

Islam, Fun, and Social Capital in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Small-group solidarity is important in Islamic movements. Islamic movements are not simply groups based on Islamic ideology, but they are also based on a sense of community nurtured by, for lack of a better term, hanging out together. In this paper, I examine how members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan have fun and build community. I will start by examining how elites in the piety movement create spaces for Muslims to have a particular type of ethical fun. I then move on to discuss how many members of the piety movement use these spaces for their own purposes. I argue that the piety movement in Kazakhstan increases social capital among its members by developing intense social networks that bond members together through fun activities.

Keywords

Islam – Kazakhstan – Central Asia – Leisure – Fun – Scripturalism

Having fun is not something that policy analysts often think about. International institutions, water rights, and political wrangling over an army's budget all seem like more germane subjects for those interested in governmental policy. But this ignores two facts: first, governments regulate having fun, whether through the taxation of foreign movies or laws making particular drugs legal or illegal. Second, politics is a process always conducted by groups, and group cohesion is not simply brought about by shared civic ideologies or religious beliefs, but by having fun together. In this article, I examine this second subject by discussing how members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan have fun and build community. I start by examining how elites in the piety movement—specifically writers and imams—create spaces for Muslims to have a particular type of ethical fun. I then move on to discuss how many members of the piety

movement use these spaces for their own purposes, disregarding some of the ideals of elites but furthering the creation of a tight-knit community. Finally, I address the implications of an increasingly tight-knit piety movement in Kazakhstan, including its possible impact on politics in the future.

Context: The Piety Movement in Kazakhstan

The piety movement is a group of Muslims in Kazakhstan who differ from broader Kazakhstani society by their anti-shrine attitudes, emphasis on avoiding polytheism (*shirk*) and innovation (*bighdat*), observance of daily ritual prayer, belief that there is only one true interpretation of Islam, pedagogy focused on engagement with the Qur'an and hadiths, and modest dress such as headscarves for women. Recent survey data help to identify how large the piety movement is in Kazakhstan. Approximately four percent of the Muslim population in Kazakhstan prays several times a day,¹ while 10% attend mosque services at least once a week.² Of the Kazakhstani Muslims who pray several times a day, 80% believe there is only one correct interpretation of Islam, compared with 35% of the population who pray once a day or less; this is the largest difference between Muslims who pray frequently and those who do not in the Muslim world.³ Around 12% of Kazakhstani Muslims find visiting shrines unacceptable.⁴ Taking these numbers together, approximately 5–10% of Kazakhstani Muslims can be considered part of the piety movement, including most of those who pray five times a day and who attend Friday prayers at mosques.

Other Islamic movements exist in Kazakhstan and are more in line with the general populace's understanding of Islam. Ata Zholy, for example, was an influential Islamic movement in the first decade of the 2000s.⁵ It emphasized continuity with Kazakh traditions and pilgrimages to saints' shrines. It did not demand daily or weekly Islamic ritual practice, and many Kazakhstani Muslims

1 Pew Research Forum, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012), 43.

2 Ibid., 46.

3 Ibid., 86.

4 Ibid., 96.

5 P. Jessa, "Aq Jol Soul Healers: Religious Pluralism and a Contemporary Muslim Movement in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 25, no. 3 (2006): 359–371; P. Jessa, "Religious Renewal in Kazakhstan: Redefining 'Unofficial' Islam," in C. Hann (ed.), *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe* (Berlin: Transaction Publishers, 2006) 169–190; W. Schwab, "Traditions and Texts: How Two Young Women Learned to Interpret the Qur'an and Hadiths in Kazakhstan," *Contemporary Islam*, 6, no. 2

found pilgrimages run by Ata Zholy attractive and useful. Given Ata Zholy's emphasis on shrine pilgrimage, which 88% of Kazakhstani Muslims find acceptable,⁶ and asking ancestors for aid, which 51% of Kazakhstani Muslims believe is acceptable in Islam,⁷ the number of Kazakhstani Muslims with similar beliefs to Ata Zholy was much larger than number of Kazakhstani Muslims in the piety movement.⁸ (Ata Zholy's formal corporation was shut down in 2009; it continues as a loose grouping without a formal legal structure, but it has lost much of its influence in Kazakhstan.)

The broad grouping known as the Religious Right in the United States is roughly analogous to my grouping of scripturalist Muslims in Kazakhstan as "the piety movement."⁹ There are, of course, fissures within the piety movement; while most members of the piety movement self-identify as

(2012): 173–197; W. Schwab, "How to Pray in Kazakhstan: *The Fortress of the Muslim and Its Readers*," *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 32, no. 1 (2014): 22–42.

6 Pew Research Forum, *The World's Muslims*, '96.

7 *Ibid.*, "101.

8 Kazakhstani Muslims who are divided by understandings of proper Islamic ritual practice, like Ata Zholy and the piety movement, share stances on many social issues. For example, members of Ata Zholy and the piety movement see homosexuality as morally wrong, as do 92% of Kazakhstani Muslims and think sex outside of marriage is morally wrong, as do 75% of Kazakhstani Muslims. They also share more basic Islamic beliefs, such as the idea of the Prophet as moral exemplar and faith in divine justice on Judgment Day. Pew Research Forum, *The World's Muslims*, '80–81.

9 Other scholars, such as Mahmood and Hirschkind, have discussed similar piety movements in the Islamic world, but I find Anne Meneley's description of scripturalist movements in Yemen to be the most articulate, and the description most directly comparable to mine. I quote it at length to show the similarities between scripturalist movements elsewhere in the Islamic world and those in Central Asia:

Although scripturalist trends are many and sometimes contradictory, the way they are enacted in Zabid tends to be a foregrounding of the importance of the sacred texts, the Quran and the Hadith, over mediated interpretations by religious scholars (*ulema*). There are deep suspicions of anything resembling "innovation" (*bid'a*) from these texts, persistent critiques of practices that smack of "polytheism" (*shirk*), and most germane here, critiques of women's comportment. These Islamist scripturalists may not refer to them-selves as anything other than Muslim; they do, however, critique the practices of others, particularly saint (*wali*) veneration, as not being properly Muslim. They were, however, referred to by others in 1989–90 as "Ikhwan" (referring to the Muslim Brotherhood) or "Wahhabi"; by 1999, they were being referred to, particularly by those who did not agree with them, as "Islahis." Although it is far from clear if those described as "Islahis" were actually members of the Islah party that articulates an Islamic agenda, the Zabidis in this instance were following a more general usage of the term to refer to scripturalists or Islamists of various stripes.

Hanafis, others identify as Salafis, and still others simply as “pure Muslims” (*taza musylandar*). However, scripturalist Muslims generally recognize each other as pious Muslims who share similar lifestyles and goals for transforming Kazakhstani society. If we use the typology of Tariq Ramadan, the piety movement is actually an amalgamation of Salafi literalists, Salafi scripturalists, and scholastic traditionalists.¹⁰ Although the Kazakhstani Muftiate publicizes its Hanafi (i.e., scholarly traditionalist) credentials, in actuality many imams and writers of the piety movement have been deeply influenced by Salafists. Many Islamic presses publish works written by Saudi scholars¹¹ as well as classical Hanafi texts.¹² Everyday life is even more complicated than divisions among intellectual genealogies. In their own lives, members of the piety movement read works from Hanafi scholars, Salafi scholars, and others.¹³ Moreover, despite the best efforts of Islamic leaders, everyday life exceeds their disciplinary networks, as will be seen below.¹⁴

Creating Spaces for Ethical Fun

Writers, imams, television producers, and preachers associated with the piety movement are the main producers and transmitters of scripturalist Islamic

See A. Meneley, “Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin De Siècle Yemen: Chador Barbie and Islamic Socks,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 22, no. 2 (2007): 224. Meneley’s description and my own conceptualization of Kazakhstan’s piety movement bear resemblance, for obvious reasons, to the seminal statement on scripturalism in C. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971). See also, S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

10 T. Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24–30.

11 See, e.g., S. al-Qahtani, *Musyلمان Qorghany*, trans. A. Qasymov and K. Berdali (Almaty: Khalifa Altay Charitable Fund, 2004); Q. Isa, *Islam Uaghyzy* (Almaty: Shapaghat-Nur, 2002). Al-Qahtani is a Saudi religious scholar, while Isa’s work is a translation of a text that was originally published by the government of Saudi Arabia; the popularity of these types of text illustrates the importance of transnational Salafist media in the piety movement. A. Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature in Kazakhstan: An Annotated Bibliography* (Hyattsville, MD: Dunwoody Press, 2007), 60.

12 E.g., A. al-Khanafi, *Uiqydaghylyardy Oyatu: Tanbihul Ghafilin*, trans. Zhengis Matkarimov. (Almaty: Musyلمان, 2011).

13 Schwab, “Traditions and Texts.”

14 See also Schwab, “How to Pray in Kazakhstan.”

ideas in Kazakhstan.¹⁵ Muslim elites attempt to create a particular understanding of leisure in various media, such as monthly magazines, on Asyl Arna, Kazakhstan's Islamic television network, on Muftiate websites, and on socialmedia pages. These articles use Islamic scripture to argue for the ethical benefits of certain leisure activities and the immorality and negative consequences of other leisure activities. To narrow this article's focus for the time being, I will concentrate on how writers associated with the piety movement discuss sports and games.¹⁶

For example, the following excerpt from an article by Erkin Erghaliuly argues that many sports are both fun and beneficial to Muslims and games of chance are immoral.

In sharia law, permitted fun games' basic characteristic is that they must be beneficial and meaningful... Generally, sports improve a person's health, make them feel more energetic, and make a person more able to perform daily service to God with more strength. This is because it is not possible to slump over and lose heart when playing sports. Thus, God's Messenger (p.b.u.h.) invited Muslims to play sports. There are several sahih hadiths where the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) invites Muslims to compete in running and wrestling, and to throw the javelin and engage in archery ...the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) forcefully put this into our thoughts by saying "a physically strong Muslim is better than a weak one." In another hadith from Bukhari, when God's messenger (p.b.u.h.) passed by a group of his Companions who were having an archery competition, he said "Shoot (your arrow)! I am in agreement (with your action)." Today, there are sports such as archery and javelin throwing in the Olympic Games. And soccer, which increases a man's strength and agility, must be counted as the most popular and main sport of our Muslim youth... Sharia bans all games that bring harm to people. These include games of chance involving money and even games of chance that do not involve money. In the Qur'an, games of chance are compared to wine, liquor, and idols. Our

15 W. Schwab, "Establishing an Islamic Niche in Kazakhstan: Musylman Publishing House and Its Publications," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 2 (2011): 227-242; Schwab, "Traditions and Texts"; Schwab, "How to Pray in Kazakhstan."

16 Writers associated with the piety movement also write on other types of leisure. For television, see, for example, E. Tasbolat, "Neni Nasikhattap Zhur," n.d., <http://www.islam-orkeniet.kz/?p=654> (accessed January 30, 2013). For tourism, see A. Qonarbaiuly, "Khalal Turizm: Usynys Kop, Umtylys Kerek," 2012, <http://www.muftyat.kz/index.php?newsid=5945> (accessed January 30, 2012).

Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said, “Whoever says to his friend, ‘come on, let’s go playgames of chance’ should give charity [to someone else].” Or, just for invit- ing someone to play games of chance, a man should give charity to atonefor his sin. Muslims who play games of chance in their free time cannotactually relax and don’t raise their spirits (*kongil koteru*).¹⁷

Other authors from the piety movement produce similar articles.¹⁸ In fact, the similarity of these articles is their most striking aspect. The head of a mosquein Astana, Baqtybai Beisenbaev, details the benefits of sports in similar terms,arguing that sports are beneficial to Muslims’ health, help them relax, and teach them valuable ethical lessons.

Wasting time makes a person and their soul tired. This rusts a soul like iron. To solve this problem, we must find answers from sports, activities, and good human relations. Permitted sports invigorate and relax people.Filling our free time with sports is right and good ... sports teach us to be forgiving, humble, accept our successes with modesty, and not to be arro-gant. Moreover, it strengthens our steadfastness in the face of tragedy anddefeat.¹⁹

These writers’ emphasis on a holistic sense of control is part of the general Aristotelian ethical model of most modern scripturalist Islamic movements. Inthis model, expertly described and illustrated by Mahmood, Asad, and Hirschkind, external acts create internal dispositions.²⁰ For example, veilingnot only reflects female modesty but also creates it: wearing a veil reminds women to be modest at all times and thus women become modest. Similarly,practicing archery is not only a manifestation of strength, but also training tobecome physically strong. This strength irradiates the body and soul. As one young man who was inclined toward psychological explanations told me, the

17 E. Erghaliuly (2011) *Sharighat zhane Kumar Oiyndar*, 2011, <http://www.muftyat.kz/index.php?newsid=3528> (accessed January 30, 2013).

18 E.g., A. Qoibagharova, “Islamda Rukhsat Etilgen Oiyndar,” *Musulman*, 79, no. 18 (2010).

19 B. Beisenbaev, “Sport—Salauatty Omir Saltynyng Kepili: Islam Dini Dene Shynyqyru Zhoninde Ne Deidi?” <http://www.muftyat.kz/index.php?newsid=4141> (accessed January 30, 2011).

20 S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, md: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

increased self-confidence that accompanied physical strength helps Muslims control their soul (*napsi*; this particularly denotes the part of the soul that includes one's baser instincts). This ideology of human capabilities stresses the interconnected nature of the body and soul. Erghaliuly argues that strength makes prayer easier, while Beisenbaev argues that sports do not only positively develop the body and mind, but that these sports also help to "defeat" one's base instincts. Instincts incite lust, while physical strength and intellectual reason can control and direct the soul. Sports help to control the instincts by increasing a young man's strength, holistically combining bodily and mental control.

This emphasis on ethical Islamic fun contrasts notably with Asef Bayat's work on fun and Islam.²¹ In an extremely broad-ranging article—he groups together Shi'ite Iranian mullahs with the Deobandi soldiers of the Taliban and Wahhabi Saudi jurists—Bayat argues that Islamists have a problem with fun, which he distinguishes from other emotions such as joy by pointing to its spontaneous nature:

I take fun to refer to an array of ad hoc, nonroutine, and joyful conducts—ranging from playing games, joking, dancing, and social drinking, to involvement in playful art, music, sex, and sport, to particular ways of speaking, laughing, appearing, or carrying oneself—where individuals break free temporarily from the disciplined constraints of daily life, normative obligations, and organized power.²²

Bayat argues that Islamists are fearful of fun in part because of its possibility for subversion of Islamist moral and political norms: in other words, that non-routine fun could function as what Victor Turner refers to as "anti-structure."²³ Fun for these Islamists must be had in accordance with Islamic doctrine and promote a controlled and structured individual expression. More importantly, Bayat asserts, is the possibility that fun promotes the possibility of challenge to authority, or a challenge to the paradigm of Islamic authority itself. It not only distracts from an ethical paradigm, but also from a paradigm and regime of power. In other words, MTV not only plays inappropriate videos, but it lies outside of Islamist structures of power.

Bayat makes an excellent point: Islamists are fearful of the possible subversive effects of fun and fight to regulate fun and to transform leisure into a time

21 A. Bayat, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture*, 9, no. 3 (2007): 433–459.

22 Ibid., 434.

23 V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

for ethical relaxation rather than for possibly subversive fun. However, the broad scope of his article prevents him from examining how the ideologies of fun—even the “anti-fun” ideology of fundamentalists—influence Muslims’ everyday practices of fun and sociality. Moreover, my discussion above shows that Islamic elites in Kazakhstan are not interested in suppressing fun, but organizing it. As Lara Deeb and Mona Harb point out,²⁴ Bayat contrasts Islam and fun exploring what Islamic fun might be.

At a more local level, imams and leaders of study groups in Kazakhstan pro-mote particular sports and games, among other activities, as ways to have fun while becoming a more ethical person. For example, I often attended a studygroup that met in the back room of a café serving halal food in Almaty led by aman named Erbolat, who had previously served as an imam of a small mosque in Almaty and was a writer when this research was being conducted; later he would become an imam in South Kazakhstan oblast. Erbolat once gave a short sermon almost identical to the articles above to a group of young men who met weekly to listen to his sermons.

There are many benefits of sports. Sports are good for your health. You won't become fat like me. [Laughter from the study group.] Our Prophet (p.b.u.h.) did some wrestling. A Muslim should be strong, he should have knowledge of everything, and excel in many fields. Running, archery, many sports are good for people. But there are also sports that are forbidden in Islam: karate, boxing, sports like that. Why is boxing forbidden? Because you beat each other. You can't hit other people for no reason... This is not a sport. You cannot harm others as a Muslim. You have seen Muhammad Ali. He can barely stand. This is from boxing. Other sports like soccer, volleyball, and basketball are okay. But playing cards is forbidden. First, it is not good for your body. You sit. Second, people usually tell bad jokes and swear when they play cards. This environment leads to bad thoughts and people try to use magic to win. This is why playing cards is forbidden.

Erbolat is not, however, only interested in discussing leisure with his students. He also hopes to help his students enact the ideals of piety and leisure he discusses in the quote above. In order to do so, he invites the young men in his study group to play soccer every Sunday.

24 L. Deeb and M. Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 2013), 32.

Erbolat's decision to organize soccer games was not only based on an abstract understanding of Islamic ethics of leisure; his personal experience as an overweight man also played a role. He takes pride in his personal spiritual discipline, particularly the fact that he had not missed a single one of the five daily prayers in several years. However, he saw his own struggles with weight as the result of a personal lack of physical discipline; if he could make soccer a routine part of his life, perhaps he would gain discipline in exercise and lose weight. Rather than just having skill and discipline in prayer, he would also be physically fit. Some of his students had the opposite problem: they played soccer consistently, but were less consistent with their prayers. Erbolat thought that organizing a soccer game in addition to his weekly study group—which performed the evening prayer together—would help everyone in the group develop more discipline in their lives. He also thought it would be a time that his students could have fun and bond with each other, but his main justification, both to his students and to himself, was that it would be a particular type of fun that would help them develop discipline in mind and body.

“Today, we are Meeting to Play Soccer, not to Listen to a Sermon.”

Given the previously discussed writers' and Erbolat's emphasis on discipline and ethical self-fashioning in sports, I went into my discussions with Erbolat's students thinking they shared similar sentiments. However, when I asked them why they played soccer, they did not mention the Prophet, the ethical benefits of soccer, or various imams' permission to play soccer. If I pushed them on the issue and specifically asked how soccer could develop a better character, Erbolat's students could give me examples of the methods they use to become more pious during soccer games. For example, Qongyrbek spoke about particular words of praise that helped him to reinforce Islamic humility during the games:

Qongyrbek: When someone scores in our games, you hear
 “*mashallah*” [Arabic: God has willed it.]

...

Wendell: So you say “*mashallah*” after goals?

Qongyrbek: Yes. It reminds us to be humble. If someone makes a good play, you can remind them that everything is God's plan.

Wendell: Yes. But I also like feeling good when I score.

Qongyrbek: Me too. It is a joy that everyone feels. But you have to remember God even when you are jumping [with joy.]

Saying “*mashallah*” helps Qongyrbek remind himself of his dependence on God, and the joint efforts of everyone to say “*mashallah*” creates an Islamic and moral environment.²⁵ In fact, the type of ethical self-fashioning Qongyrbek discusses is extremely similar to that suggested by Beisenbaev in the article cited above, who argues that “sports teach us to be forgiving, humble, accept our successes with modesty, and not to be arrogant.” Playing soccer—and leisure in general—presents an opportunity for simple but useful methods of ethical self-fashioning, like uttering pious phrases to fashion a more humble self.

However, Erbolat’s students, as mentioned above, usually did not speak about ethical self-cultivation when I asked them why they played soccer. Rather, they told me, “It’s fun to run around with people your own age.” “Soccer is the world’s game—everyone likes it ... even Americans like you watch the World Cup,” and “I feel good when I play soccer. When I play soccer, I cheer up.” The reasons that my interlocutors played soccer were not based on Islamic ethical schemas, as hoped for by Islamic elites, but on the general cultural schemas about soccer in Kazakhstan and in global sports media. Soccer is an opportunity to be physically active, develop skills, and spend time with friends. It is fun for its own sake.

Some of Erbolat’s students explicitly told me this. Beibarys, a young man who had just moved to Almaty, seemed a little annoyed with my questions about soccer and ethics. He told me: “Everything has its own place (*oz ornybar*). We listen to [Erbolat] on Wednesdays. We play soccer on Sundays. Today, [we are meeting] to play soccer, not to listen to a sermon.” Others nodded their heads and seemed impatient to get on with the game. Beibarys and most of

25 Some readers may express surprise at my inclusion of the practice of saying “*mashallah*,” arguing that this is a very common Islamic practice. In Kazakhstan, this expression is not common and usually is said only by newly pious individuals as part of their effort to include more Arabic-language expressions in everyday speech and more publicly Islamic acts in everyday life. Readers should keep in mind the fact that Kazakhstan is a less publicly Islamic country than other Central Asian or Muslim-majority countries. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, 42% of the population in Turkey and 60% of Egyptians pray *namaz* (Arabic, *salat*) several times per day. Within Central Asia, in Tajikistan, 42% of the population prays *namaz* several times per day, while in Uzbekistan 17% do. In contrast, 4% of the Muslims in Kazakhstan pray *namaz* several times per day. Pew Research Forum, *The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, p. 43.

Erbolat's students saw soccer as a time mainly separate from ethical self-fashioning.

So far, so banal. Soccer is fun, scripturalist Muslims play soccer, and occasionally a few scripturalist Muslims who play soccer try to be better Muslims while having fun. However, as I listened to Erbolat's students talk to each other, I started to realize what they thought was special about these soccer games: playing soccer with other scripturalist Muslims was not primarily a time for ethical self-fashioning, but a time to relax, away from sin and the world outside of the piety movement. For example, Qongyrbek pointed to the lack of vulgar language and jokes in their games, using the example of what he considered to be an inappropriate sexual joke.

You don't hear men swearing or talking about chasing after women or joking about girls. When you play soccer with people who don't pray five times a day, they say things like "sorry about that pass. My main sport is sex. But no one wants to play with me."²⁶ The main thing is that you don't have to tell young men to behave when you play [soccer] with Muslims.

Other interlocutors said similar things: "I feel uncomfortable hearing about going to the bathhouse [to find prostitutes] when I play with young men who do not pray five times a day. I have to talk to them about adultery and honor." Some of them explicitly said that playing soccer was time *away* from ethical self-fashioning and Islamic duties. Beibarys said that soccer games are a time away from his duty to preach to others,²⁷ and explained how he tires of having to explain Islam and ethics to others:

I always have to preach to people about alcohol at my family's parties. Alcohol use is a terrible epidemic stemming from the Soviet atheist government. Now our Kazakh people cannot have a party without alcohol. If you have a party without alcohol, people become angry and will leave the party. But God has clearly said alcohol is forbidden. There is a hadith:

²⁶ Ironically, in addition to being a pretty good joke, this "inappropriate" joke showed humility, exactly the ethical quality Qongyrbek had discussed previously.

²⁷ Books read by members of the piety movement, like *Preaching Islam*, discuss preaching as "the highest and most beneficial action" of Muslims (Isa, *Islam Uaghyzy*, p. 10). Members of the piety movement are often excited and animated while they are preaching to others. Many members of the piety movement tell me that they are exceptionally happy when their preaching convinces someone to start to pray five times a day, wear the *hijab*, or stop drinking. But, as Beibarys notes, it can be tiring.

“The key to all tragedy is alcohol.” How many families have been broken up by alcohol? How many children have become orphans? So we have to preach about this. To Muslims and to non-Muslims. So [at every party and wedding I go to], I have to start by telling people I don’t drink, and then they pressure me, and then I have to preach about alcohol. And then I have to talk about cigarettes. I get tired of having to do this.

Goffman’s analysis of the presentation of self in everyday life offers a useful lens to view the lessened ability of members of the piety movement to relax around less pious Kazakhs.²⁸ Goffman argues that social interactions often involve playing an appropriate social role. A husband and wife may play the role of a happy couple when meeting other parents at their child’s soccer game during the early evening, for example. This is their front stage. Later that night, at home, or “back stage,” however, the couple may fight over the husband’s comments at the game. They are no longer managing expectations as a couple, but are individuals working out the roles they wish to perform in the future. Alternatively, while back stage, they might simply ignore their public roles and discuss the news of the day with each other. This role-playing is not necessarily cynical. A husband and wife may be happy and seek to demonstrate that happiness to others, or they may think of themselves as a generally happy couple even if they are in a temporary fight back stage.

Young members of the piety movement, a distinct minority in Kazakhstan, are front stage when around those who do not share their beliefs. They have to act or model piety to help others come to a better understanding of Islam. Again, this is not cynical. They truly believe and hope that their example and their preaching will play a role in helping others come to a correct understanding of Islam. They have to tell their friends not to swear and make sure they do not swear themselves; they have to instruct their friends not to have sex before marriage and to demonstrate proper respect for women in speech and action; and they have to tell others about the evils of alcohol. With other members of the piety movement, however, they are back stage. It is easiest to enjoy soccer for its own sake when you don’t have to worry about presenting Islam to others.

Another way to describe these soccer games would be to use Michel de Certeau’s language of strategies and tactics, in which a strategy is a “place

28 E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959).

that can be delimited as its own and serves as the base” from which it can manage targets or threats.²⁹ Elites in the piety movement create publishing houses that target members of the piety movement as an audience to be educated;³⁰ imams and study group leaders attempt to manage their students’ leisure time. These Islamic elites, who have offices in mosques, publishing houses, and religious government bureaucracies, attempt to discipline non- elite Muslims; they tell them to play soccer so they can be more virtuous, forexample. De Certeau contrasts strategies with tactics, which are attempts by less powerful individuals to use the opportunity provided by a strategy to accomplish their own goals.³¹ Erbolat’s students, for example, use the soccer game organized by Erbolat not to create physical and spiritual discipline or cultivate virtues, but to be back stage and relax away from the impiety of others.

The back stage created by members of the piety movement may not be the exact type of utopian, controlled, ethical leisure envisioned by leaders of the piety movement and advocated by Islamists elsewhere in the Islamic world, but it has many analogues in other religious communities. Heather Hendershot quotes a Christian teen who argues that it is easier to listen to Christian music than secular music because “if you listen to secular music, you have to think about what they’re saying,” whereas in Christian music, a listener can simply enjoy the music without monitoring it for possibly sinful messages.³² Life is more fun when you don’t have to be vigilantly watching out for sin; similarly, playing soccer with other members of the piety movement is more fun because you don’t have to watch out for sin. One partially unintended consequence of members of the piety movement’s self- segregation during leisure activities is the strengthening of communal ties or, to use sociological jargon, an increase in social capital.³³

29 M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

30 Schwab, “Establishing an Islamic Niche in Kazakhstan.”

31 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 36–37.

32 H. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 38. I am grateful to Jessica Carr for pointing out this analogue in contemporary American Evangelical Christian culture.

33 Although it may seem like common sense that playing sports together increases a sense of community and trust, there have been empirical studies showing this. See, for example, K. Walseth, “Bridging and Bonding Social Capital in Sport: Experiences of Young Women with an Immigrant Background,” *Sport, Education, and Society*, 13, no. 1 (2008): 1–17.

Getting Away from it all, or at Least the Less Pious: Sociality and Fun in the Piety Movement

Douglas Hollan argues that an anthropology of well-being should embrace the complexities and ebbs and flows of well-being and happiness.³⁴ If we are to take Islam's interaction with well-being and leisure seriously, we have to accept the complications that Islamic duties introduce into situations that could be enjoyable. The importance that Erbolat's students place on getting away from sin or sinners to be able to relax shows the difficulties that many members of the piety movement have with leisure: leisure is great, but it is sometimes hard to have fun around Muslims who do not share your views. For example, a member of the piety movement named Nurzhan was good friends with another young Kazakh man named Turar. They got along well in college, but Nurzhan had become more pious, started praying, and had an arranged marriage with a hijab-wearing woman. After his turn toward the piety movement, Nurzhan told me he sometimes could not relax around his friend. Once, they went out to eat and Turar told Nurzhan that he wanted to live with his girlfriend. Nurzhan thought he had a responsibility to discuss proper Islamic relationships with his friend. He told me:

It is easier talking to friends who pray five times a day because I don't have to preach to them. God has commanded that we spread Islam. You know I had to talk to Turar about moving in with his girlfriend. This kind of conversation makes me tired. [It is easier to talk to people who pray five times a day] because I don't have to talk about basic morality. Turar's parents also do not want him to move in with his girlfriend before they are married. What I am to do?

Despite his friendship with Turar, Nurzhan is somewhat exhausted by his Islamic duty to preach to him and recognizes that his commitment to Islam has made hanging out with Turar less fun.³⁵

For Nurzhan, as for Beibarys, hanging out is more enjoyable when he does not have to intervene in others' lives. The type of sociality they prefer is not the intensely pious life that is reported in academic literature, in which Muslims seem to devote their lives to consciously making themselves and others better

34 D. Hollan, "Selfscapes of Well-Being in a Rural Indonesian Village," in G. Mathews and C. Izquierdo (eds), *Pursuits of Happiness: Well-Being in Anthropological Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2009), 211–227.

35 Turar presumably thought that hanging out with Nurzhan was less fun as well.

Muslims. I support Samuli Schielke's critique of many anthropologists for concentrating on the "success stories of piety" and idealizing Islamic rhetoric when discussing scripturalist Islamic movements.³⁶ No one fully enacts the ideal pious self-fashioning discussed by Islamic elites and anthropologists focusing on discourses of Islamic piety. Muslims who engage in intense pious self-fashioning often also want or need a break from prayer and preaching; they want to escape back stage from their presentations of a pious self to others.

For young members of the piety movement, the dilemma of how to avoid sin is complicated by exposure to and desire for global media products in post-Soviet Kazakhstan such as Western action films, Russian rap videos, translations of U.S. business bestsellers, and historical epics made in Kazakhstan. Discussing his research in southern Kyrgyzstan, Stefan Kirmse argues that

Cultural globalization gives shape to the everyday lives of students in Osh. Boys and young men experience this process as a series of interactions with different "global" media images, social actors and spaces. ... In commercial outlets such as Internet cafés and sports clubs, donor-funded organizations and religious spaces, students experimented with different styles and identities, moved between them and tested their boundaries.³⁷

Kirmse further argues that young Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh create a type of *bricolage*, inhabiting different worlds that may seem contradictory to outsiders but are not experienced as such by his interlocutors. I want to complicate Kirmse's discussion, for although my interlocutors certainly interact with global media flows, they also were very committed to a particular type of Islamic identity that they hoped would define them. My argument is not that my interlocutors only thought of themselves as Muslim or did not play soccer like everyone else in the world, but that they attempted to create situations where they did not overtly violate their understanding of Islamic norms so that they could relax and have fun. While my interlocutors drew on the cultural forms of Kazakh and global culture, activities such as playing soccer did not represent alternative identities that they "tried out." Islam was supposed to be

36 S. Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, no. S1(2009): s36.

37 S. Kirmse, "In the Marketplace for Styles and Identities: Globalization and Youth Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 29, no. 4 (2010): 401.

their main identity and source of values, and alternative cultural products had to fit within structures of Islamic authority and morality or be excluded.

For example, on one of the last days I was in Kazakhstan in 2010, I was sitting with a group of young men who work at an Islamic publishing company. They switched the cd player from an Azeri religious singer that their 50-year-old boss had left on—the epitome of pious self-fashioning leisure—to 50 Cent, the American rapper. This seemed slightly incongruous to me. I started laughing after hearing 50 Cent rap about drugs and clubs. The young men asked me what was funny, and in return I asked them what they thought 50 Cent was rapping about. They confessed they did not know, but suspected that his lyrics might not have been written with Shari'a law in mind. They asked me to translate, and I did the best I could, although I visibly struggled to translate the names of drugs like Ecstasy, much to the amusement of my audience. Many of them exclaimed that 50 Cent was emphatically not a good Muslim and laughed at the dissonance between their beliefs and 50 Cent's lyrics. As I was explaining 50 Cent's lyrics, a senior member of the publishing company joined us, heard my explanation, and told the young men to throw the cd out. I apologized to the young men, who told me that they would just play 50 Cent while hanging out in their cars because "they liked the beat." One young man joked that he would just not learn English so he could not understand the lyrics.

Rather than becoming more pious, these young men wanted to relax and were attempting to negotiate the conflict between dominant popular culture products and activities in Kazakhstan—like listening to 50 Cent or joking about sex while playing soccer—and their desire to be good Muslims. But, rather than experimenting with different identities and building a *bricolage* of identities, these young men consciously attempted to keep this type of *bricolage* away so that they could have fun and not worry about ethics. Their solution to dominant popular cultural artifacts like 50 Cent's songs is to segregate themselves from other meanings of these artifacts, like the English song lyrics of 50 Cent, and from less pious communities while they relax and have fun. 50 Cent's lyrics were off-limits, but if you did not understand his lyrics, you could still lightheartedly rap over the beat of his music in your car. The young men at this publishing house were not always successful in segregating themselves from sin, but they tried. Ethical self-fashioning takes a back seat to avoiding sin while enjoying popular culture.

This emphasis on avoiding sin is important among other pious Muslim communities. Deeb and Harb argue that the multiple moral authorities and the numerous technologies used to access opinions of these moral authorities allows young Shi'ites in Lebanon to construct their own personal and changing morality.³⁸ This does not mean that there is a lack of agreement among these "more or less pious" young people: for example, none of their interlocutors

openly admit to drinking alcohol. Rather, Deeb and Harb's interlocutors disagree on how to form relationships with drinkers. Some young Lebanese argued that it is acceptable to go to a café with friends who drink alcohol while abstaining from drinking, while others differentiated between associating with those who drink beer and those who drink liquor. Unlike members of the piety movement, however, Deeb and Harb's interlocutors do not seem to feel the same need to call their beer-drinking friends to piety. Deeb and Harb's work points out that older generations in Lebanon are more likely to confront friends who drink alcohol or to leave situations where there is alcohol.³⁹ This older generation is the "vanguard" generation of public Islamic piety and political Islamism in Lebanon. Most of this vanguard generation traces their personal Islamic growth to their teens and early twenties. In Kazakhstan, the same dynamic may be occurring, but with a particularly post-Soviet wrinkle. Young men who grew up in the post-Soviet era are the vanguard generation of the piety movement. Older generations of Kazakhs in the piety movement have more experience switching between leisurely social roles framed as "Muslim" and "international friend," for example.

In a small city in southern Kazakhstan, one 60-year-old leader of the piety movement named Nurbek kept a bottle of vodka in his home. When I asked him about this, he told me that he would never give alcohol to other Muslims, and in fact he often spoke to other Muslims about abstaining from alcohol. In Nurbek's opinion, however, Islamic rules of hospitality call for him to be able to give Russian neighbors, who are not Muslim, alcohol "if they needed it." I wondered what sort of situation called for such a pious man to give out shots of vodka. Nurbek told me that his Russian neighbor was often physically beaten by his wife and needed sympathy and vodka afterward, so he kept a bottle of vodka in the house. He giggled a little bit, asking me if I could ever imagine such an incongruous situation, and then told me to stay away from Russian women, who could be tough, as illustrated by his neighbor's plight.

However, it is important to note that Nurbek thought of his time consoling his Russian neighbor more as a duty than as leisure time, and he even commented on needing to relax after consoling his friend. Nurbek enjoyed spending time with his Russian neighbor when he did not have to provide him

38 L. Deeb and M. Harb, "Choosing Faith and Fun: Youth Negotiations of Morality in South Beirut," *Ethnos*, 78, no. 1 (2013): 1–22.

39 Deeb and Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 144–151.

alcohol, but he preferred to relax by reading the Qur'an or hadiths, or by social-izing with a group of older pious men. This group of older men were all Qozhas, an ethnic or subethnic group in Kazakhstan who are putative descendants of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, or, in some cases, the Prophet Muhammad, who did not need to be preached to and who "knew the Soviet era" and could reminisce about their shared ethnic and religious past. I will return to this group shortly.

Scripturalists Hanging out Together: Policy Implications

Robert Putnam famously argues that there was a decline in social capital in the United States in the last part of the twentieth century, epitomized by Americans "bowling alone" rather than together as part of a team.⁴⁰ My argument regarding the piety movement in Kazakhstan is the opposite: there is an increase in social capital among Kazakhstani Muslims in the piety movement because they have fun and socialize together, epitomized in this article by soccer games. This increase in social capital is not simply because of shared moral values or rituals, but because members of the piety movement have fun together in ways that create or strengthen social networks that otherwise might not exist. For example, four of Erbolat's students had moved into a three-bedroom apartment together. Two of them had already been living together after meeting at the radio station they both worked at. They met their other two roommates, a banker and a seasonal laborer, at the study group organized by Erbolat. This is an example of the dual nature of social capital that Putnam discusses: the social network created by these students *bonds* similarly minded Muslims but also *bridges* class divisions between an upper-class, two middle-class, and a lower-class Kazakh.

These types of informal networks can expand into official organizations. To return to Nurbek and his group of Qozha friends, Nurbek decided to formalize this group as a registered association so they could raise money to supplement the local imam's meager salary and put pressure on other Qozhas to live up to their Islamically sacred ancestry. Although one young Qozha dismissed the group in a conversation with me, saying, "They thought it would be the nineteenth century again and Qozhas would be in charge of Islam," other members of the Qozha community and the community at-large looked to them for Islamic instruction and communal action. In 2009, a group of parents at the

40 R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

school where Nurbek taught asked him to form a small Islamic study group; a few years earlier, the group had, unsuccessfully, put pressure on the local government to shut down a group of ecstatic healers for being non-Islamic; later, the group helped others organize “Islamic,” alcohol-free weddings. Socializing and having fun came first; civic organization came later.

The policy importance of the leisure practices and beliefs of members of the piety movement lies in an increase in social capital in the piety movement. Carrie Wickham argues that the success of Islamist messages in Egypt are based on three conditions: (1) resonance with the life experiences and beliefs of some Egyptians,⁴¹ (2) the credibility of Islamic activists, and (3) reinforcement through intensive, small-group solidarity at the grassroots level.⁴² Having fun with other members of the piety movement matters for this third condition. Solidarity is something that is not simply the result of shared beliefs or civic organizations focused on social change, but it is the result of social networks that allow people to have fun with each other.

The piety movement in Kazakhstan is creating spaces for young people to have fun without worrying about sinners or Islamic duties, and these spaces are crucial to strengthening the social networks of Muslim social activists. Two of Erbolat’s students, for example, convinced a coworker, whose name was Qanat, to start attending their study group after they mentioned they all played soccer together. Qanat had been skeptical of the piety movement because they seemed like such austere people; in his words, “they all had hijabs on,” symbolizing an unhealthy devotion to religion.⁴³ However, after assuring Erbolat and the other soccer players that Qanat was a decent young man who might be looking for a more overtly religious lifestyle, Qanat’s coworkers asked him to play soccer with them. Although some of the soccer players commented that they felt that they had to impress Qanat in the first few weeks, making the games less relaxing, they felt more comfortable when Qanat started to attend

41 In “Traditions and Texts,” I argue that Kazakhs who have been consistently exposed to domestic practices, life-cycle rituals, and an oral tradition focusing on narratives connecting Kazakhs to their Islamic ancestors are most receptive to revivalist movements focusing on what are seen as “Kazakh traditions,” such as shrine pilgrimage. Conversely, Kazakhs without this “domestic apprenticeship” are more receptive to scripturally focused movements such as the piety movement.

42 C. Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 151.

43 For a longer discussion of the ways that visible piety can be seen as superfluous or dangerous in Central Asia, see M. Louw, “Even Honey May Become Bitter When There Is Too Much of It: Islam and The Struggle for a Balanced Existence in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 32, no. 4 (2013): 514–526.

the study group and became much more interested in Islam. Qanat had moved back stage, in Goffman's terms, and another Kazakh had strengthened his ties with the piety movement.

The current social and political environment in Kazakhstan is relatively hostile to independent Islamic civic groups, and no Islamically-oriented political parties exist. However, the small-group solidarity mentioned by Wickhamas so important to the growth of Islamist movements in Egypt is becoming more noticeable among members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan. As I have shown above, these are not simply groups based on Islamic ideology, but also based on a sense of community nurtured by, for lack of a better term, hanging out together. The intense bonds between members of the piety movement make their messages credible and attractive to other Kazakhs. The piety movement is effective at proselytizing through "fun" activities because newcomers to activities see a group of loyal friends rather than a group exclusively focused on Islamic practice. If something akin to the AK Party in Turkey or the Nour Party in Egypt ever comes about in Kazakhstan, it will not only be due to an increased sense of Islamic civic activism in the future, but because members of the piety movement are having fun together now.