Visual Culture and Islam in Kazakhstan: The Case of Asyl Arna's Social Media

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Abstract

Asyl Arna is the most popular Islamic television channel in Kazakhstan and the dominant Islamic media company in Kazakhstan. This article examines how images on the social media pages of Asyl Arna create a way of understanding and engaging in contemporary Islamic life in Kazakhstan. I examine four kinds of images: lists, por- traits of authority figures, illustrations or photos of the Qur'an, and images related to a middle-class life with a strongly gendered division of labor. The visual culture of Asyl Arna's social media promote Islam as an achievable part of a middle-class lifestyle that can provide simple rules for a pious, economically successful life and a connection to the numinous through the Qur'an.

Keywords

visual culture – Islam – Kazakhstan – Asyl Arna – social media

Visual content is integral to social media. Posts may simply be a photograph or image on platforms such as Instagram, or may consist of an image accompanied by text on platforms like Facebook. Corporations, celebrities' public relations teams, governments, and other powerful organizations use images on social media to create cultural models, norms, and experiences. Revlon creates understandings of beauty in its daily posts of women wearing lipstick. University marketing teams use Facebook accounts to post images of football players mingling with fans at charity events in the offseason, and they create hashtags so fans can post their own pictures with players. Evangelical churches show images of parents interacting with their children in order to model proper

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Biblical parenting styles. Organizations in Central Asia similarly use social media to create cultural norms and models. This article examines how images on the social media pages of Asyl Arna, Kazakhstan's Islamic television network and dominant Islamic media company, create a way of understanding and engaging in contemporary Islamic life in Kazakhstan. The images on Asyl Arna's social media promote Islam as an achievable part of a middle-class lifestyle that can provide simple rules for a pious, economically successful life and a connection to the numinous through the Qur'an.

Asyl Arna's Social Media

Asyl Arna, founded in 2007 by Mukhammedzhan Tazabek, is the most popular Islamic television channel in Kazakhstan and the dominant Islamic media company in Kazakhstan. Asyl Arna's social media pages, and the television network in general, are associated with "the piety movement" in Kazakhstan, which focuses on spreading a scripturalist form of Islam in Kazakhstan.[1] This movement is a loose confederation of imams and bureaucrats associated with the Kazakhstani Muftiate and its mosques throughout Kazakhstan; media companies such as Asyl Arna and Musylman Publishing House; and individual Muslims who do not make a living through explicitly Islamic work. These different people and organizations have a particular division of labor. The Kazakhstani Muftiate administers mosques, sends out topics for Friday sermons, certifies imams, and issues fatwas. Media companies pro- duce television programs, websites, magazines, and books on Islam. Individual Muslims use the products produced by media companies and the spaces administered by the Muftiate to participate in an Islamic community and develop their own piety.

Asyl Arna and the Kazakhstani Muftiate work with the Kazakhstani government, as made explicit on July 2, 2015, when the Ministry of Culture and Sports, Asyl Arna, and the Kazakhstani Muftiate signed a cooperation agreement. This agreement was not surprising, as it has long been clear that the

1 For previous work on the piety movement, see 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, "How to Pray in Kazakhstan: The Fortress of the Muslim and Its Readers," *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 32, no. 1 (2014): 22–42; and W. Schwab, "Islam, Fun, and Social Capital in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2, no.1 (2015): 51–70. For Geertz's work on scripturalist Islam, see C. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

Kazakhstani Muftiate and Asyl Arna are connected to the Kazakhstani government. However, it gives three powerful organizations a common mission: to "protect inter-ethnic peace" and "inter-religious harmony." Asyl Arna's specific role in this enterprise is to show the meaning of religion, tradition, and the Hanafi school of jurisprudence via media programs, including its website and social media feeds.2

Asyl Arna maintains nearly identical social media pages on vKontakte (here- after, vK), with over 244,000 followers, on Facebook, with over 31,000 followers, Instagram, with over 216,000 followers, and on a Twitter feed, with over 10,000 followers.3 These numbers have grown considerably in the last two years. In early 2014, Asyl Arna had approximately 30,000 followers on vK. Its influence in social media far exceeds that of the Kazakhstani Muftiate (approximately 19,000 followers on vK) and individual mosques, such as the Khazret Sultan mosque in Astana (about 15,000 followers on vK).4 Asyl Arna's social media feeds are filled with pictures and other images. By its own count, Asyl Arna published over 1,000 images in 2015, along with over 300 articles.5 And, while articles linked in social media feeds may or may not be read, images are at least scanned and seen. In short, Asyl Arna's social media feeds are popular, and on these feeds, images are the most common way to construct ideas, represent the world, and make arguments.

Picturing an Achievable Piety

Lists are ubiquitous on the internet. There are lists of the hottest celebrities over 50, and lists of the best trees to plant in New Mexico. There are even lists summarizing academic work about why the human species likes lists.6 However, the meaning of the genre of the list depends on context. Just as an eye closing could be a twitch or a wink or a mocking imitation of a wink depending on context,7 a list could be derisible clickbait or a set of sacred instructions.

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2 "Kelisim Muraty—Asyl Dindi Ulyqtau," e-Islam, July 21, 2015, http://e-islam.kz/qazaqstandagy-islam/item/6676-kelisim-m-raty-asyl-dindi-lyktau.

3 These sites can be found at http://vk.com/asyl_arna, http://www.facebook.com/asylarna, http://www.instagram.com/asylarna/, and http://twitter.com/asylarna. The numbers cited are accurate as of May 3, 2016.

4 See http://vk.com/muftyatkz and http://vk.com/muslimkz1.

5 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?w=wall-51948252_75156, January 5, 2016.

6 C. Hammond, "Nine Psychological Reasons We Love Lists," BBC, April 13, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150410-9-reasons-we-love-lists.

7 C. Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

Lists feature prominently in the visual culture of Asyl Arna's social media. The popularity of Asyl Arna on social media such as vK and Facebook, and of Tazabek on Twitter,8 where he reposts much of Asyl Arna's social media content, has made lists a noticeable feature of the visual culture of the piety movement in Kazakhstan. Two aspects of the post-Soviet Kazakhstani context produce a particular reading of the genre of the Islamic list. The first part of this context is the perceived loss of Islamic knowledge due to Soviet repression of Islam. Bruce Privratsky has argued that Kazakhs generally profess ignorance of many Islamic concepts.9 I have argued that leaders of the piety movement in Kazakhstan, such as Kazakhstani Islamic publishers, see their audience as uninformed due to the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union.10 Tazabek, the director of Asyl Arna, related similar thoughts in a 2014 interview:

> Our purpose is not, in a single day, to turn everyone into a person who preaches well, wears a headscarf, prays five times a day, and gives charity. The Kazakh nation's ancient traditions and beliefs and way of life collapsed completely during the 70–80 year period of atheism.11

Tazabek and Asyl Arna use lists to simplify information for Kazakh Muslims perceived to be unfamiliar with Islamic practices and beliefs due to the repression of the Soviet era.

Simplifying moral injunctions or ritual practice is not new or unique to the post-Soviet context. Take, for example, the simplified Islamic instructions found in early twentieth century Islamic literature in Afghanistan. Shahrani describes how children learned from the "Four Books," which first present short poems on opposing virtues such as arrogance and humility, and then present short, formulaic instructions on prayer and ritual ablutions.12 Similarly, a hadith on women's comportment was structured as a list of behaviors long

8 By one measure, Tazabek has the eighth most influential Twitter feed in Kazakhstan, and is the fifth most influential personal user of Twitter in Kazakhstan, "Reting—Klout," Kaznet, http://kaznet.me/rating/ (accessed April 29, 2016).

9 B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (London: Routledge, 2001), 7, 91.

10 W. Schwab, "Establishing an Islamic Niche in Kazakhstan: Musylman Publishing House and Its Publications," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 2 (2011): 227–242.

11 A. Bitore, "Mukhammedzhan Tazabek: Qazir—Alasapyran Uaqyt. Arkim Zhasyna Zharaspaityn Zhuk Koterip Zhur," June 27, 2014, *Zhaqsy*, http://jaqsy.kz/article/view?id=383.

12 M.N. Shahrani, "Local Knowledge of Islam and Social Discourse in Afghanistan and Turkistan in the Modern Period," in Robert L. Canfield, ed., *Turko-Persia in Historical-Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 161–188.

before Asyl Arna published it.13 Lists are pedagogical tools with a long history, both inside and outside of Islamic cultures. What is distinct about lists in Asyl Arna's social media is, in part, their connection with the perception of recent loss due to the historical Soviet experience. The emotions that Asyl Arna hopes to stir in visitors to its social media pages are joy in the simplicity of Islam and pride in their reclamation of Islam. A list is a simple start to recovering from the "collapse" of Kazakhs' traditional beliefs and way of life.

The second part of the post-Soviet context that produces a particular reading of Islamic lists is the understanding that there are simply too many media distractions in twenty-first century Kazakhstani life. Asyl Arna hopes to help their social media audience understand Islam, even while they are struggling with information overload. In an article on Asyl Arna on the role of media in Islam in Central Asia, Tazabek argues that there is too much media for contemporary Muslims to digest.

> Today's readers, listeners, and viewers are too free, too rich in terms of media, and too demanding. For example, today a common person tries to keep up with and take in the same amount of media in one month that a person living in the seventeenth century did in their whole life.14

Asyl Arna also posts images and texts showing the dangerous distractions of the internet and other media. One post shows a mother serving dinner to her husband and their four children. The children ignore the food in front of them and play with their tablets or phones, while the parents frown.15 The accompanying text argues that good Muslims should pay attention to their companions. Media distractions can detract from a good Muslim life.

Tazabek and Asyl Arna view their audience's media use in much the same way that Ben Highmore, following Walter Benjamin's much earlier work, sees twenty-first century media practices, which he describes in terms of "distraction."16 This term is meant to cut two ways. First, consumers of media are often distracted by other media: viewers blog or read comments while

13 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=21042014&z=photo-51948252_329804490%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted April 21, 2014.

14 M. Tazabek. "Islamdy Nasikhattauda baq-tyng Roli Qandai?" *Turkistan*, May 5, 2014. http://archive.turkystan.kz/kz/articles/view/49130 (accessed February 24, 2016).

15 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?w=wall-51948252_80059, posted February 21, 2016.

16 W. Benjamin, Theory of Distraction. *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 2006), 358–364; B. Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London: Routledge, 2010).

watching a favorite television show; people do chores while the radio plays in the background; web surfers have multiple browser tabs open while listening to music on their tablet. Followers of Asyl Arna's social media pages may be listening to ethno-pop on their computer while seeing an Asyl Arna post on the characteristics of religious hypocrites below a friend's photo at Qapshaghai beach. A list can be quickly scanned before moving on to comment on a friend's new sunglasses. Second, media is absorbing, pulling us away from the rest of the world. A man interested in curtailing his drinking may see a quick list of alcohol's evils in his vK newsfeed, click on it, and then peruse Asyl Arna's other posts for a lengthy period of time, becoming distracted from the world, entranced by images of piety and texts relating these images to Islamicscripture.17

Asyl Arna's employees act on their belief that visitors to their social media pages are distracted and disconnected from Islam, and want their visitors to take away simple actions that can make a difference in their lives and perhaps become distracted from non-Islamic life for a bit. One post argues that if you want to pray, you only need to remember, "Daily prayers are made up of *only* four movements" (see Figure 1).18 A reader does not need to understand the history of daily prayers, variations of them, or their scriptural support; a reader can sim- ply memorize four movements. The message of repeated lists is this: if a Muslim can, for example, remember the four movements of daily prayers, the six evils that drinking brings,19 the five habits of a Muslim on Friday (see Figure 2),20

17 For an empirical discussion of this type of distracted and distracting reading, see T. Hillesund, "Digital Reading Spaces: How Expert Readers Handle Books, the Web and Electronic Paper," *First Monday*, 15, no. 4 (2010). http://uncommonculture.org/ojs/index .php/fm/article/view/2762/2504.

18 Emphasis added. Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252 _369802318%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted May 21, 2015. Also posted January 4, 2016: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_398504792%2Falbum-51948252 _00%2Frev.

19 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=02052014&z=photo-51948252 _330733099%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted May 2, 2014. Also posted December 30, 2015: http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=02052014&z=photo-51948252_330733099% 2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

20 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=23052014&z=photo -51948252_332538268%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted May 23, 2014. Also posted October 16, 2014: http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=16102014&z=photo-51948252_34497 7967%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev. Also posted June 19, 2015: http://vk.com/wall-5194 8252?day=19062015&z=photo-51948252_373133148%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev. Also posted February 11, 2016: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_404338356%2 Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev. Also posted April 8, 2016: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo -51948252_412552169%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

Figure 1 *The text reads: "Daily prayers are made up of only four movements. 1. standing straight; 2. bending; 3. touching the head to the floor; and 4. kneeling. These four actions—that a four-year-old could do—are difficult only if you don't have motivation. M. Tazabek"*

the four promises God has made to Muslims,21 the five things a Muslim should know the value of,22 the four questions a Muslim will be asked on Judgment Day,23 or the five qualities of the Day of Arafah,24 then they will be able to function as a Muslim. More generally, the repeated device of a list suggests that there

21 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=10042014&z=photo206952853_325554919%2Fwall-51948252_1521, posted April 10, 2014.

22 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_412168368%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted April 5, 2016.

23 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_412017267%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted April 4, 2016.

24 Asyl Arna's vK page,http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=03102014&z=photo-51948252_343637206%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted October 2, 2014. Also posted September 20, 2015: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_384182400%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

Figure 2 *The text reads: "Friday's Etiquette. Whoever… 1. performs the major ablutions, 2. goes to Friday prayers, 3. recites the salutation during prayers, 4. listens to the sermon until the end, and 5. prays with the imam, will have his minor sins committed between two Fridays forgiven."*

are simple Islamic steps to take for any problem, even if a particular list does not apply to a particular Muslim. The genius of Islam represented in these lists is not in long philosophical arguments or the touch of the divine, but in its simple instructions for everyday piety.

This simplicity, however, also creates anxiety. If prayer is only four simple actions that a four year-old child could do, and Muslims don't pray, what kind of excuse do they have? Repeated images of lists of pious practices and beliefs address a general sense of loss of Islamic culture and knowledge, but they also create a paradoxical sense of confidence and doubt: confidence in one's ability to act on a simple list and perform piety adequately; doubt in one's knowledge outside of lists and other simplified instructions. I experienced this paradoxical sensibility when discussing Islam with young Kazakh Muslims, who felt perfectly ready to instruct me on Islamic practices and beliefs that they had learned from social media and short pamphlets, but who also felt that they were inadequately knowledgeable about Islam in general. One young man

spoke to me about the benefits of ritual prayer (*namaz*)—one becomes closer to God, more relaxed, more physically fit—for hours in a cafe in Almaty. He continued to repeat these points with increasing passion, as he hoped to help me see the benefits and genius of Islam. When I asked about something other than prayer, he argued that he knew nothing about Islam because he had only read lists and short articles on internet sites. He felt he knew enough to get by, so to speak, but would never have "deep knowledge" because of Kazakhs' Soviet experience. Reading lists informed him and gave him great joy and pride in reclaiming "lost" knowledge, but it also reminded him of his perceived ignorance. In the end, the mood created by lists is one of possibility (of knowledge and a pious life) and of anxiety (of failing short of the demands of Islam).

The Aesthetics of Authority

The visual importance of lists in Asyl Arna's social media and their attendant sensibility raises the question: if readers are not experts and need lists to make Islam a part of their lives, who are the experts who can make the lists? Asyl Arna presents two sets of experts in its images: (1) the Head Mufti, Yerzhan Mayamerov, and other imams and Muftiate administrators, and (2) Asyl Arna's workers, particularly Asyl Arna's founder, Mukhammedzhan Tazabek. In this section, I will concentrate on the Head Mufti and Tazabek as representative of these two sets of experts.

The Head Mufti is always dressed in white robes with gold embellishment and a particular hat.25 The white color of the Head Mufti's robes identifies him as pure and clean (*taza*), two ways Islam is also described in Kazakh. The robe links him to an idealized past when Central Asians , especially Islamic leaders, wore robes, and it also models cleanliness and modesty.26 The gold embellishment is particularly Kazakh, marking him as an ethnically Kazakh leader. More generally, his clothing sets him apart from other Kazakhs, who do not dress in

25 ~~Imams~~ and other members of the Kazakhstani Muftiate must dress in white. See Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan, "Din Qyzmetkerline Zhanga Shapan Ulg- isi Bekiteldi," *Mufiyat.kz*, May 6, 2015, http://old.muftyat.kz/kz/news/view?id=4466. The Head Mufti has argued that imams' clothing models and creates the virtues of cleanliness and modesty. See "Ne Odezhda i Dlina Volos Opredelyayut Veru Cheloveka," *Tengrinews*, September 15, 2015, http://tengrinews.kz/conference/106/.

26 Privratsky provides a longer explanation of the connection of white to purity and Islam, such as "pure blessings" (*aq bata*) and "pure intentions" (*aq niet*). B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (London: Routledge, 2001), 125. I want to thank Ulan Bigozhin for drawing my attention to this reference.

Figure 3 *Yerzhan Mayamerov, the Head Mufti of Kazakhstan.*

white robes and stylized hats. His clothing visually argues that he is more pure, more Islamic, and more traditional.

The Head Mufti is most often shown in an office, presumably his own (see Figure 3). This image appears in many posts, including congratulatory remarks on the first day of school,27 the Night of Power,28 and Kazakhstani Independence Day.29 The connection of Islam and Kazakhstan through the figure of the Head Mufti is also seen in the image itself. The twin pillars of this image are the Head Mufti and the flag of Kazakhstan. There are other identifiable objects in the photo—a vintage phone, a portable stereo, books—but the Head Mufti is the focus of the picture, with the sky blue and gold flag of Kazakhstan supplying a color contrast to the other elements of the photo: the white walls, the Mufti's white robes, the white pages of the books, and the white lamp. The merging of Islamic authority and the Kazakhstani government creates a fuzzy fusion: the Head Mufti is the highest Islamic authority because he is approved by the Kazakhstani government, but Kazakhstan also becomes an Islamic

27 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?q=%D0%bc%D2%af%D1%84%D1%82%D0%B8&z=photo-51948252_381801265%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted September 2, 2015.

28 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?q=%D0%bc%D2%af%D1%84%D1%82%D0%B8&z=photo-51948252_337673365%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 23, 2014.

29 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?q=%D0%bc%D2%af%D1%84%D1%82%D0%B8&z=photo-51948252_350585760%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted December 14, 2014. For a different official photo of the Mufti with similar elements, see Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_395698956%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted December 15, 2015.

country because it has an officially appointed mufti. These images are part of a larger enterprise to define a scripturalist Islam specifically for Kazakhstan. The Mufti is positioned in front of an open book, which is placed atop several other books. Another open book sits to the side of him, while a newspaper is on his left. The work that the Head Mufti performs in his office is knowing Islam through textual sources. He reads, collates, and interprets texts in order to produce an official, correct interpretation of Islam for Kazakhstan.

Other aspects of the visual culture of Asyl Arna reinforce the connection between the Muftiate, Islamic authority, and texts, particularly the Qur'an. For example, the program *Opinion and Understanding* (*Pikir men Paiym*) contrasts the "opinions" of people on the street with the "understanding" of experts, such as doctors, journalists, and imams. In this program, which is often advertised on Asyl Arna's social media and posted on Asyl Arna's YouTube channel, imams are often shown near books or reading books. On the "An Alcohol-Free Feast is not a Feast" ("Araqsyz Toi—Toi Emes") episode of this program, the head imam of the Al-Hamid mosque in Almaty is shown seated at a desk in a mosque, dressed in a white robe with a white turban. The mosque's brown wooden minbar is behind him, and a patterned green carpet covers the floor. In front of him are five books that are oriented toward the imam, that is, upside- down to the viewer. These books include a Kazakh-language translation of the Qur'an.30 While he is speaking, the program cuts from the imam's face to focus on the books and then cuts again to a different camera angle so that the translation of the Qur'an is facing the viewer, and its title is clearly readable. The setting and juxtaposition of the imam and the Qur'an shows that, in contrast to the opinions of common Kazakhs, the understanding and authority of the imam comes from his position at a mosque and his knowledge of the Qur'an and the Islamic textual tradition.

In contrast, Tazabek is often pictured in a suit or collared shirt in a living room.31 For example, in Figure 4, Tazabek sits on a leather couch. Armoires and china cabinets are visible behind him. He models how middle- or upper-class

30 Asyl Arna's YouTube page, "Araqsyz Toi—Toi Emes," December 3, 2015, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wkydgqlj0Y&t=5m30s.

31 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?owners_only=1&q=%D0%A2% D0% B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%ba&z=photo-51948252_371954964%2 Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted June 8, 2015. For other examples, see Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?owners_only=1&q=%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%B7% D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%ba &z=photo206952853_369429545%2Fwall -51948252_36720, posted June 18, 2015; Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252? owners_only=1&q=%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0% ba&z=photo-51948252_371614130%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted June 5, 2015;

Figure 4 *Mukhammedzhan Tazabek, founder of Asyl Arna.*

Kazakhs decorate their home, how they should sit, and the types of discussions about Islam they should have. He dresses in a coat without a tie. In contrast to the Head Mufti, who draws his authority from his association with the Kazakhstani government and visual representations of his scholarliness, Tazabek draws his authority from a liminal position between Islamic authorities, such as the Muftiate, and the perceived audience: middle-class Kazakhstanis, or aspiring middle-class Kazakhstanis. The text accompanying this image is a two-paragraph exposition of proper spousal roles according to Tazabek: wives should attempt to make their husbands happy, and husbands must provide for their family members. The text and the image combine to bring Tazabek into domestic life. If the Head Mufti is a man who studies and knows Islam in the form of texts, Tazabek is a man who can come into your living room and explain how Islam can fit into your everyday life.

The rise of the lay Muslim intellectual has been a trend throughout the Islamic world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including Central Asia.32 Management gurus in Indonesia combine Islamic ethics and

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Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_405950555%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted February 22, 2016.

32 The most comparable case of an Islamic celebrity in Central Asia who does not have a formal Islamic education is that of Hayrollo Hamidov in Uzbekistan. Hamidov is a journalist who combined writing on soccer, Islam, marriage, poetry, and more on the Uzbek-language internet before he fell afoul of the Uzbekistani authorities. See N. Tucker, "Domestic Shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures: Sheikh, Scholar, Society, and the State," *Islam in Eurasia: A Policy Volume* (Cambridge, ma: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies), 77–92 and N. Tucker, "Hayrullo Hamidov and Uzbekistan's Culture Wars: How Soccer, Poetry, and Pop-Religion Are 'A Danger to Society'," Uzbekistan Initiative Papers, No. 6, February 2014. For a contrasting examination of the website of well-known, formally trained Islamic scholars, see S. Nozimova and T. Epkenhans. "Negotiating Islam in

business practices in self-help seminars.33 Lay preachers in Egypt, such as Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud, have become extremely popular with middle- class viewers, eclipsing the popularity of more classically trained preachers and scholars by focusing on personal narratives rather than textual knowledge. Yasmin Moll argues that Khaled, much like Tazabek, "has authority not because he is different from the audience he preaches to, but because he is one of them."34

Tazabek's image, and his authority as someone who can explain Islam to the masses, is connected to lists and pithy statements in Asyl Arna's media. Rather than fatwas or learned treatises, Tazabek's name is attached to images that focus on short phrases such as "For the prayers coming out of a person's mouth to be accepted [by God], the food entering that person's mouth must be righteous,"35 or the phrase found in Figure 1. The name and the image of Tazabek stand for easy-to-relate-to advice.

The dual Islamic authorities constructed on Asyl Arna's social media help the organization to reach different audiences or to address different feelings of the same audience. Someone interested in scholarly texts is shown that the Muftiate can provide scholarship and that their mosque is an appropriate place to engage in their search for more knowledge. Someone interested in "living room Islam" or inspiration knows that Asyl Arna can provide everyday advice or short inspirational sayings. Of course, a person may be interested in both of these things at different points of their day or year or life. To connect this point to my point about the achievable piety constructed by the visual repetition of lists: Asyl Arna provides authorities for Kazakhstanis who are distracted but want to engage with Asyl Arna's relatable advice quickly, and also to those who want to become absorbed in the more learned style of the Mufti-ate and Islamic print media.

Emerging Public Spheres in Contemporary Tajikistan," *Asiatische Studien*, 67, no. 3 (2013): 965–990.

33 D. Rudnyckyj, "Market Islam in Indonesia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (2009): S183–S201.

34 Y. Moll, "Islamic Televangelism: Religion, Media and Visuality in Contemporary Egypt," *Arab Media & Society*, 10 (2010): 13.

35 AsylArna'svKpage,http://vk.com/wall-51948252?owners_only=1&q=%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%ba&z=photo-51948252_377719204%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 29, 2015. For other examples, see Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_402899259%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted February 2, 2016; and Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_400786223%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted January 19, 2016.

The Qur'an: Everyday Machine and Connection to the Numinous

Asyl Arna visually depicts the Qur'an in several ways. It can be a mundane object, a machine built to sustain morality in humans, or a supernatural connection to God. My argument is that it is this combination of the mundane, the mechanical, and the magical that makes imagining the Qur'an central to Muslims' everyday morality and their connection to God.

The images presenting the Qur'an as a machine or analogous to a machine may be unexpected and contrast with the images of the Qur'an as divine light that I will discuss later, but they serve to place the Qur'an in an everyday context. For example, the image in Figure 5, taken from a July 8, 2014, post, constructs an analogy between washing a t-shirt with a washing machine and washing a heart with the Qur'an.36 The analogy is plain: just as a washing ma- chine cleans a shirt, reading or reciting the Qur'an cleans the heart or soul.

This image builds on a larger cultural understanding: the act of reciting or listening to the Qur'an physically brings a Muslim into contact with God's speech, which can directly affect a human's heart, body, or soul. For example, the Qur'an's words on kindness are the most perfect words on kindness, and listening to them can make a person kinder through their semantic and sonic qualities. Members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan argue that the Qur'an, in Arabic, is inherently different from other speech in its ability to

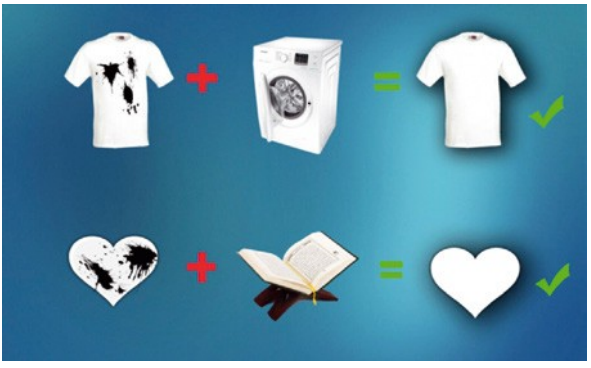

Figure 5 *Just as a washing machine cleans a shirt, reading or reciting the Qur'an cleans the heart.*

36 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=08072014&z=photo-51948252 _336504018%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 8, 2014. It was also posted January 4, 2015: http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=04012015&z=photo-51948252 _352700841%2 Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

Figure 6
The text reads, "The Qur'an is my soul's nourishment."

reform human hearts and souls, whether the Qur'an is recited or heard. One woman stated, "If one person is reading supplications in an ordinary language and one person is reading supplications in Arabic, and you listen to those people's supplications, you will know which one is closer to your soul."37 This image, however, presents a stronger analogy than this interlocutor. It is not simply that the words of the Qur'an are closer to a human soul due to their connection to the divine. Creating a parallel between the Qur'an and a washing machine makes the assertion that the Qur'an is a straightforward tool to be used to reform, or cleanse, one's heart, and the process is relatively automatic. This is a visual representation of the inherent accessibility of the Qur'an to all Muslims. A second mechanical representation of the Qur'an presents the Qur'an as a medical device (see Figure 6).38 An image from a February 14, 2016, post over- lays the text "The Qur'an is my soul's nourishment" (*quran mening rukhymnyng nari*) on a dark image of a goateed young man holding a Qur'an; a tube connects the Qur'an to an oxygen mask strapped on the young man's face. The young man's legs are not shown, but he appears to be wearing a South Asian- style *kemeez*. Rather than presenting the Qur'an as a sin-cleansing machine, here the Qur'an is necessary for the soul: it is the oxygen of religious life. The text accompanying this image is a poem reinforcing this message, arguing that the Qur'an can answer your questions about the meaning of life, how to find the path to Heaven, and more. This is the pictorial depiction of what Geertz

37 W. Schwab, "How to Pray in Kazakhstan: The Fortress of the Muslim and Its Readers," *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 32, no. 1 (2014): 31.

38 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_404714197%2Falbum -51948252_00%2Frev, posted February 14, 2016.

calls scripturalism: the placement of texts at the center of daily life and the elevation, in practice, of the Qur'an and hadiths to a position of highest authority. (In theory, the Qur'an and hadiths have often been the highest authorities, at least for Muslim scholars; however, in practice, the example of elders, those connected to the Prophet by blood, or masters of Sufi techniques, have often been more authoritative than consulting the Qur'an or hadiths.39) The Qur'an is oxygen for the soul, and thus there can be no substitute for a constant interaction with the Qur'an. It must be at the center of everyday life and of Muslims' understanding of Islam.

Placing the Qur'an at the center of daily life is reiterated by Asyl Arna and the broader piety movement in Kazakhstan. Elites in the piety movement see sports, for example, through the lens of scripture: archery is a good sport be- cause of its scriptural support, as are wrestling and javelin throwing.40 Some members of the piety movement go farther than Asyl Arna's representatives or the official Muftiate Hanafi orientation, and declare that "if it is not in the Qur'an or the hadiths, you don't need it. The Qur'an, the hadiths, that's enough."41 For Kazakhs not influenced by the piety movement, however, other sources of authority are also, or even more, important than the Qur'an and hadiths. These sources of authority include such things as the moral habits of elders, dream omens from ancestors, or descent from saints. For many Kazakhstani Muslims, the Qur'an is a gift to the Muslim community, and some members of the community must know, recite, or otherwise interact with the Qur'an, but it is not an individual obligation to interact with the Qur'an on a daily basis. Asyl Arna, conversely, constructs an image of the Qur'an as indispensable, not only to the Islamic community, but to each individual Muslim's everyday life. (Asyl Arna constructs and uses other sources of authority, as seen in the middle-class authority of Tazabek, but rhetorically, the Qur'an andhadiths are all-important.)

The Qur'an, however, is not only shown to be the main tool to cleanse the heart and sustain moral life. It is also the connection between God and this world, and mysteriously divine or supernatural. Muslims do not experience reading or hearing the Qur'an with the same emotion produced by using a washing machine. It is meant to be wondrous and divine, and Asyl Arna

39 D. Deweese, "Authority," in Jamal J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 26–52.

40 W. Schwab, "Islam, Fun, and Social Capital in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2, no. 1 (2015): 51–70.

41 W. Schwab and U. Bigozhin, "Shrines and Neopatrimonialism in Kazakhstan," in *Kazakhstan Beyond Economic Success* (Lanham, md: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

Figure 7 *Fairy dust emanates from a Qur'an.*

also produces images of the Qur'an using global visual conventions to show its magic.

For example, the image shown in Figure 7, from a July 29, 2013, post, borrows from Hollywood imagery of the supernatural. On the left-hand side of the frame, a Qur'an rests on a Qur'an stand, and emanates what viewers of Disney cartoons can recognize as pixie dust.42 The Qur'an illuminates this image, and the background progressively darkens as the eye travels from the Qur'an. Showing the Qur'an as emitting Disneyesque pixie dust brings it into a global semiotic network juxtaposing the magical with the mundane. This represents a notion of the supernatural that is influenced by, but in op- position to, Hollywood representations of the supernatural. Asyl Arna's social media producers are well-aware of the fact that much of humanity does not believe the Qur'an has special powers. Soviet atheists, Western scientists, and members of other religions fail to see the wonder of the Qur'an, viewing it as a work of literature or superstition. Shifting pixie-dust from the make-believe to the real world glorifies the enchanted and the miraculous in the world. Asyl Arna's implicit argument here is that while many people see magic as some- thing that happens in movies or fantasy literature, real magic happens in the Qur'an. There is something greater, more mysterious, and more powerful than common matter and speech, and that something is the Qur'an. The image of a Qur'an emitting pixie dust or divine light is repeatedly evoked; Asyl Arna posted the same image with additional text on July 18, 2014, and July 15, 2015.43

42 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=29072013&z=photo-51948252_308890703%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, July 29, 2013.

43 Asyl Arna's vk page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=18072014&z=photo-51948252_337281826%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 18, 2014. See also Asyl Arna's vK

This visual repertoire draws from images across the globe that are easily accessed through the internet. The images in Figures 7 and 8, for instance, are found on many Islamic websites.44 On an everyday production level, Asyl Arna's workers may choose international images in order to connect Kazakhstani Muslims to a global Islamic visual culture; they also might simply find these images after a quick Google search while trying to meet a deadline. In either case, the effect is the same: Kazakhstani Muslims see the same images of the Qur'an as Muslims elsewhere in the world. The work of creating Islamic visual culture, and visual culture itself, becomes somewhat delocalized.45

Other images combine similar elements that emphasize the magical nature of the Qur'an. A May 27, 2014, post shows an image that combines three elements on a blue background: a Qur'an on a Qur'an stand, blue pixie dust emanating upward from the Qur'an, and text. The background is blue, and again darkens away from the Qur'an and its illuminating emanation. The text also recalls the touch of the divine or miraculous in the world: "Read the Qur'an! Truthfully, on the Day of Judgment, it (the Qur'an) will be an intercessor for those who have read it." In this image, the Qur'an is presented as an agent rather than an object: it will intercede for Muslims on the Day of Judgment. A June 22, 2015, post shows an almost psychedelic or science fictional image of the Qur'an. (Figure 8) In this image, a Qur'an on a Qur'an stand sits on top of a blue planet—the Earth?—and emanates light upward toward the text, "If you are searching for a path to God…" ("Allagha zhaqyndaudyng zholyn izdesengiz…").46 Stars shine in the black background at the top of the image, while parabolas of light streak upward on the left side of the image. Clouds ap- pear behind these parabolas. Here, the Qur'an is again light-giving, but it also is the road to God, traveling through the literal heavens. This post bludgeons the viewer with the heavenly, supernatural, mysterious nature of the Qur'an, and its ability to connect humans to God.

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page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_375857211%2Falbum-51948252_00%2 Frev, posted July 13, 2015.

44 For the image shown in Figure 7, see al-Morohen's Contest Flickr page, http://www.flickr .com/photos/almorohenphoto/6106136015/, August 8, 2010. For the image shown in Figure 8, see "Does Qur'an Contradict Science," *Quran and Modern Science*, June 2010, http://quran-modern-science.blogspot.com/2010/06/does-quran-contradict -science.html (accessed May 3, 2016), or http://www.whyislamtrue.com/panel/imgUrun/ 19032015214744.jpg.

45 For more on the delocalization of Islamic authority and culture, see N. Echchaibi "From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam," *Nations and Nationalism*, 17, no. 1 (2011): 25–44.

46 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_373488500%2Falbum -51948252_00%2Frev, posted June 22, 2015.

Figure 8 *The text reads: "If you are searching for a path to God…"*

This image also draws on a well-established Islamic understanding of the Qur'an as God's light (*nur*) in the world.47 The Qur'an presents itself as a light for the world; Nisa 174 reads, "O mankind, there has come to you a conclusive proof from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a clear light," while Ma'idah 15–16 reads, "O People of the Scripture, there has come to you Our Messenger making clear to you much of what you used to conceal of the Scripture and overlooking much. There has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book."48 Light has significant conceptual meaning in the larger Islamic tradition. Religious knowledge in general is conceived as light, God emanates physical and metaphorical light, and the Prophet is conceived as primordial light.49 These divine and scriptural lights can even be internalized, as Muslims who have memorized the Qur'an will emanate light on the Day of Judgment.50 Muslim artists often portray the revelation of the Qur'an during Night of Des- tiny, or the Qur'an more generally, with similar iconography, such as a beam of light connecting sky and earth.51 Asyl Arna continues this tradition and adds contemporary elements, such as pixie dust or science fictional parabolas and

47 J. Elias, "Light," in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Washington, dc: Brill Online, 2016).

48 M. Mir, "Names of the Qurʾan," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*.

49 W. Hartner, T. Boer, "Nur," in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Washington, dc: Brill Online, 2016).

50 W. Saleh, "Word," in J. J. Elias (ed.), *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 370.

51 K. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 91. George also details the controversy surrounding the use of the Qur'an in art in Indonesia. There has not been any controversy around Asyl Arna's depiction of the Qur'an, possibly due to a new understanding of the importance of visual culture to proselytizing (*daghuat*, Arabic: *da'wah*).

planets, in order to place the Qur'an as a bridge between man and God and as providing a touch of magic in everyday life.52

The image of a July 29, 2013, post has a different type of sensibility, one that is less sensational but still connects the viewer with the divine light of the Qur'an and God, and is perhaps more obviously connected with historical Islamic concepts of the Qur'an.53 In this image, a Qur'an rests on a Qur'an stand in the left of the frame, while another book, possibly another Qur'an, rests on a rug on the right side of the frame. The background of the image is composed of the aforementioned rug. A lamp sits in the center of the image, behind the books. The lamp is an older railroad-style lantern, burning kerosene or oil, rather than an electric lightbulb. The Qur'an in the picture is in Arabic, bringing the reader to the original language of revelation. The emotional experience of this image is nostalgic, connecting viewers' experience of the light of the Qur'an to past Muslims' experience. The Qur'an is not simply a magic book that flies through the heavens or emits pixie dust. It has also brought the divine to Earth and il- luminated the path to God for hundreds of years.

More mundane images of the Qur'an serve to make it clear that Muslims should interact with the Qur'an in everyday life. For example, one post relates that the Qur'an was translated into Ingush for the first time and simply shows the new translation on a wooden surface, presumably a desk or table.54 Nothing more miraculous than human intellectual labor is depicted here. Another image depicts a finger tracing lines in a book.55 The book is identifiable as the Qur'an from its adornment and Arabic text, but it does not emit pixie dust or light. It is recognizable as something that a vK user might encounter, particularly if they following the textual encouragement to memorize parts of the Qur'an. This image provides a bridge from the supernatural and divine aspects of the Qur'an to the everyday Qur'an that a Muslim might encounter when first memorizing the Qur'an and learning to feel its divine power. It does not always sparkle. It gets translated and put on tables and ignored for part of the day. But

52 For more instances of glowing or illuminating Qur'ans, see, for example, some of the daily updates for the 30-part "Facts about the Qur'an" series of posts during Ramadan in 2015: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_374575520%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev and http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-5l948252_375228505%2Falbum-5l948252_00% 2Frev.

53 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=29072013&z=photo-51948252 _308868208%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 29, 2013.

54 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=26062014&z=photo-51948252 _335531800%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted June 26, 2014.

55 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_381075851%2Falb um-51948252 _00%2Frev, posted August 27, 2015.

if one is correctly attuned to the Qur'an, then one can appreciate the miraculous and the divine at particular times. The Qur'an is at once a mundane guide to life and prayer and also a magical connection to God and miraculous events.

Middle-class Lifestyles and Anxieties

According to James Laidlaw, "Religion is not all there ever is to ethics."[56] Laidlaw's statement concerns the contradictions and negotiations between Jains' ideals of asceticism and their everyday concerns of wealth and prosperity. Similar issues exist in the visual culture of Asyl Arna's social media. On the one hand, Asyl Arna downplays the importance of worldly wealth by posting pictures of impoverished children meant to symbolize childlike innocence, and images of money with text reminding viewers that peace is more important than money. On the other hand, many images portray middle-class or wealthy lifestyles, and Asyl Arna explicitly states that piety is the path to the middle class.

Asyl Arna encourages readers to be happy with the material goods that God has provided for them.[57] Smiling children, often with stereotypical African or South Asian phenotypes, are often shown in posts with texts exhorting viewers to consider what is most important in life: God, Islam, and morality. For example, Figure 9 is part of a two-paragraph post titled: "Be pleased with what God Almighty has given, and you will be the wealthiest person!" The image shows a smiling African child against an unfocused background. The child holds a mobile phone made from clay. In its context, this image models

Figure 9
True happiness is a person who makes thebest of what God has provided.

56 J. Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society among the Jains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 12.

57 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/photo206952853_314887347, posted November 28,2013.

Figure 10 *The text reads, "Peace is more precious than money, brother!"*

what true happiness looks like: a person who makes the best of what God has provided.

This emphasis on spiritual well-being intensified after the tenge devaluation in late August 2015. One simple image from an August 20, 2015, post shows five Euro notes ascending in value from left to right (see Figure 10). The notes are rolled into cylinders. The focus is on the €50 note, although this seems to be coincidental. The text at the bottom of the image reminds the viewer that "peace is more precious than money, brother!"58

Another post from August 20th related the following tale.

> One man went to complain about sky-high prices to a man recognized by the people as wise. [The wise man] said, "even if one grain of barley was one dinar, this would not worry me. Because I have made a habit of serving God as He commanded. And He has made a promise to provide."59

This tale was accompanied by two images: one of gold coins on a scale, the other of hands scooping some sort of grain. The gold coins are presented without a social context, just as the Euros in Figure 10 are presented without a human element. The background of the image is also gold, and creates a sense of impersonal wealth, or a platonic ideal of currency. The hands scooping grain are closed tightly, supporting the grain and ensuring that none falls. The hands connect people to simple material needs. People need food, they touch food, they take care of food. Wealth sits on its own. The connection of food with humanity and the loneliness of wealth constructs a picture that wealth

58 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_380253243%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted August 20, 2015.

59 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?w=wall-51948252_54253, posted August 20, 2015.

Figure 11 *The text reads, "How can one [morally] save and earn money?"*

cannot fulfill human needs. Only God can do that. Comments on this post praised its wisdom and chided Kazakhstanis who had become "too attached to this world."

However, Asyl Arna also depicts a middle-class lifestyle as a result of proper Islamic behavior. One post shows an image of a fist clutching money with the caption, "How can one [morally] save and earn money?"60 (See Figure 11.) The fist clutches green money, presumably dollars, linking the morally acceptable ways to earn money to success not just in Kazakhstan, but in the larger world. Live right and you can be successful enough to have dollar holdings if the tenge loses its value. Another image consists of cursive text against a blurred background; the text reads, "Marriage is the road from poverty." The post links to an article arguing that God has made marriage an Islamic duty and will enrich those who follow His commands.61 These two images make a combined visual and textual argument that Islam is the path to the middle class.

Other images of pious husbands and wives show well-dressed people in identifiably middle- or upper-class settings. For example, in the image accompanying a March 19, 2015, post, a husband and wife walk through the grass at a park with trees out of focus in the background (see Figure 12.).62 The park is empty except for the couple, who face away from the camera. The man wears a black suit, while the woman wears a turquoise headscarf, matching skirt, and a white blouse. The husband leads the wife by the hand; behind her back, she

60 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_409254341%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted March 16, 2016. The linked article gives tips such as "keep an account book" and "don't go out to lunch."

61 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_376872076%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted July 22, 2015. It was also posted September 28, 2015: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_385083925%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

62 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=17092014&z=photo-51948252_342277788%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted September 17, 2014. It was also posted March 19, 2015: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_360667990%2 Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

Figure 12
The text reads, "Living a blessed life—it is not merely happy moments. It is loving, trusting, protecting, and respecting one another for God."

holds a sign that reads, "He surprises me :)" This is plainly a happy scene, as indicated by the emoticon. Below this sign of marital bliss is the text, "Living a blessed life—it is not merely happy moments. It is loving, trusting, protecting, and respecting one another for God." In this image, the absence of many features of contemporary urban life in Kazakhstan is noticeable. Skyscrapers and tall Soviet apartment buildings are absent. The air is clean. Buses and mini- buses are not idling nearby. Garbage is not visible. Spouses are not worried about finding work. Extended family members are not living on pull-out mat- tresses in the family room. In other words, this couple is not finding love in the microraion. This image provides an ethical example. Happy marriages, nice clothes, and dates in uncrowded green parks are the result of keeping God at the center of a marriage.

Asyl Arna's depiction of gender and family furthers this class-based depiction of Islamic piety. The ideal role for a woman is made explicit in Figure 13.63 A mother is seated next to her daughter at a table. One assumes they are in conversation, although their faces are not depicted, in accordance with Asyl Arna's construction of female modesty. The caption reads: "There is not a rule for women that says 'do not work, do not make money.' But, we would not lose anything if we taught our daughters, before anything else, 'you are the mother of the future.'" The sensibility here is not thought to be a restrictive one. Women should have the option of working. But in an ideal world, husbands would make enough money that their wives could stay at home,

63 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_358144815%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, published February 24, 2015. It was also republished February 17, 2016: http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_405215981%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev.

Figure 13
The text reads, "There is not a rule for women that says 'do not work, do not make money.' But, we would not lose anything if we taught our daughters, before anything else, 'you are the mother of the future.'"

raise children in wholesome environments, and devote time to making their husbands happy by cooking and beautifying themselves. Asyl Arna's construction of a woman's ideal role and her relationship to her husband assumes privacy, leisure time, access to uncrowded parks, vacations, and other middle- class consumerist and public goods.64

Where then should a husband work in this ideal marriage? Figure 14 models the types of desk jobs that Asyl Arna sees its audience as having or wanting. This image is the illustration that accompanies a link to a somewhat convo- luted article on Asyl Arna's website. The article is supposedly written by a man, now 20 years out of school, who visits his former school director in a nursing home. The school director was placed in the nursing home because his children did not want to take care of him. The situation is particularly sad be- cause the school director realizes that he treated his parents in the same way.65

64 For a more detailed look at Central Asian women's struggles with fashion, Islam, and living a good life, including finding "well-paid work, good husbands, kind mothers-in-law, and nice homes." see J. McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, no. S1 (2009): S127–S144. For more detail on the dreams of Kyrgyzstani women, including what Kyrgyz women hope for and their Islamic interpretations of dreams, see M. Louw, "Dreaming up Futures: Dream Omens and Magic in Bishkek," *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2010): 277–292. For an examination of the "re-traditionalization" of gender roles in Central Asia, which is actually using the authority of "tradition" to advocate for new economic gender roles in a new type of economy, see M. Commercio, "The Politics and Economics of 'Retraditionalization' in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31, no. 6 (2015): 529–556.

65 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_402960848%2Falbum -51948252_00%2Frev, posted February 2, 2016.

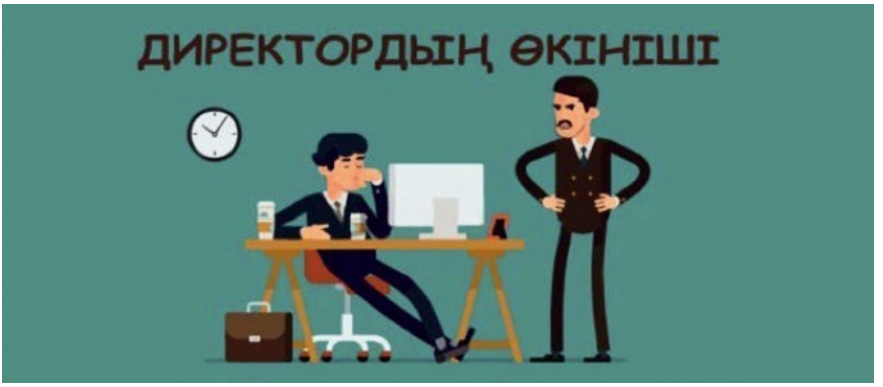

Figure 14 *The text reads, "A Director's Regret."*

The drawing shows a man sitting at a desk, staring at a computer. A coffee cup sits to his right. Underneath the desk is a briefcase. A mustached man, presumably a younger version of the director, although this is not at all clear, scowls over the office worker. The text above these two figures reads, "A director's regret."

The strange juxtaposition between the story and the image, however, should not detract from Asyl Arna's creation of a typical work scene. The article is not directly in the post, and followers of Asyl Arna on vK may only see the drawing. Other illustrations more directly related to the story could have been chosen, such as a man in a nursing home. However, a decision was made to show a male office worker at his desk deferring to a supervisor, something that Asyl Arna sees as either reflecting its audience members' experiences or as a model of what work should be like. Geertz would tell us that this image functions both ways.66 In the context of Asyl Arna's visual culture, a viewer can imagine the harassed office worker going home to his waiting wife and children, like those found in Figure 13.

There is a seemingly contradictory but actually complementary argument on Asyl Arna's social media pages. First, Islam is the path to the middle class; second, wealth and consumerism are less important than piety. This argument creates a hope for a "normal" life, as one interlocutor put it to me in a Skype conversation, one in which being a pious Muslim and middle-class come naturally and are not such hard work.67 Or, put differently, a life in which doing

66 C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.

67 For a description of the middle-class "Astana Dream," see K. Osmonova, "Experiencing Liminality: Housing, Renting, and Informal Tenants in Astana," *Central Asian Survey*, 35, no. 2 (2016): 237–256.

the right thing pays off in economic security and a happy domestic life run in accordance with scripturalist Islamic norms. One example of this "normal" life can be found in the background of photos of Tazabek, such as Figure 4. In this image, Tazabek wears a tailored jacket and clean white shirt while he sits on a shiny, expensive leather couch with a china cabinet visible behind him. This is the model of "everyday" Islamic life. A second example of this middle-class life can be found Asyl Arna's June 2015 advertisement for curtains, chests, and cribs of "national design."[68] In this set of images, sumptuous pillows lay on a bed and an artisanal wooden crib has a baby monitor attached to it. A third example is an advertisement for "national clothing," which shows children in white suits and dresses embroidered with gold designs similar to those found on the Head Mufti's robes.[69] A good Muslim can afford, and should buy, consumer goods referencing the same kind of "traditional" and Islamic aesthetics as the Head Mufti. A modern Muslim life—a "normal" life—includes disposable income tobe spent appropriately.

But with this hope for a "normal" life comes anxieties: what if a Kazakhstani Muslim cannot find a middle-class job or the Kazakhstani economy falls into a recession? Asyl Arna's images of happy but impoverished children and statements that money is less important than piety create a fallback position if a Muslim does not find economic success. The same interlocutor told me, in a separate Skype conversation, that he did not worry about the tenge devaluation, because Kazakhs will do what they have always done: make do with what God has given.[70] When times are good, Asyl Arna's readers can model their dreams on depictions of a middle-class Islamic lifestyle; when times are bad, they can take comfort in the fact that real wealth is found in piety.

Conclusion

I want to use the ways the Asyl Arna discusses its 2015 logo to summarize the hopes and dreams and anxieties modeled in Asyl Arna's visual culture.[71] (See Figure 15 for the new logo.)

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68 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/asyl_arna?z=photo-51948252_373160114%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted June 19, 2015.

69 Asyl Arna's Instragram account, http://www.instagram.com/p/bdislaiiqUw/, postedMarch 19, 2016.

70 My interlocutor's specific quote was, "Eh, I lived through the 1990s. God gives and He takes away. Everything will be fine."

71 Asyl Arna's vK page, http://vk.com/wall-51948252?day=17092015&z=photo-51948252_383718071%2Falbum-51948252_00%2Frev, posted September 17, 2015.

Figure 15
Asyl Arna's new logo.

> Asyl Arna! A new face for a new season! A new logo! A dome, Kazakh ornamentation, a new moon, and the first letter of Asyl Arna, these all come together in a unified image. Our educational purpose, which offers appropriate guidance to the demands of our time, is to elevate the unity of religion and tradition as well as the harmony of Islam and the nation, and to reveal their beauty year after year. It is to instill great moral qualities, and direct them to the protection of the nation, in the consciousness of the new generation and to ensure the foundation of our independence is strong. We will make the everlasting example of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), our great teacher, the cornerstone of our lives in accordance with the laws of a secular society. Tell us, what do you thinkof our new logo?

This logo, as made clear in the equation in the image and the accompanying text, combines stylized simplifications of a mosque's dome, a Kazakh pat- tern for rugs and felted goods, the Islamic crescent moon, and the company's initials. What does Asyl Arna stand for? Islam and Kazakhstan, most obviously, but also marketing and media consumption. The presence of a logo and the accompanying branding emphasizes integrating Islam with consumer capitalism. Asyl Arna addresses the concerns of busy middle-class Kazakhs, and middle-class hopefuls, such as their hopes for material wealth and desire for piety and a touch of the numinous in their busy, media-saturated lives. Seeing a glimpse of Asyl Arna's visual culture in a Twitter feed on a smartphone creates hope and joy at the possibilities of an achievable piety, interactions with the divine, and a moral road to a middle-class life. Seeing Asyl Arna's images in a vK

feed also creates doubt and uncertainty regarding the possibility of deep knowledge and one's own ritual observances and fears of not reaching or staying in a middle-class life. The overall enterprise of Asyl Arna, the dreams it reflects and creates, is to produce a prosperous, middle-class society in which men work, women raise pious and devout children, Russians and Kazakhs and Ingush and Uyghurs get along in a society led by Kazakhs, and there is no social upheaval. Many Kazakhs, including those who are not as observant or pious as they might like to be, find this picture attractive. They see neighboring countries as less wealthy or chaotic. They are not looking for Shariah law or democratic political change.72 They are looking for a new "normal." The visual culture of Asyl Arna delivers a picture of what a middle-class Islamic life might look like.

72 For a complementary examination of how Kyrgyzstani Muslims view democracy, and their hopes for political and economic change, including change based on Islamic law, see D. Montgomery, "Islam beyond Democracy and State in Kyrgyzstan," *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 229–242.