“Where is Our Honor?” Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Bigozhin, Ulan. " “Where is Our Honor?” Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media", *Central Asian Affairs* 6, 2-3 (2019): 189-205.

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of Islamic authority in Kazakhstani online media. I build on the growing scholarship in Central Asian studies that questions the logocentric nature of Islamic authority, even for scripturalist Muslims. Taking the You- Tube channel of Abdughappar Smanov as a case study, I argue that some scripturalist preachers in Kazakhstan construct their Islamic authority by tapping into Soviet, Kazakh, and global currents of masculinity and sport.

Keywords

Islam in Kazakhstan – Islamic authority – masculinity – combat sports – gender

Introduction

A man in a weight belt lies down to bench-press a barbell. The cameraman says, “That’s 60 kilos there. Here he goes. God willing. *Allahu akbar*!” The man finishes his set and stands up to practice his punching technique. This is not the stereotypical content of online Islamic evangelism, but it is an important way in which the Kazakhstani preacher Abdughappar Smanov establishes his authority. He bench-presses his way to importance.

Privratsky, author of the best-known ethnography of Islam in Kazakhstan, argues that Islamic authority in Kazakhstan is created in Kazakhs’ “collective memory.” On this view, Islamic authorities are those who can best reference memories of domestic traditions and a supposedly lost Islamic tradition. However, recent work has complicated the idea that Kazakhs’ collective memory is

doi:10.1163/22142290-00602006

the most important aspect of Islamic authority in Kazakhstan. Allen Frankl and Wendell Schwab2 have shown the importance of scripturalist authority to the Muftiate and Islamic publishers in Kazakhstan. In addition, Schwab's research on middle-class values and the importance of economic success to creating Islamic authority on the *Asyl Arna* television channel,3 for example, shows the changing nature of Islam in Kazakhstan. My research adds to our under- standing of Islamic authority in two ways. First, I show how Islamic authority works beyond the traditionalism of collective memory discussed by Privratsky. Second, I complicate the scripturalist construction of authority discussed by Frank and Schwab by showing how a scriptualist preacher constructs his authority outside of mastery of scripture and classical texts through engagement with social phenomena such as masculinity, martial arts, and combat sports.

Martial Arts and Masculinity in Kazakhstan

Combat sports (Rus. *edinoborstvo*) were an important part of Soviet masculini- ty. James Riordan's *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the ussr,* which is based on archival materials from 1960 to 1975, tracks how the Soviet state paid particular attention to sport and heavily supported the development of sports facilities for different sports, ages, and genders.4 Riordan writes that almost from the moment it came into existence, the Soviet state had a high demand for disciplined and healthy citizens, hence the development of a system of regular participation in physical exercise.5 I re- call that in the mid- and late 1980s, even my small city in the northern Kazakh SSR had several state-run sports facilities, ranging from cross-country skiing to judo. Pupils at all grade levels took sports tests, and schools were generally well equipped with sports facilities: indoor and outdoor gyms, volleyball courts,

1 A.J. Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature in Kazakhstan* (Hyattsville, MD: Dunwoody Press, 2007).

2 W. Schwab, "Establishing an Islamic Niche in Kazakhstan: Musylman Publishing House and Its Publications," *Central Asian Survey,* 30, no. 2 (2011): 227–242; W. Schwab, "Traditions and Texts: How Two Young Women Learned to Interpret the Qur'an and Hadiths in Kazakhstan," *Contemporary Islam,* 6, no. 2 (2012): 173–197; W. Schwab, " Islam, Fun, and Social Capital in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2, no. 1 (2015): 51–70; W. Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam in Kazakhstan: The Case of Asyl Arna's Social Media," *Central Asian Affairs,* 3, no. 4 (2016): 301–329.

3 Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

4 J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

5 Ibid., 73.

basketball courts, etc. I personally spent almost a year in 1989 as a member of the city's Soviet sambo wrestling club, for a very modest monthly payment. For a teenager in the late Soviet period, being masculine and physically strong played an important role in one's ability to gain the respect of one's peers.

In the late 1980s, when Gorbachev-instigated perestroika was at its height, there was a steady inflow of pirated VHS tapes into the Soviet Union, bearing the movies of Western martial artists such as Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris, among other stars. These movies, with their bright images, masculine heroes, and sports themes, certainly contributed to the tremendous popularity enjoyed by combat martial arts in the early post-Soviet era. Men of different ages went to the newly opened martial arts gyms. Private conversations with post-Soviet men in the 1990s revealed that many of them considered martial arts, boxing, and wrestling the "real sports"—along with soccer, of course! Even today, the possession of sports degrees (a Soviet innovation) such as Master of Sport (*Master Sporta*) or Candidate Master of Sport (*Kandidat v Mastera Sporta*) in combat sport is an important factor that can build an individual's symbolic capital and make him more respected. Combat sports such as wrestling and boxing also became part of Soviet and post-Soviet street youth culture.6 Fights among Soviet street youth formations pushed young Soviet men into gyms to pump iron and punch punching bags. Some youth street groups that lived near sport centers became associated with certain sports activities, be- coming nicknamed for the sports they practiced: for example, Russian youth slang refers to wrestlers as *borchiki* or *bortsuhi*.

In the post-Soviet era, Soviet combat sports have become intertwined with the global phenomenon of mixed martial arts (MMA). Different mixed martial arts promotions began to develop in the 1990s, such as Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Pride, etc., and some post-Soviet fighters built careers there. These promotions and athletes were followed by people in post-Soviet space: many people in Kazakhstan, especially combat practitioners, watched VHS tapes of UFC fights featuring Russian fighters like Oleg Taktarov and (later) Fedor Emelianenko.

The names of Taktarov, Emelianenko, and now Dagestani fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov have become in some sense iconic for many post-Soviet Kazakhstani fighters today. During my participant observation in Astana's MMA and BJJ clubs, I often observed people imitate Nurmagomedov's takedown or Emelianenko's punch.

6 E. Nasritdinov and P. Schröder, "From Frunze to Bishkek: Soviet Territorial Youth Formations and Their Decline in the 1990s and 2000s," *Central Asian Affairs,* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00301001.

People in MMA gyms discuss how they should train, how they can stick to their diets, and so on, but what motivates them to train is the idea of becoming a stronger, meaner, more masculine man. In the minds of many people in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, a "strong" man, a "real" man—or even the ideal masculine man—should combine physical strength and bellicose spirit. This imagined and idealized man should possess physical power and fighting skills, have a strong sense of national belonging and tradition, and protect and take care of his family and relatives, all while being materially successful.

After completing my PhD in the US and arriving in Astana in May 2017, I was surprised, as an anthropologist, to see how deeply combat sports were integrated into the daily lives of the capital's citizens. For example, in the summer of 2017, the streets of Astana were full of posters of Kazakhstani BJJ (Brazilian jiu-jitsu), karate, and boxing champions; these posters were emblazoned with the phrase "Heroes of Our Time" (*Geroi Nashego Vremeni*). In a similar vein, boxing champion Gennadii Golovkin (known as "GGG") had become the "face" of the Kazakhstani bank Tsesna.7 Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), judo, and Kazakh-style wrestling are even part of the physical training program at Kazakhstani universities, including Nazarbayev University (NU).

In daily life, one often overhears young Kazakhstani men discussing recent international Ultimate Fight Championship (UFC) fights and boxing matches in cafeterias, in coffee shops, and even during family gatherings and celebrations. State officials and heads of state also symbolically support combat sports, however unintentionally: former Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev watched Golovkin's boxing match on September 17, 2017, during his official visit to Uzbekistan.8

Many Kazakhstani men love martial arts, especially boxing and wrestling, and they display their interest in these types of sports by attending MMA championships, watching fights online, or posting pictures of their favorite fighters and wrestlers on their social media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, etc). Kazakhstani women pay attention to the large, all-country combat sport events, usually international boxing matches with major Kazakhstani stars like Golovkin and Qanat Islam, but in general, it is primarily Kazakhstani men who show an interest in combat sports.

The victories of Kazakhstani athletes in combat sports fixtures are often discussed privately in patriotic and nationalistic ways. Jeremy MacClancy makes

7 "Gennadii Golovkin stal poslom Tsenabanka," *Forbes.kz*, January 28, 2016, https://forbes.kz/finances/finance/gennadiy_golovkin_stal_poslom_tsesnabanka/.

8 "Kak Nazarbaev smotrel boi Golovkina s Al'varesom," *Nur.kz*, September 17, 2017, https://www.nur.kz/1619996-kak-nazarbaev-smotrel-boy-golovkina-s.html.

the important point that sports are vehicles of identity or assist in the creation of identity, providing people with a sense of difference.9 To follow MacClancy, for Kazakh men, combat sports are a way of expressing their ethnic identity and masculinity at the same time.

Such praise of combat sports in nationalistic tones is nothing new. Indeed, it is a widespread phenomenon around the globe. In his chapter "Strong as a Turk: Power, Performance and Representation in Turkish Wrestling," Martin Stokes points out that the popularity of wrestling in Turkey is based in part on nationalistic sentiments: "Wrestling is systematically used in the construction of [a] myth of national strength."10 However, in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia, ethnographers have yet to address the correlation between nationalism and combat sports. That being said, Stokes' arguments appear to be applicable to studies of the Kazakh construction of the myth of national strength. Participant observations conducted in the Kazakhstani capital, Astana—in Astana's combat sports or MMA clubs, during wrestling tournaments, meetings and interviews with combat sport practitioners, and even with random individuals on the street and in cafeterias—show that many Kazakhs believe in the constructed heroic vision of the past or myths of the national strength of their nomadic forefathers and Kazakh heroes (*batyrs*). There is a cultural sentiment that Kazakhs' warrior heritage is not dead, but is rather maintained by the current generation of martial artists and combat sports practitioners. In private conversations, people (usually men) contrast the physical strength and stamina of Kazakhs with that of other nations. Kazakh men who served in the Soviet Army underline how good Kazakhs were at physical training during military service, or how they won wrestling or boxing matches—or even just fights—in army barracks.

The myth of national strength, connected with Kazakhstan's imagined bellicose past, is widely circulated around the country. For example, during my field research in Pavlodar region, in Kazakhstan's rural steppe, in 2013–2014, local Kazakhs shared stories of the deeds of their heroic ancestors (often in the context of the Kazakh-Dzhungar wars). The proverb that their forefathers "with the strength of their arms and by the sharpness of their lances protected our natives lands" (*bilketyn kushymen, naizanyn yshymen elemyzdy korghaghan*) was often repeated. Today, streets are named after Kazakh heroes (like Bogenbay batyr street in Astana), sculptures of these heroes form part of urban and rural landscapes, and images of *batyrs* are included in school textbooks.

9 J. MacClancy (ed.), *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity (*Oxford: Berg, 1996), 2–12.

10 M. Stokes, "Strong as a Turk: Power, Performance and Representation in Turkish Wrestling," in J. MacClancy (ed.), *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity (*Oxford: Berg, 1996), 22.

Indeed, images of *batyrs* have become an integral part of Kazakhstan's state-led nation-building process. The major news website *Tengrinews* produced a special article about Kazakh *batyrs* for May 7th, the Day of the Kazakhstani Army or Motherland Defenders' Day. The article reads:

> A real *batyr* is the son of the steppe, the defender of the Motherland. They (*batyrs*) would always give their lives for their nation. Their names will always be in the memory of Kazakhstanis. To honor Motherland Defenders' Day and the upcoming Victory Day, we would like to suggest remembering the names of several great Kazakh warriors.[11]

The article goes on to provide a short biographical sketch of several Kazakh *batyrs* who lived during the 17th and 18th centuries, all of whom it depicts in glorious tones. And this article is only a small example of the official and common perception of *batyrs* as people of extraordinary strength, power, military skills, and wisdom.

The myth of national strength is connected with the practice of different combat sports and martial arts in contemporary Kazakhstan. Astana has a Mixed Martial Art (MMA) club called Kazakh Hero (*Qazaq batyry*), the emblem of which is a round war shield with crossed lances.12 This emblem appeals to the heroic past, but it is also connected with the modern construction of masculinity. The founders of Qazaq batyry gym are sending the message to the public that training in this gym makes an athlete a contemporary Kazakh *batyr*, the heir of an ancestral bellicose path.

This interest in combat sports and the sense of masculinity associated with these types of sport affect many aspects of society, including religion. Abdughappar Smanov's Internet preaching, which includes video footage of his personal training and praise for Kazakhstani former MMA champion Ardaq Nazarov, is part of this cultural pattern. Religious preaching, masculinity, and romantic nationalism are bound together in Smanov's videos.

Abdughappar Smanov as a Model of Kazakh Muslim Masculinity

Abdughappar is one of the four sons of Shakir Ishan Smanov. The latter was the main student of Tayaqty Ishan, a famous Islamic scholar who moved from

11 "Velikie batyry kazakhskoi stepi," *TengriMix*, May 7, 2016, http://mix.tn.kz/mixnews/velikie-batyiryi-kazahskoy-stepi-293027/.

12 See the gym's website: http://qazaqbatyry.kz/.

the Ferghana Valley to southern Kazakhstan in the early Soviet era. Shakir Ishan Smanov led a small Islamic discussion group during the Soviet era, but it was his sons who would have the most substantial impact on Islam in Kazakhstan.13 I would like to focus on the video of Abdughappar's personal training. Not only does this video create a model for the modern, masculine Kazakh Muslim man, but it also demonstrates that an individual's authority among Central Asian Muslims can be built through sport and masculinity. Muslim authority construction usually contains an appeal to the scripturalist tradition, such as knowledge of the Qur'an and Sharia law. However, historical sources suggest that religious authority in Central Asia could, in the past, also be established via miraculous deeds;14 today, prosperity and financial success seem to serve that function.15

Abdughappar seems to straddle those two traditions. He is a well-known and well-established scripturalist authority across Kazakhstan: among many practicing Kazakh Muslims, he is considered to be an educated religious scholar who knows the Qur'an, Sharia, and hadith. He is generally perceived as a charismatic preacher who is even more respected than his younger brother Abduzhappar. There are several videos on Ali Studio Channel depicting Abdughappar's hajj to Mecca and his preaching based on scripturalist Islamic tradition. During the hajj, for instance, he produced a video on how to correctly perform Islamic ablutions.16

The sports training video is called "Abdughappar *ustaz*'s morning training" (*ustaz* is Kazakh for "master" or teacher"). The almost-three-minute video had been watched more than 210,000 times as of July 2017. It starts by introducing Abdughappar: a voice behind the camera refers to him as "Abdughappar– *ustaz*." As the video opened, Abdughappar was punching a small boxing bag in a "karate style," using just his palms and with a short, heavy exhalation. After several punches, Abdugappar made a thumbs-up, then moved to the bench press, where the iron bar was already lifted. While he was punching, the cameraman exclaimed the *takbir* phrase "God is great" (*Allahu Akbar)*. During the

13 A. Muminov, "From Revived Tradition to Innovation: Kolkhoz Islam in the Southern Kazakhstan Region and Religious Leadership (through the Cases of Zharti-Tobe and Oranghay Since the 1950s)," in S.A. Dudoignon and C.U. Noack (eds.), *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation, and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realm (1950s-2000s)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2014).

14 D. DeWeese, "Authority," in J.J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 26–52, 382–3.

15 Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

16 "Däretti, ğusıldı alw tärtibi/Abdugappar Smanov," YouTube video, 8:22, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," September 23, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lPEceOBMfVY.

bench-press scene, he explained that the dumbbell weighed 60 kilos, adding, "Abdughappar is doing ten reps, *Inshallah*, in one set." The cameraman's exclamations and support suggest a disciple's admiration for his religious authority and teacher's demonstration of physical strength and stamina. In addition to the cameraman's voice, one can also make out the sounds of children screaming and playing, implying that Abdughappar was training in his home gym. From the video it was apparent that the gym was an additional or even separate rural house full of different sports equipment. Having a separate home gym is a kind of luxury in Kazakhstan today, in itself a demonstration of authority and prosperity.

Abdughappar continued his bench-pressing, accompanied by the cameraman's regular exclamations of "*Mashallah*" and "*Allahu Akbar*!" From the bench press, Abdughappar moved to the standing dummy and started to hit it with his palms and fists. Abdughappar made "kiai" sounds and the cameraman repeated *takbir* again. Then Abdughappar began to do different high leg swings, in order to develop flexibility and speed. The cameraman related that the entire training takes about an hour. At some points in the video, the cameraman's hands were visible and it was evident that he was wearing MMA punching gloves, a sign that he was also training. During this videotaped training, the cameraman explained that this was just part of Abdughappar's training routine, which he described using the Russian term *trenirovka* (training).

Then the camera returned to the bench press. The cameraman focused on the weights, saying that the bar weighed around 10 kilograms, one of the plates was 20 kilograms, and another was 10 kilograms. He repeated that the whole weight of the iron bar (with plates) was around 60 kilograms and that Abdughappar trained daily for up to 45 minutes. Thus ended the video of Abdughappar's personal training.

Before analyzing Abdughappar's preaching/training, I would like to touch on the phenomenon of Internet preaching. In their sermons, the Smanov brothers actively use modern Internet mass media; they run their own YouTube channel entitled "Ali Studio."17 Using modern mass media tools like Internet and TV is not a "new thing" for Muslim preachers around the globe. In India, for example, there is already the phenomenon of "Islamic Televangelism."18 In the case of Kazakh preachers, it is not only the Smanovs who use mass media tools;

17 See the "ali sty'diosy" YouTube channel here: https://www.youtube.com/user/AlistudioPredstavlae/videos.

18 P. Eisenlohr, "Reconsidering Mediatization of Religion: Islamic Televangelism in India," *Media, Culture & Society,* 39, no. 6 (2016): 869–84.

nationally renowned religious authority Mukhmedzhan Tazabek is active both on the Kazakhstani Muslim TV channel *Asyl Arna* and on social media.19

What sets Abdughappar's training apart from the online offerings of other Kazakh preachers (those of his disciple Arman Kuanyshbayev, for example)—what makes it "unique"—is that Abdughappar shows his personal side, part of his intimate life. Filming his own training and showing it to the public demonstrates quite strong charisma and self-esteem. This video in a sense challenges the existing stereotype of Muslim authority in Kazakhstan, where the mullah or imam is generally perceived as a gentle, calm person.

Abdughappar sends a different but powerful message to Kazakhstani Muslim communities about how a Muslim authority might behave. Moreover, he presents a model for a Kazakh Muslim man, indicating that a man should be masculine, participate in sports, and keep himself mentally and physically strong. This combination of religiosity and masculinity is—for Abdughappar and many other Muslims—a way to follow the imagined and nostalgic path of their Kazakh ancestors and *batyrs*.

In the introduction to *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*, William J. Baker argues that, "For all their differences, religion and sport seem to have been made in the image of each other. Both are bathed in myth and sustained by ritual; both reward faith and patience; both thrive on passion tempered with discipline."20 That is, sport and religion reflect each other, a fact visible in Smanov's videos. In his video on Ardaq Nazarov (which will be discussed below), Abdughappar mentions that a religious man should be self-disciplined and should discipline his family and children.

In general, Abdughappar's enthusiastic training and his religious teaching combined with sport (physical culture training in the Smanovs' religious school or *medrese*), as well as my participant observation in Astana's MMA gyms, confirm that the perception of religion and sport as forms of self-discipline, tools that can make a religious person "better" in this life and the afterlife, is widespread among Kazakhstani Muslims, especially Salafis.

Sport and religion already have a long history of interaction, as with the "Muscular Christianity" and Evangelical Protestant movements in Christianity.21 According to James Mathisen, Gil Dodds, who played a prominent role in the revival of Muscular Christianity after World War II, perceived running

19 Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

20 W.J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

21 J. Mathisen, "Reviving 'Muscular Christianity': Gil Dodds and the Institutionalization of Sport Evangelism," *Sociological Focus,* 23, no. 3 (1990): 233–49.

"as an opportunity to tell people about the Christian Gospel."22 According to Mathisen, varieties of Muscular Christianity still exist, and the movement is highly institutionalized and diversified. The Smanovs' YouTube preaching on sport and religion definitely has similarities to Muscular Christianity—in both, the focus is the construction of ideal, athletic, pious men.

There may be several cultural explanations for why Abdughappar uploaded this video: the traditional Kazakh vision of male masculinity, Abdughappar's Soviet background, and Islamic approval of sport activities. For Abdughappar and many post-Soviet Kazakhstani Muslims, these explanations are not contradictory, and may in fact influence one another. The Soviet factor is drawn from Abdughappar's past: he was a Soviet citizen in his youth, studied in a Soviet high school, and perhaps served in the Soviet military, whose cult of physical endurance and strength was quite developed.

Yet Abdughappar's sport video was also motivated by Islamic principles. According to Islamic law, sports like wrestling, swimming, archery, and horse riding are permitted.23 By practicing sport, Abdughappar signals his solidarity and shared identity with the Muslims who watch his channel. As Nathalie Koivula puts it, "A sport may also be considered to be masculine if it functions in society to reinforce [a] sense of identity and solidarity…"24

Nassim Hamdi et al. write that, "According to Islamic writings, gender identities are strictly attached to the biological sex" and "Muslim men, regardless of Salafi, Wahabbi [sic], or Sunni sects therefore remain constrained by a rigid gender role that is thought to be predetermined by divine will."25 These points are applicable to the Smanov brothers, who—as Sunni Muslim preachers— believe that gender roles are designated by God and attached to biological sex, making strict obedience to these roles required.

For Abdughappar and many Kazakhstani Muslims, gender and combat sport are bound up together. Koivula writes that labeling different sport activities feminine or masculine is a "largely social construction based on stereo- typed expectations."26 According to Koivula's research, based on data collected among Stockholm college students, combat sports like wrestling, boxing, and even weightlifting are perceived as "masculine." This echoes the responses

22 Ibid., 247.

23 U. Shavit and O. Winter, "Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law," *Islamic Law and Society,* 18, no. 2 (2011): 250–80.

24 N. Koivula, "Perceived Characteristics of Sports Categorized as Gender-Neutral, Feminine and Masculine," *Journal of Sport Behavior,* 24, no. 4 (2001): 377–93, 379.

25 N. Hamdi, M. Lachheb, and E. Anderson, "Masculinity, Homosexuality and Sport in an Islamic State of Increasing Homohysteria," *Journal of Gender Studies,* 26, no. 6 (2017): 688–701, 689.

26 Koivula, "Perceived Characteristics of Sports," 377.

of my Kazakhstani interlocutors, who responded to my question about "true men's sports" by referring to boxing, martial arts, wrestling, etc. Abdughappar practices precisely those sports that are associated with masculinity.

Asked about women's participation in combat sports, many of my male respondents reacted with half-hidden skepticism regarding the "necessity of these activities for future mothers." That being said, other respondents—both male and female—indicated that modern Kazakh women should practice martial arts such as karate or aikido as a form of self-defense.

However, I argue that to interpret Abdughappar's video from a purely Islamic standpoint—to see the training as nothing more than a religious activity—is to reject much of its significance. It is the range of backgrounds that feed into this video—Kazakh, Soviet, religious, and nationalist—that give the video depth.

The hybridity of sport, nationalism, and gender is not only visible among Kazakh religious authorities like the Smanovs, but can also be found across post-Soviet space, for example in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church once claimed that through sambo (a self-defense wrestling-type combat sport of Soviet origin), their religious clerks would develop an "ideology of sambo as a national system of self-defense."27

Abdughappar about Ardaq and Vice Versa

But why must a Kazakh man be masculine and strong—as many people, including Abdughappar, claim? Many members of Kazakh society wholeheartedly believe in the social construction that a man's main duty is to protect sacred symbols such as family, clan or tribe (*el* and *ru*) pride, native land (*Tugan Zher* or *Otan*), and the nation and national honor (*eldyn namysy*). Abdughappar may not be an ideal example of such a man himself: he is primarily an imam, sport is not his main profession, and he is already advanced in years. However, he has "found" such a role model for Kazakh Muslims—a masculine Sunni Muslim man who combines nationalism and religiosity—in the person of Ardaq Nazarov, former Kazakh MMA fighter and champion.

According to Abdughappar, Ardaq Nazarov is a Kazakh religious masculine "model" for all men.28 His video about Nazarov had more than 21,000 views,

27 "Sportsmeny i russkaia tserkov' zaimutsia rasrabotkoi ideologii sambo," Pravoslavie.ru, March 18, 2010, http://www.pravoslavie.ru/34568.html.

28 "Abduğappar ustaz Ardaq Nazarov jayında," YouTube video, 1:41, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," June 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-SQ6f6dLCQ.

more than 600 "likes," and only 12 "dislikes" on YouTube as of July 20, 2017. The title of the video is "Abdughappar *ustaz* about Ardaq Nazarov."

Here is Abdughappar's video speech about Ardaq:

> For example, you know Ardaq Nazarov, he was a champion in mixed martial arts. Look, he is a true *batyr*, a true hero (*aqiiqi djigit, aqiqi batyr*), with religiosity (*iman*), and the Qur'an is always in his hands. His profession is sport, and via sport he became famous in Kazakhstan, however, look at the *iman* of this man. He is preaching (*yagyzda zhur*) and his younger brother is a pious, religious man (*imandy djigyt*) too. Why do we not do these things [preach and behave like Ardaq]? Why do we not discipline our households and children? Where is our honor (*namys*)? In Ardaq Nazarov, I saw real Kazakh pride, real *iman*. In all places around, he preaches (*yagizda jur*). However, not all fighters are like him. Arman Ospanov, and Naiman, and many others are around, but there is nobody like Ardaq Nazarov. Not many men call others to religiosity (*imandylyq*), piety (*qasietlyk*). It should be everybody's job, not just the job of some mullah, it is a job for all of us. If we have a businessman, a businessman should do it, he should invite others to religion, to piety (*adaldyq*)! If we have a judge [using the Russian term "*sudia*"], then the *sudia* should go and do [preach] with words: "Hey people, here is Qur'an, and it is our first law (*byrynshy zan*)!" Preachers from the procuracy [using the Rus- sian term "*prokuratura*"], from the police, should do [preaching]—this is how people (*halyq*) will be reformed; without preaching, people will not change. "Such and such a mullah 'ate' money"—yes, he would "eat" if everybody were a *mangurt*." [The term "mankurt" (Kaz. "mangurt"), meaning a person with no memory of the past or their ancestors, became famous through a Chingis Aitmatov novel.]

One of the key phrases used by Abdughappar is "Where is our honor?" Here he uses the word "honor" (*namys*), which is bound up with Kazakh masculinity. The theme of *namys* often appears in Kazakh folklore and epic poems about *batyrs*. A traditional Kazakh hero defends his and his family, clan, or people's honor against internal and external enemies. For Abdughappar, *namys* is also connected with a certain type of behavior: being pious and at the same time masculine, at once full of honor and physically strong.

In Abdughappar's view, moreover, a man's honor is bound up with a woman's honor. A strong man, as Abdughappar notes in his speech about Ardaq, should discipline his family. This is a strict, patriarchal vision of gender roles: the man plays a dominating role in the family and in society in general.

Gender, religion, and honor are some of the topics addressed on the Ali Studio YouTube channel. In other videos, Abdughappar defends male domination or a male-centric point of view, and suggests that woman from the beginning needs man's protection. Thus, without men who are physically and mentally strong, the family—and even the nation—would decline.29

For Abdughappar, Ardaq is an ideal Kazakh Muslim for several reasons: Ardaq had a successful career in MMA, where he defended Kazakh pride; he preaches; and he is quite possibly also financially prosperous. Wendell Schwab, in his research on Mukhamedzhan Tazabek and the Muslim TV channel *Asyl Arna*, studies in a more detailed way the connection between being materially successful and being religious in the Kazakhstani context.30

There are definite similarities between Abdughappar's training video and his video on Ardaq. Both praise sport, masculinity and religiosity. Abdughappar and Ardaq both send the Kazakh Muslim community a message about masculinity, religiosity, and patriotism or nationalism, suggesting that combat sports build a man who can protect and discipline family, honor, and nation.

If for Abdughappar, Ardaq is a "model" young religious figure, Abdughappar is equally an example for Ardaq, as a more experienced, Islamic-educated au- thority who is physically tough. Around ten days before Smanov's speech about Ardaq, a video in which Ardaq praised Smanov appeared on the Ali Studio channel. It is hard to elucidate whether there is a connection between these videos—was Smanov's video a "grateful reply" to Ardaq's praise?—but they are definitely both part of the same pattern of masculinity, sport, and honor.

This praise video looks to be a segment of a longer sermon by Ardaq; it lasts for two minutes and 45 seconds. The video is entitled "How Abdughappar Got Jealous and Knocked Someone Down."31 Ardaq's video, which was uploaded by Ali Studio, has more than 30,000 views and more than 900 "likes" on YouTube. Ardaq begins, "There are a lot of leaders in Saryagash schools, *atamans* ["leader," a Turkic term that entered the Russian language], who are involved in sports, who respect people, who are strong (*baluandar*). Allah gave you strength, young man, but not to beat somebody, remember that. I never beat Kazakh men on the streets. I never had a fight with a Kazakh guy on the street. You should demonstrate your strength inside the ring only. And if you are robbing

29 "Basındı köterseyşi ey, Qazak! Abduğappar Smanov," YouTube video, 3:05, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," July 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7KFtHkFuR4.

30 Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

31 "11 // 1001 suraqqa qıska da nusqa jawap "ali studiyası," YouTube video, 2:45, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," June 20, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ_dI2UXodc&list=PLSx7VhNWagHQd4idzhjJvmrUul8qwPmAc&index=15.

somebody, taking somebody's cellphone, tomorrow you will meet somebody stronger than you. [Robbery] is a big sin. So in school we should defend Kazakh girls, our classmates, our younger brothers. If we study at university, we should defend our fellow students. If in high schools, 10th- and 11th-grade students are racketeering younger students, we should stop it."

Ardaq continued his speech by giving an example of how Abdughappar "defended" a female high school classmate. According to Ardaq, a girl from Abdughappar's class was dating a young man who had just returned from the army and was physically strong. One day, this young man came to the school to meet Abdughappar's classmate. This made Abdughappar angry, and he punched the young man, knocking him down with just one punch. It is not clear what kind of intentions this young person had. Later, friends of this young man came and questioned Abdughappar. Abdughappar, with no fear in front of the mob of angry friends, explained that coming to the schoolyard to date is not an "appropriate thing."

To Ardaq, Abdughappar's fight was an example of how Kazakhs should defend honor, especially female honor. To him, Abdughappar's punch was in defense of a girl's, a community's, and the school's honor—thus, it was a noble, chivalrous, and good deed, which every Muslim and every Kazakh patriot should perform. These videos send the message that to defend honor, family, and native land, Kazakh Muslims should be masculine and practice combat sports.

The patriarchal views of Ardaq and Abdughappar may be partially explicable by the fact that both men originate from the southern region of the country. The southern part of Kazakhstan is perceived (both in the academic literature and the everyday discourse of many Kazakhs) as more culturally "traditional."32 However, it is too much of a generalization to say that Abdughappar's vision of men's and women's roles is purely geographical. Likewise, it is too broad a statement to suggest that this "traditional" view of gender roles is held only by Kazakhstan's Muslims.

How to Become a Man

The Smanov family believes that honor, masculinity, a sense of patriotism, and religiosity can be cultivated in young generations of Kazakhs via systematic methods such as sports tournaments (mostly wrestling) and a religious

32 N.R. Koch and K.D. White, "Cowboys, Gangsters, and Rural Bumpkins: Constructing the 'Other' in Kazakhstan's 'Texas,'" in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), 181–207.

summer camp in their native village of Saryagash. The Ali Studio channel contains several videos on the operations of this summer camp.

From the Ali Studio videos, it is clear that sport and sport-related activities are an important part of the brothers' *medrese* teaching. Combat sports like wrestling play an important role in bringing up a masculine generation of Kazakh Muslims. For example, in 2014 Saryagash *medrese* held a wrestling tournament, the twentieth such tournament organized by the Smanov family.33 Guests and prominent wrestlers were invited from places including Almaty and Shymkent. But along with large events such as wrestling matches, the Saryagash *medrese* also develops more stable or systematic programs oriented toward the younger generation, such as summer camps.

There are two videos about sport in the children's summer camp at Saryagash *medrese*. The first video is entitled "Welcome to the Morning Physical Exercise! Saryagash *Medrese*."34

The video is five minutes long and has been viewed over 11,000 times. As of September 20, 2017, this video had more than 150 "likes" and only 4 "dislikes," indicating that people's reactions were generally positive. Viewers' comments are likewise positive and demonstrate support for such sport activity.

In the first seconds of the video, Ali Studio notes that this *medrese* is under the Kazakhstani Muftiat. Under this note, there is a link to the Kazakhstani Islamic website www.nasihat.kz. The rest of the video shows children in the yard of the *medrese* doing basic physical exercises: squats, push-ups, etc. A couple of young men walk between lines of children to keep them in order. At the end of the video, a short announcement appears on the screen that "Now it's time to have breakfast"—the last seconds of the video show children lining up at the entrance to the *medrese*'s canteen.

It is important that the creators of this video used as their musical soundscape two *nasheeds* (vocal Muslim chants), the first in Arabic and the second in Kumuk. According to commentaries, the second *nasheed* is performed by a Kumuk girl from Dagestan with the surname Alieva. Including *nasheeds* is an important symbolic act that underlines the religious, pious character of the video.

This video shows that the Smanov family takes the idea of raising and disciplining healthy young generations of Kazakhstani Muslims seriously. Crucially, this summer camp has some similarities to other summer camps for children, for example the Soviet-era "Pioneers' camp" (*pionerskii lager*). Lines of

33 "Kures-4, 2- 2014j. Sarıağaş medresesi," YouTube video, 1:03:58, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," September 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jG_Xh9rOODI.

34 "Tanğı jattığwğa keliniz! Sarıağaş medresesi," YouTube video, 5:02, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," July 5, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEVd3d2JDZk&t=6s.

children doing synchronized physical exercises call to mind physical culture classes (*fizkultura*) in Soviet children's camps and schools.

In Kazakhstan, as in many post-Soviet countries, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the well-developed system of children's summer camps was practically destroyed. However, the Saryagash *medrese* summer camp, where the primary focus is on religious education, continues to provide the rest and sport activities associated with Soviet Pioneer camps. The *medrese* summer camp serves as a place where young Muslims can have a vacation, get basic religious education, and become healthy and athletic. The Smanovs know that just inviting children and their parents to attend the mosque is not enough; combining religion with popular ideas about a healthy lifestyle makes the *medrese* more attractive.

In 2014, Abdughappar gave a special video interview about the role of the *medrese*'s summer camp.35 In this video, Abdughappar says that during the summer break children have the opportunity to spend time in the *medrese*'s camp, where they can learn religion and get a proper upbringing (*tarbie*). According to Abdughappar, a summer camp with religious education and physical exercise can help bring up "real patriots" or "real citizens" (*nagyz aza- mattar*) who will defend their land and people and stay away from habits like drinking and drug addiction. In particular, Abdughappar emphasizes the im- portance of learning daily prayers (*namaz*), mentioning the Prophet's hadiths about the need to teach *namaz* to children. Both sport activities and religion help these children to become manly in the eyes of not only Smanov but also many Kazakh Muslims.

After Abdughappar's speech, the video features interviews with people who took children to this summer camp. One person (whose name was not provided) brought his four young brothers from Almaty to attend. Interviewees mention that the camp is free to attend, including meals and accommodation for the children; some children return to the camp year after year. Between interviews, the Kazakh proverb "Learn from the good (people), stay away from the bad (people)" (*Zhaqsynan yiren, zhamannan zhiren*) appears on the screen.

Conclusion

Combat sports such as wrestling and boxing are popular among Kazakhs, particularly Kazakh Muslims, as a demonstration of masculinity. Martial arts,

35 "Sarıağaş medresesi/Jazğı balalar lageri-2014j," YouTube video, 11:38, uploaded by "ali sty'diosy," July 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Fr11Khkao.

combat sports, and physical strength are connected with the imagined heroic past and the figures of heroes, or *batyrs*. Regular sport activities and facilities, including combat sports gyms and federations—and indeed, the position of sport in culture and everyday life—were established during the Soviet period. Later, the images of sport heroes and heroic *batyrs* from the past became connected, even mirroring each other.

Religious preachers like the Smanovs practice sport—perhaps not professionally, but they nevertheless impress many people on YouTube, thereby strengthening their authority in the eyes of their followers. In the case of the Smanov family, preaching is based not only on Islamic knowledge, but also on demonstrated physical abilities: they provide an example of a "real" masculine Kazakh man.

For the Smanovs, building such an image of a masculine Kazakh Muslim is an important issue, since they believe a strong man can defend religion, family, and land. Videos uploaded to the Ali Studio YouTube channel show how religion, nationalism, and masculinity are intertwined in the construction of an idealized strong, pious, chivalric Kazakh Muslim.

The Smanovs appeal to the traditional sacred symbol of heroes (*batyrs*) as representatives of the reimagined Kazakh nomadic warrior past. Moreover, they find a modern *batyr* in the person of Ardaq Nazarov, a former MMA fighter. To them, Ardaq is a modern *batyr* because he is strong but religious and pious at the same time, which they consider ideal attributes for a Kazakh man. These masculine qualities and religious abilities should be cultivated in young Kazakh Muslims, the brothers contend. Children should be properly disciplined—and taught how to become men—through the summer camp system. In the Saryagash summer camp, sport and religion come together to build masculine Kazakh Muslim men.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Marlene Laruelle and the George Washington University's Central Asia Program for hosting the conference at which an earlier version of this article was presented, as well as the Henry Luce Foundation for funding the conference and Dr. Wendell Schwab for organizing it.