number of bandits near Lake Shiderty. The bandits wanted to rob Isabek, but one of his companions warned them that Isabek was a saint, and that they should not accost him. The bandits did not believe the companion, and asked Isabek Ishan to perform a miracle to prove that he was a saint. Isabek Ishan performed a prayer (*dugha*), and immediately six white swans, which had been flying above the lake, landed near him. The bandits took the swans, released Isabek Ishan and his companions, apologized, and departed. Isabek Ishan then told his companions that he had made a mistake. His companions assured him that he had not: they had escaped the bandits. Isabek sadly said that just as the six swans had been captured, his descendants would be captured in the future. Amrenov writes that Isabek's prophecy came true: in 1937, the descendants of Isabek Ishan were arrested and imprisoned.

15 A. Amrenov, "Isabek Ishanyn Qasiety," in E. Aryn (ed.), *Isabek Ishan* (Pavlodar: Sytin, 2011), 25–37.

This legend has two main themes: it shows the power of the saints and that Isabek Ishan "predicted" the repression of his descendants under Stalin. Within this narrative, time is flattened and events are made to fit into an understandable, eternal Kazakhstan. Isabek's prophecy, the Stalin-era repression of sacred families, and its modern reinterpretation in the play of the Aqköl *qozha* family being arrested—all these elements have become seemingly organically or "naturally" linked in popular consciousness. Isabek himself has become a national figure, connected with independent Kazakhstan through the jubilee in general and the play in particular.

Isabek and the *qozha* head of the arrested family are depicted as pious, religious men, models for giving meaning to today's social reality. This portrayal of them as "devoted Muslims" supports the widespread perception among Kazakhs and other Central Asian peoples that sacred families are holders of religiosity. In other words, the creators and actors of the play, the Aqköl teacher and students, wanted to show how their Kazakh *qozha* ancestors behaved during the harsh times of Stalinist repressions and indicate that current generations should follow that model of religious purity and nationalism. The play is thus consistent with the mainstream policy of the official Muslim Board of Kazakhstan, which promotes the state vision of a "Kazakh Islam" historically followed by Kazakhs' ancestors. Peace, tolerance and a non-violent attitude toward other cultures are central components of this national religion. As the Muftiate representative in Pavlodar *oblast*, Nariman Isenov, writes on the organization's official website:

> The spiritual principles of any nation [*narod*] are made up of three things: Nationality, Religion, and Motherland [*Rodina*]. This triune is our basis. When you are [any Kazakh is] asked "Who are you?" you will answer "My nationality—Kazakh; religion—Islam; Motherland—Kazakhstan." That is why you are a representative of the honorable Kazakh people with established values and rich history common to all mankind. The fact that we are a nation [*natsiia*] is a display of God's blessing.16

The beginning of the play, depicting a calm night with prayer and a lullaby, conveys a message to spectators: this is how Kazakhs peacefully and religiously

16 Translated from http://www.muftyat.kz/kz/ru/article/view?id=1872 (no longer avail- able). Similar ideas are also expressed in N. Isenov, "Nash mudryi narod vsegda berezhno sokhranyal i religioznye i natsionalnye traditsii," *Kazislam*, February 22, 2016, http://kaz islam.kz/ru/maqalalar/item/9515-nash-mudryj-narod-vsegda-berezhno-sokhranyal-i -religioznye-i-natsionalnye-traditsii.

lived before the Soviet period. The sudden entrance of NKVD soldiers, their rough behavior, and the arrest of Isabek's pious descendants represent Stalinism, Soviet repression, and the 20th-century reforms that radically changed Kazakhs' lifestyle and culture. But the drama has a "happy ending"—the arrested sacred family member's speech, in which he predicts the arrival of freedom and religion. This is the culmination of the whole play, a moment where we can see how religion—represented by the sacred family—became connected with the modern, independent Kazakh nation. That final speech underlines the broader point made throughout this short theatrical performance, namely that, as society and the state are coming to agree, "being Kazakh" is often the same as "being Muslim."

Feast Culture, Soviet-Style?

During the play, spectators exhibited different levels of interest. The majority of those who watched the entire play were state officials, bureaucrats, schoolteachers, and other people with an official function. Most of them were low-ranking state officials and state workers who wanted to interact with the most important guests, the head of the *oblast* and other high-ranking officials, whose presence motivated people to attend the official part of the jubilee, including the play.

The overall majority of spectators, meanwhile, came from nearby villages and the cities of Ekibastuz and Pavlodar. They represented different professions, such as farmers, shepherds, coal miners, bus drivers, and schoolteachers. In other words, all of the social groups and classes that make up Kazakhstani society went to the jubilee. But many spectators not affiliated with the state left in the middle of the play because the wrestling tournament had started.

Attending state-run events and fulfilling "official duties" without taking much joy in them was part of Soviet culture, and continues in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Yurchak writes that many Western accounts of this type of official culture are depicted as part of a "binary" system (e.g., oppression/resistance, repression/freedom) in which Soviet citizens are portrayed as "having no agency," and "in this portrayal, they allegedly subscribed to 'communist values' either because they were coerced to do so or because they had no means of reflecting upon them critically."17 Yurchak continues:

17 A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.

> What tends to get lost in the binary accounts is the crucial and seemingly paradoxical fact that, for great numbers of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals, and realities of socialist life (such as equality, community, selflessness, altruism, friendship, ethical relations, safety, education, work, creativity, and concern for future) were of genuine importance, despite the fact that many of their everyday practices routinely transgressed, reinterpreted, or refused certain norms and rules represented in the official ideology of the socialist state. For many, "socialism" as a system of human values and as an everyday reality of "normal life" (*normal'naia zhizn'*)15 was not necessarily equivalent to "the state" or "ideology"; indeed, living socialism to them often meant something quite different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric.18

Yurchak's point about ordinary Soviet citizens' refusal to follow certain ideological norms is also applicable to the post-Soviet period. Johan Rasanayagam observed individuals in Uzbekistan attending state-run events "for form's sake."19 This phenomenon was clearly visible at Isabek Ishan's jubilee, too, but this sense of duty does not preclude spectators or officials who watched the play from thinking of themselves as patriotic Kazakhs. To follow Yurchak, the last generation of Soviet citizens—to which many of the jubilee attendees belonged—still perceived themselves as committed communists, but also as proud patriots of their own land and country. Nevertheless, many decided to watch an event that they found more interesting: the wrestling tournament.

One explanation for this shift in their attention is that for many people this kind of patriotic and nationalistic performance has become common. Michael Billig writes about "banal nationalism," demonstrated in everyday life through different symbols such as colors and national emblems.20 For example, the interior walls of Aqköl High School, right in front of the main entrance, display state symbols, such as Kazakhstani official discourses, the text of the national anthem, the national emblem, and a portrait of the president. Nationalistic theatrical plays, including the play staged during Isabek Ishan's jubilee, convey the same message: "everyday nationalism."

During an interview with the principal of Aqköl High School, Qanat (who, as the elder son of the last Aqköl saint Zhandarbek, is a descendant of Isabek Ishan), I was told that the school had had large, well-developed infrastructure

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18 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever,* 8.

19 J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 77.

20 M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

during Soviet times and the early post-Soviet period. During the late Soviet period, when the anti-nuclear weapon testing movement *Nevada-Semei* was active in the country, Aqköl High School was a place for rehabilitating children who came from nuclear testing zones in the Soviet Union, including Yakutia and Eastern Kazakhstan. According to Qanat, at that time this school used two large buildings and worked with a lot of students. However, during the economic collapse of the 1990s, the physical size of the school, as well as the number of students, substantially decreased.

Billig writes that, "Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged,' in the lives of its citizenry."21 This play is one of many events to indicate a sense of national identity; stylistically and rhetorically similar plays are regularly presented during large celebrations. As a student who graduated from provincial state high school in 1997 and later from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty in 2002, I witnessed many patriotic and nationalistic plays performed by student classmates. The majority of these plays were performed as part of the celebrations of Independence Day, *Navruz* (Central Asian New Year) and Victory Day. Such plays with strong nation-building messages continue to circulate within Kazakhstani society, and have been performed by generations of students.

The whole jubilee/feast of Isabek Ishan provides evidence for the intermingling of religion and nationalism—or, in van der Veer's phrase, "religious nationalism"—in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's post-Soviet elite, both in the capital and at the local level (in this case Pavlodar *oblast*), seeks to use this commemoration of a Muslim saint to propagate nation-building and the state vision of Kazakh religiosity across different levels of society. It is no coincidence that the play concluded with a "prophetic speech" about a glorious Kazakhstan free from atheism and repression, since this is one of many messages the Kazakh elite wishes to convey to the masses.

Serguei Oushakine writes that new national histories and commemorative rituals are "frequently motivated by the desire to draw a clear line between the 'Soviet' and the 'national' to reclaim sources of authenticity outside the discursive realm of state socialism."22 The Aqköl play was a local reflection of national-level nation-building efforts, which strive to draw a line under the Soviet period and foreground Kazakhstan's independence. The play represented the popular desire to claim their "nationality" and regain the "authenticity"

21 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

22 S. Oushakine, "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space between Stalin and Hitler," in J. Buckler and E.D. Johnson (eds.), *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston, il: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 285–86.

of Islam. Indeed, the entire jubilee, in commemorating Isabek Ishan, also created distance from the Soviet past, portraying a return to Kazakhs' cultural and religious roots—to the world of their forefathers. With *yurts*, wrestling, and traditional food—all components of Levshin's depiction of a 19th-century Kazakh commemoration feast—the state attempted to reclaim Kazakhstan's "glorious and pure" pre-Soviet past.

Isabek's Jubilee as Ethnography of the State

Several recent ethnographies have addressed the state-building process in Kazakhstan, focusing primarily on the country's capital.23 My research on Isabek's jubilee touches on the state-building process, or rather, how the state- building ideology and the sense of belonging to Kazakhstan as a country are demonstrated in rural regions.

Christian Krohn-Hansen and Knut G. Nustad write that "a modern state must be understood as produced by a broad and continuously shifting field of power relationships, everyday practices and formations of meaning."24 Indeed, we need to see the construction of states as the outcome of complex sets of practices and processes. State formation is the result of myriad situations in which social actors negotiate power and meaning. This shifts the focus of analysis to the many practices of power and the mundane and ritual forms that constitute the state. It invites the researcher to examine in detail how a particular state is produced in everyday encounters at the local level—in those contexts where the state's representatives interact with individuals and groups. Following Krohn-Hansen and Nustad, we can say that Isabek's jubilee, which included a play, is one of these myriad situations of state formation. The jubilee provides an example of how the state is produced, and how it gives meaning and negotiates power by appealing to the social capital of the sacred family, religion, and the trauma of Stalinist repression. The play represented not only grassroots-level state-building processes, but also the local community. Aqköl locals showed the guests of the jubilee that the town has its own

23 Bissenova, "Building a Muslim Nation"; M. Laszczkowski, "State Building(s): Built Forms, Materiality, and the State in Astana," in M. Reeves, J. Rasanayagam, and J. Beyer (eds.), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington, in: Indiana University Press, 2014), 149–72.

24 C. Krohn-Hansen and K.G. Nustad (eds.), *State Formation: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and Ann Arbor, mi: Pluto Press, 2005), 12.

sacred family; this connotes a sacred past and symbolic capital, implying that Aqköl is not a periphery, but part of the broader national history.

State-level ideology is spread in Aqköl on a daily basis, and the school is only one part of this process. There are state symbols on the main administrative building in town, such as the flag and national emblems; a picture of the President in the mayor's office; and a monument to the fallen soldiers of the Second World War, decorated with the Soviet Red Star and Kazakhstani flag. In addition to these material symbols of state propaganda, Aqköl villagers are the recipients of narratives that flow daily from the mass media. Aqköl villagers who lack a satellite dish, which is almost half of the village, have access to only a few state-run channels, such as Khabar or Kazakhstan-1. State ideology is also spread by the imam during Friday sermons in the Aqköl mosque, which follow the topics of the sermons of Astana's Central Mosque.

Krohn-Hansen and Nustad make other important points about "critical 'grounded' ethnographic work which helps to understand state-building processes."25 The study of public events in Kazakhstan, such as this jubilee, is one of many ways of studying state formation from an ethnographic point of view, where attention is focused on different actors—in this case, local, regional, and village administrations; state high school workers and students; and high-ranking officials. All of them are involved in the daily, "ground-level" process of building meaning into the state. This jubilee/commemoration is an illustration of how the local administration has interpreted and adopted messages from the "center," the country's capital, while deploying local symbolic capital, such as the figure of a local *qozha* saint like Isabek. Saints, sacred lineage, and memories of Stalinism were brought together in the play and used to send the state's ideological message about Kazakhstan's independent status.

Conclusion

The jubilee/feast for Isabek Ishan constructed a cultural complex that emphasized the importance of the Stalinist repression of Islam to locally salient sacred lineages, long-standing feasting traditions, and post-Soviet nationalism. Through the work of local but powerful government officials, Isabek is in the process of becoming part of a pantheon of heroes with national recognition. The number of pilgrims who visit his shrine from all over the country

25 Krohn-Hansen and Nustad, *State Formation*, 12.

is growing, and the jubilee was featured in the news programming of the national channel Khabar.26

The theatrical play that formed part of the jubilee/commemoration event was just one way to help current Kazakhstani citizens understand and imagine Stalin-era repressions. It linked past, present, and future: Isabek Ishan exists simultaneously in the Kazakh experience of the Tsarist 19th century, the Soviet 20th century, and the post-Soviet 21st century. The arrest of the Aqköl *qozha* family in the play symbolizes the whole nation, Muslim clergy, and even Islam in general, which was oppressed but reborn after independence.

The jubilee is also significant for its role in the state-formation process in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. It occurred at the "ground" level, in a particular location, as a local state-administered initiative. Local officials decided to display their local historical past, their shrine, and their saint (Isabek Ishan) in an effort to root the central state's nation-formation policy in local conditions.

26 "V Pavlodare k 200-letiiu Isabeka Ishan Khazreta otstroen mavzolei," *YouTube* (video), uploaded by Bauyrzhan Kakimov, April 3, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_NpeU5eoec.