Religion, Power, and Contemporary Art in Central Asia: Visualizing and Performing Islam

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Abstract

This article examines diverse perceptions and discourses of Islam, fundamentalism, spirituality, and culture in the contemporary Central Asian context, revealed through the study of contemporary art and its discussions about these phenomena. While many online sources and social media accounts provide a framework for different types of religiosity—cultural, pious, or fundamental—contemporary art in the region serves as a platform for critiquing religion as a whole. I use the examples of the most famous works by prominent Central Asian contemporary artists, who discuss Tengriism, Islam, and other religious practices in their works, performances, and videos. The diversity of online platforms that transfer discussions of Islam and religion to the digital forums through which third-wave artists promote their works also create space for more pluralistic views of—and discourses on—Islam.

Keywords

contemporary art – digital Islam – religion – cultural critique – art – Central Asia

Introduction: Why Does Central Asian Contemporary Art Focuson Islam?

"Katipa apai will cure you," reads an advertisement for Ekaterina Nikonorova's performances of "Goddess Katipa apai." In a photo posted on Facebook, a woman in a white gown and headscarf gazes lovingly at her audience while lying on a sofa, her head resting on one arm. Other photos posted on Facebook and Instagram show the same woman, sporting neon sunglasses, looking at her

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now-cured followers through a plastic frame she painted with green disinfectant. Katipa apai is Ekaterina Nikonorova's artistic Other, a goddess who aims to cure people of all sorts of diseases through the power of love.

It is impossible to imagine Katipa apai's artistic performances without her presence online, where she posts her photos, video performances, and texts (see Figure 1). In one video, for example, she demonstrates "cleaning" the aura using a 3-liter Soviet bottle used for compote filled with water from Issyk-Kul lake in Kyrgyzstan. She makes multiple references to Soviet-era anti-religiosity and the popular cult of Kashpirovsky, the self-made psychic healer who promised to cure all diseases by "magnetizing" water in front of Soviet people's TV sets.

Through her online presence, Katipa apai has created a discourse of artistic performance and religious intertextuality combined with culture, local perspectives, and perceptions of religion and its performance. In the end, what Katipa apai attempts to do is to become an artistic representation of the social and cultural contextualization of contemporary artistic and religious practice. The project of "Katipaapaism" began with Ekaterina Nikonorova experimenting with religious discourse by wearing a white veil. Art critics immediately

Figure 1 Katipa apai and her priest, Anatoly Chernoussov, at their performance at stab, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Source: Art Initiatives.

jumped to conclusions about this, noting that a white veil is traditionally worn by married Kazakh women. Nikonorova, herself a citizen of Kazakhstan, reflects on the veil as a traditional but also neo-religious (contemporary Islamic) practice,[1] and uses it to engage with the re-traditionalization and Islamic radicalization her country is currently going through. Such a linear perception of *katipaapaism* may even have been one of the artist's intentions, although her performances are far more complex, located as they are at the intersection of gender, religion, ethnicity, placeness, Central Asianness, spirituality, and sexuality (Katipa apai, for example, advocates for queer love.)

Katipa apai, who grew out of the artistic effort to engage with contemporary questions facing Nikonorova's society, quickly became a cultural phenomenon. There was no way to ignore her presence and her message in the public space; she appeared at events ranging from artistic presentations to art festivals to public performances. Katipa apai became the cultural and religious intervention in these discussions of spirituality (in a very private sense), religiosity (through collective expression), and post-national identity (which is a work in progress)—Katipa apai invites viewers to consider an identity free of ethnic or traditional markers.

Katipa apai's existence and performance cannot be separated from the fact that she is a significant part of the contemporary art scene in Central Asia. Her performances coincide with major art exhibitions and mostly happen in artistic spaces like stab (School of Theory and Activism, Bishkek) in central Bishkek and public art events in Almaty and Astana. With her performances, Katipa apai tries to attract attention to both religion and art. This raises the question of what religion is for the artist.

In the thriving Central Asian art sphere, which has become a public space for openly discussing and performing alternative, radical, and plural views about the current political and social situation in Central Asia, criticism and

1 Headscarves or hijabs have become a visual representation of post-Soviet Islamic practices in Central Asia—see M. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007); S. Nozimova, "*Hijab* in a Changing Tajik Society," *Central Asian Affairs*, 3, no. 2 (2016): 95–116; 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. Some artists and public commentators connect the visuality of hijab to neo-religious practices and Islamic radicalization. M. Kamp and N. Borbieva ("Veiling and Unveiling in Central Asia: Beliefs and Practices, Tradition and Modernity," in A. Almilla and D. Inglis (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook to Veils and Veiling* (London: Routledge, 2017), 87) mention that in the post-Soviet era, "many Central Asian Muslim women embrace the freedom to veil as a 'modern' privilege, one that distinguishes their lives today from the lives women lived during the Soviet era." This distinction between the Soviet past and neo-religious present is exactly the temporal divide Nikonorova aims to show with her headscarf.

rethinking of Islam and religion in general occupy a prominent position. Some artistic works critique and even ridicule religion; many artists question the power of Islam in the region; and substantial attention is paid to the blending of old and new religious traditions and practices.

In this article, I conceptualize how and why contemporary art has become a space for—and source of—these alternative discussions and expressions of religion and how the artistic performance of Islam, in particular, influences rigid religious and political understandings of it. Through the works of Central Asian contemporary artists Katya Nikonorova (Katipa apai), Said Atabekov, Almagul Menlibayeva, Anvar Musrepov, Saule Suleimenova, Kuanysh Bazargaliev, Syrlybek Bekbotayev, Ulan Dzhapparov, Umida Akhmedova, and Dilyara Kaipova, I demonstrate how discussions about religion traverse art, cultural critique, and digital Islam, and how the diversity of art platforms provides space for pluralistic views and discourses on Islam in the region.

First, I discuss why art resists domination in any form. Next, I explore how contemporary art in Central Asia developed a strong bent toward social and religious critique in the 1990s, illustrating this through the powerful discourses of Said Atabekov and Almagul Menlibayeva. After that, I study how artists question myths of religiosity and society, looking at the works of Saule Suleimenova, Ulan Dzhapparov, and Kuanysh Bazargaliev. Also engaged in these nomadic and tengriist discussions are younger artists like Syrlybek Bekbotayev. Turning to contemporary art in Uzbekistan, I explore the most recent works by Umida Akhmedova and Dilyara Kaipova, who focus on gender, traditions, and religiosity in contemporary Central Asian societies. Finally, I engage with the third generation of contemporary artists and their use of digital Islam, which brings me back to Katipa apai, and also discuss resonant works on religiosity by Anvar Musrepov.

The space for contemporary cultural production has been overlooked in the important discussions on Islamic revival. This article therefore aims to fill that gap by looking at cultural critiques of the dominant forms of contemporary religious discourses. Increasingly, authoritarian systems "penetrate the life of the society, preventing, even forcibly, the political expression of certain group interests," including religious expression, and "sharpen them by interventionist policies like those of corporativist regimes."2 Contemporary art stands in stark opposition to such forcible and direct attempts to navigate and dominate public views, belief systems, and actions. Contemporary artists thus reclaim pluralism by opening up the space for (sometimes difficult) discussions aboutthe past or religion.

2 J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 160.

Art, Islam, and Domination

The Central Asian contemporary art scene is defined by the constant search for one's true identity and the truth about one's past, culture, and future.3 Historically, the dual contexts of the post-Soviet ideological vacuum and growing pressure from authoritarian states also forced many contemporary artists to focus on "socially responsible" art that aimed to solve collective problems rather than explore deeply personal issues.4 The contemporary art of the late 1980s and early 1990s became the first real space for freedom of expression for many Central Asians, since the major censors were the dominant foreign curators rather than the new states, which rapidly lost their grip on "independent artists" (*svobodnie khudozhniki*). But why focus on Islam in such a thriving field?

Islam has become a key factor in defining identities and dominates the social space in Central Asia.5 For its part, contemporary art as a field of cultural production is opposed to any sort of domination. Art, and specifically contemporary art, "is working on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation."6 In the face of any type of domination— whether from the political regime or from a domineering ideology like Islam currently is— it serves to provide alternative views. Thus, contemporary art both resists domination and provides a space where such domination can be avoided. Art turns into political and social activism for plural views, becoming

3 D.T. Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation: Contesting 'Tradition' in Post-Socialist Cultures and Societies," *Central Asian Affairs,* 4, no. 4 (2017): 305–330; D.T. Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism, Revolt and the Break Up of Traditional Linkage: The Waves of Cultural Production in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 21, no. 4 (2018): 435–451.

4 Zh. Nauruzbayeva, "Refurbishing Soviet Status: Visual Artists and Marketization in Kazakhstan" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2011).

5 T.J. Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia," *Sociology of Religion*, 64, no. 3 (2003): 389–410; S. Peyrouse, "Islam in Central Asia: National Specificities and Post-Soviet Globalization," *Religion, State & Society*, 35, no. 3 (2007): 245–260; C. Hann and M. Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)socialism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, no. 9 (2009): 1517–1541; A. Biard, "The Religious Factor in the Reification of 'Neo-Ethnic' Identities in Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers*, 38, no. 3 (2010): 323–335; Louw, *Everyday Islam*; M. Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter When There Is Too Much of It: Islam and the Struggle for a Balanced Existence in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey,* 32, no. 4 (2013): 514–526; E. McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

6 B. Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 76.

an active voice in opposition to certain powerful political representations. Works of art themselves become reflections of the multiplicities of contexts and aspects that form the societal fabric. Contemporary art in Central Asia reminds its audiences that nothing is black and white.

By taking religion out of its context of ritualization and sacred performance and instead turning it into an artistic performance, contemporary artists in Central Asia radically transform the very concept of religion. Though religion has many connotations and definitions, it is usually considered to be a system of beliefs in a supernatural power that features ritualization, rules, discipline, and symbolism.7 Art, as understood in the present discussion, is a form of cultural, personal, and critical expression of the reality that surrounds the artist and the viewer. It goes beyond the framework of cultural production or of an object placed in the museum. Boris Groys explains the power of contemporary art, which transgresses on personal spaces in its attempt to expose collective trends and problems:

> Contemporary art is less a production of individual artworks than it is a manifestation of an individual decision to include or exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world, to give them a new context or to deny it for them: a private selection that is at the same time publicly accessible and thereby made manifest, present, explicit.8

Thus, when Islam or any other religion is placed within the artistic field and artistic practice, it becomes more than a religion. It becomes a powerful cultural text that is open to cultural criticism through art—something that can be viewed negatively by many outside observers. Religion in contemporary art begins as a personal, spiritual, and thus private exploration that is subsequently exposed to wide audiences. In artistic re-interpretation, religion and its discourses transgress the collectively acceptable set of rules and rituals that can be re-conceptualized and are even taken out of context. However, some artists claim that their re-interpretations and attempts to re-conceptualize religious and spiritual practices and the essence of religion are no more or less religious than the strict collective rules that call for believers to follow certain rituals and behaviors.9 As such, artistic representation of religion is taken as something collective and thus not private, making it open to further exposure and

7 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

8 Groys, *Art Power*, 76.

9 As discussed in Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

a plurality of ideas that may not always enjoy the total approval of all groups involved in that discussion.

From the beginning of the first wave of contemporary art in Central Asia (from the late 1980s to the early 2000s), through the second wave (throughout the 2000s), and into the current third wave (since the 2010s), the art field has been transforming itself through an in-depth discussion of self-Orientalizing practices, e.g., the focus on distinct "Asianness" or "nomadism" in artworks to satisfy the needs and interests of foreign art markets, exhibitors, and curators. Yet two central themes of contemporary art production in the region—Islam and nation—remain constant, reflecting the societal changes brought by the rapid Islamization and nationalization of the public sphere.10

The artists who dare to step into this discussion on dominant discourses of the nation and religion are not always free of their own personal self-reflections, opinions, fears, aspirations, and spirituality or lack thereof. The rules of the game in Central Asian contemporary art do not prohibit such exploration, but also do not stress the importance of artists' ethnicity, place of birth, gender, or religiosity. Issues arise when the artistic text (performance, installation, painting, video art, etc.) merges with the artist's personal discourse and personal space in ways that he or she may intentionally try to avoid: for example, positioning Ekaterina Nikonorova as a "Slavic" woman wearing a white "Islamic" headscarf.

An artist who decides to project their understanding of religion—personal or collective—immediately loses the private aspect of this experience and this artistic performance of Islam or non-Islam becomes a far more powerful discourse. However, these experiences are also circumvented and empowered by the elitism and exclusivity of the art field: very few artists are allowed to question the artistic text and the idea behind it. Contemporary art almost immediately receives symbolic capital from within the field through the approval of regionally based art curators (most of them either atheist, non-Muslim, or not openly religious) or through international biennales/exhibitions and international curators. Such was the case with Kyzyl Traktor (Red Tractor) performances, whose spiritual shamanism almost pigeon-holed them as southern dervishes from the highly religious region of Southern Kazakhstan on the border with Uzbekistan, from which almost all of them originate. For a very long time, local art curators perceived them as very locally rooted artists "searching for their soil and nationhood" in various spaces, including religion.11 Many Central Asian artists revolted against this social framework as they "nomadized"

10 Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation."

11 Art curator no. 2, interview with the author, April 20, 2011, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Islam and let these discourses speak to viewers directly: they constructed a prayer rug from stones (Said Atabekov), created Islamic burial materials from traditional Central Asian felt (Ulan Dzhapparov), and merged Tengriism with Islam (Almagul Menlibayeva and later Syrlybek Bekbotayev). Tengriism is the pre-Islamic religion of many peoples of Central Eurasia, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and parts of other contemporary Central Asian states.12 Nature and natural forces are central to the religion. The main god is Tengri, the god of the sky. These initial attempts by great artists from the first wave of contemporary art development in Central Asia (Atabekov, Dzhapparov, Menlibayeva, Suleimenova, Bazargaliev, and others) touched off an ongoing journey and experiment with rigid Islam.

Anvar Musrepov, a young contemporary artist from Kazakhstan, goes even further in his experiments, demonstrating how Islamic revival goes hand in hand with local superstitions and alternative religious practices. In his latest video, for the 2017–18 exhibition "Time and Astana: After the Future" at the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana, Musrepov used a drone bearing *adraspan*—dried grass that is used for rituals and protecting an individual from the evil eye in Central Asia. The drone carried *adraspan* and a camera over Astana's main expo pavilion in a 5-minute ritual for scaring the evil eye away from the capital's major construction and symbolic site, which has been troubled of late by bad publicity and corruption scandals. The "Alastau" video/ performance (2017) captured Kazakhstan's vision of modernization and desire to portray itself globally as a progressive state, yet the ritualization echoed many locals' archaic tradition of protecting themselves with *adraspan*. As this and many other examples in this article reveal, contemporary art in Central Asia juxtaposes significant power axes and inserts the "radically pluralistic" practice of its own existence.13 In the text, I will discuss how this process develops alongside the powerful narratives of "strict religious ritualization" and "clean and authentic Islam" that exists and is practiced away from Tengriism, and through the re-interpretations of sins, modernization, and radicalization.

Contemporary Art in Central Asia as a Space for Alternative Views

"Said [Atabekov] once burnt a hole in a Quran, put a stone inside, and paint- ed it green. Then he brought it to the exhibition. I thought we'd get closed down immediately," remembers Valeria Ibrayeva, former director of the Soros

12 Laruelle, "Religious Revival."

13 Groys, *Art Power*, 1.

Contemporary Art Center in Central Asia.14 The Soros Contemporary Art Center, located in Almaty from its launch in 1998 until its closure in 2008, was the only center of its kind in Central Asia. It facilitated discussions, ran workshops, and organized exhibitions of the work of contemporary artists from across the region, for whom it provided one of the first opportunities to learn and share their experiences.

In 1998, the Center organized "The Feast of the Spirit" (*Pir Dukha* in original Russian) exhibition in Almaty, where Said Atabekov explored his interest in Islam with the aforementioned resonant Quran performance. Besides burning the Quran, he also constructed a prayer rug from stones, dressed up like a shaman, and started praying on it in the exhibition hall. This performance became one of the most iconic artistic works in the history of post-Soviet contemporary art in the region. Atabekov constantly reminded viewers and art historians alike that he did not intend an act of sacrilege, but instead wanted to draw attention to religious pluralism in the Central Asian context.15 This same theme of religious pluralism and complex interpretations of religion guided and influenced a large part of Atabekov's work and performances before and after this iconic "burning" of the sacred book in an attempt to localize his religious ritual.

Atabekov is one of the most famous contemporary artists in Central Asia. He was born in Uzbekistan in 1965 and currently resides in the nearby city of Shymkent, across the border in Kazakhstan. Atabekov is a member of the famous art group Kyzyl Traktor,16 a group of likeminded artists mostly from Southern Kazakhstan and who reside mainly in Shymkent. The group also included the late Moldakul Narymbetov, Smail Belyaev, Arystanbek Shalbayev, and Vitaly Simakov.

The location of artists and their artistic network of fellow artists, curators, and art critics is very important to contemporary art in Kazakhstan, which remains the most developed artistic scene in the region (along with that of Azerbaijan). Artists from Kyzyl Traktor are known for their exploration of the traditions and history of ethnic Kazakhs, but the group does much more than

14 Valeria Ibrayeva, interview with the author, January 17, 2013, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

15 Said Atabekov, interview with the author, June 23, 2016, Naryn, Kyrgyzstan.

16 See Kyzyl Traktor discussion in Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation"; Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism"; and, more recently, curator Leesa Ahmadi's interview on the Kyzyl Traktor exhibition in New Jersey, "Thinking Collections, Telling Tales: 'Focus Kazakhstan' Part iii in Jersey City—Artist Profile + Curator Interview," Art Radar, October 23, 2018, http://artradarjournal.com/2018/10/23/thinking-collections-telling-tales-focus-kazakhstan-part-ii-in-jersey-city/ (accessed November 2, 2018).

this. Their work investigates cultural and social alternatives and serves as an attempt to rethink and reinterpret Kazakhstan's contemporary culture, including its spiritual culture, through the lenses of history, heritage, and traditions. Atabekov, for example, remembers when, in the mid-1990s, members of Kyzyl Traktor dressed up like dervishes and went on a spiritual trip to nearby Turkestan—the sacred land for many religious and ethnic groups in Central Asia. They went there to find an alternative spirituality, something not dictated to them from above by the state or by a local imam. "We imagined ourselves as ancient shamans. We tried to reconnect with the steppe and with the cultural heritage," remembers Atabekov.17 They even slept in the steppe and explored spaces near the Hodja Akhmed Yassawi mausoleum in Turkestan before returning to Shymkent. For each member of the group, the spiritual trip was a very personal experience, and it left many of them inspired to continue these shamanistic trips and performances.

On a later occasion, they marched down Almaty's Arbat boulevard dressed as shamans playing with the spirit of Kazakhstani oil, deconstructing the country's main resource and also curse. The barrels of black oil that they rolled down Almaty's central boulevard also demonstrated the ideological and spiritual void into which the collapse of the Soviet Union and growing capitalism had plunged many people. This performance was a way to re-think these major shifts in people's historical and social conceptualizations in the post-Soviet era that the ruling political regime still failed to form on an ideological rather than market economy level. For many Central Asians, the first decade of independence symbolized the constant search for new ideas, but it did not quite patch over the losses of the past, nor did it provide answers for the difficult colonial or postcolonial past. The political elites who controlled most means of mass communication failed to lay out any meaningful ideological program beyond economic development programs that would make Kazakhstan a developed country and prosperous nation within 20 or 30 years (Kazakhstan 2030, Golden Age, Progress, top 40 developed countries list, etc.) and the recent expo 2017. So when Kyzyl Traktor members collectively engaged in representations of shamanistic rituals, dancing with and rolling empty barrels, they reflected on the void that this developmentalist turn had brought with it. Their performance of the fading pre-Soviet and pre-colonial ritualistic knowledge of barefoot shamans was juxtaposed with reflection on a state program empty of cultural or deeper social meaning and questioned the future path of the society, which was no longer forcibly atheist as it had been during the Soviet period.

17 Said Atabekov, interview with the author, June 23, 2016, Naryn, Kyrgyzstan.

The contemporary shamans of Kyzyl Traktor did not encourage anyone to become religious, but rather sought to explore spiritual plurality by highlighting the impossibility of there being "no spirit" or belief system apart from a belief in capitalism. This critique was one of the strongest in the aftermath of Kazakhstan's developmentalist turn, symbolized by the Kazakhstan 2030 development program. Contemporary art discussions and criticisms provided a space for independent reflections on what the state and the ruling regime proposed for the future development of the country.

Kyzyl Traktor members performed similar shamanistic dances and actions in Vienna, at the Venetian Biennale, and in Shymkent, calling for alternative religious practices in Central Asia and beyond to be remembered and considered and for spiritual pluralism to be ensured.

If the art of Kyzyl Traktor seeks to reconceptualize and rethink the past, then individual artists are also seeking their own paths. Said Atabekov's effort to connect distorted and disjointed spiritual and cultural elements has been particularly strong. In his search, he is called to the national identity represented by the traditional Kazakh *korpe*—pillows and larger carpet-like throws sewn from patchwork. He plays with the traditional form to create the national flags of different countries from these *korpes*. In his quest to understand religion in contemporary societies, he travels to villages in Central Asia and takes pictures of people praying, as well as noting their daily routines and rituals connected to Islamic spirituality. In these photos, one can spot older Kazakh women preparing for *namaz*, the praying ritual, or going about either before or after the religious ritual. Atabekov's work asks: what is religion if not a search for something more meaningful than daily routine, some bigger cause in life?

In answer to his ever-present questions about the role of religion in society, Atabekov created the "Way to Rome" series in 2007. The photos in this series represent the steppe and its abundant space using people or symbols that are easily recognizable: a branded UN jeep, elderly Kazakh or Uzbek ladies with their heads covered by headscarves, and religious symbols—the Star of David, the cross, and the Islamic crescent—side by side. Atabekov's works do not give clear answers and he himself avoids drawing conclusions, he tells me in an interview, indicating that an artist's work is there to make viewers think, and they can interpret it in whatever meaningful or meaningless way they choose.18 This opinion is shared by many Central Asian artists of his generation, who corroborate that contemporary art is there for diversity, for searching for meaning, but not for clear-cut or dictated answers.

18 Ibid.

In any work, every viewer has to find meaning on their own, adds Ulan Dzhapparov, an artist and curator from Kyrgyzstan, as he joins the interview with Atabekov.19 This desire for freedom in art—including freedom of interpretation—is an attempt by the first wave of post-Soviet contemporary artists to continue the struggle against artistic domination by the state, curators, museums, or even the market that many of them had been waging since the mid- and late 1980s. It is an open struggle against the *goszakaz*—the state order— and the surviving traditions of Socialist Realism that impede artists' freedom. An element of this struggle against orders and frameworks dictated from above is the personal and private desire to do certain work. Atabekov claims that a lot of his works begin in this way. At the time of our interview in summer 2016, he was working on a series of photos depicting the male horse game *kokpar*.20 "I have black and white pictures and then I 'paint' with my hands on their surface. I use mud to cover parts of the painting, and if someone were to ask me why I do it, I would say it is because I feel like doing it, something inside me tells me to do it, to make it more local, to spread mud on it and to earth it a bit," said Atabekov, attempting to illustrate his decision to focus on private
feelings in making his art.21

Contemporary Art in Search of Tengri and Alternative Spiritualism

A very important theme in Atabekov's art is Tengriism and its heritage in Central Asia. Tengriism (or *Tengrianstvo*) is a source of inspiration for many Central Asian contemporary artists. However, Tengriism is not understood here as the historical acceptance of some sort of religious practice, cultural repository, or opposition to Islam. In contrast to the political Tengriism that Marlene Laruelle writes about,22 artists who engage with Tengriism do not make political or ideological claims to provide an alternative vision of religion or a unified set of tasks and ideologies that counter the established political order or dis- course. In fact, many contemporary artists scrupulously avoid any involvement with politics or bureaucracy due to their fear of "selling out" to the corrupt

19 Ulan Dzhapparov, interview with the author, June 23, 2016, Naryn, Kyrgyzstan.

20 See Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism," for further discussion on Said Atabekov's series *We Are From Shymkent* depicting *kokpar*. See also U. Bigozhin's paper (forthcoming) on *kokpar* and masculinity in Central Asia for further details about the nomadic game.

21 Said Atabekov, interview with the author, June 23, 2016, Naryn, Kyrgyzstan.

22 M. Laruelle, "Religious Revival, Nationalism and the 'Invention of Tradition': Political Tengrism in Central Asia and Tatarstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 2 (2007): 203–216.

political regime or even "losing their talent": many artists and writers with whom I spoke indicated that seeking success through political cooptation had caused other artists "to lose their inner voice because playing with talent for personal gain is a sin."23 Those who identify themselves as contemporary artists in Central Asia try to oppose state structures and distance themselves from state-sponsored art. There is an exception, however, for contemporary artists who decide to take part in state-funded exhibitions, including at the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana. Here, the goal—regardless of the venue—is to gain greater exposure and engage with different audiences and viewers.24

Tengriism in artistic expression is a remnant of the Soviet legacy that continues to influence many first-generation contemporary artists, those who started their work in the late 1980s to mid-1990s. In their own words, these artists are still trying to come to terms with the Soviet ideological domination and oppression of creativity and their new states' search for alternatives that bear no trace of Sovietness (*Sovok*). Even though all the post-Soviet independent states—including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—officially identify themselves as secular states, religion became a pressing socio-cultural and political issue in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Private religious practice became a matter of public display and discussion25—and, more recently, a security issue as a result of the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in the region.26 Contemporary artists carefully followed these discussions and consciously or

23 Author's interview with a writer, April 12, 2011, Almaty, Kazakhstan. The same idea was expressed by numerous contemporary artists in Almaty during fieldwork in June-July 2016 and even during improvised artistic discussions in art studios in Bishkek (December 2017 fieldwork), Astana (August 2018 fieldwork), and with an Uzbek artist (June-July 2018 fieldwork).

24 The National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana is currently the largest museum in Central Asia. The museum has a Center for Contemporary Art, chaired by experienced curator Roza Abenova, who has been able to win the trust of many Kazakh contemporary artists, including Almagul Menlibayeva, Askhat Akhmediyarov, Rashid Nurekeev, Syrlybek Bekbotayev, and Saule Suleimenova, who have agreed to exhibit their works in the museum. However, relations between contemporary art and official state structures re- main at the level of mutual suspicion locally and regionally. The news of the construction of the Tashkent Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, was met with skepticism by local artists, and very few important figures on the Kyrgyz contemporary art scene express eagerness to work with state structures and state cultural or art committees.

25 Louw, *Everyday Islam*; Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter"; Khalid, *Islam after Communism*; Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam."

26 D. Montgomery and J. Heathershaw, "Islam, Secularism and Danger: A Reconsideration of the Link between Religiosity, Radicalism and Rebellion in Central Asia," *Religion, State & Society*, 44, no. 3 (2016): 192–218; E. Lemon and H. Thibault, "Counter-Extremism,

unintentionally revealed these disputes and complex thoughts in their works. The works of the first wave of contemporary artists searched for the lost past and romanticized what they viewed as the pre-colonial authenticity of the magic steppe.27 This search is not yet over: debates about the nation's past (its traditions, values, and norms) challenge the ever-changing reality of the nation's present across Central Asia.28 These popular and populist discussions of traditions and shame reveal a deeper division in the meaning-making struggle in society to which the third generation of artists speak, with the performances of Katipa apai, Dilyara Kaipova, Umida Akhmedova, and Anvar Musrepov.

What separates these groups and their work is not the focus but the representation. Those who focus on Tengriism (Atabekov, Menlibayeva, Bazargaliev, Bekbotayev) seek to find and to express a space that is empty of dominant frameworks and rules of conduct—there are almost no references to conventional houses of worship and meaning is open to individual interpretation. In these works, one might pick and choose how a shaman should look: like a dervish dressed up in stereotypical Central Asian attire or a naked woman in the steppe (as in Menlibayeva's *Apa,* 2003 video art). The only connecting reference here is the concept of Tengriism itself, which offers unlimited space for artistic freedom and self-expression.

The more recent works of the second group of artists—produced between 2015 and 2017—move away from this desire for alternatives, focusing instead on the dominant narratives of visual Islamization: hijab, mosque, praying gestures and rituals, male beards, and "religious" attire (white caps and shortened trousers for men, veils and long dresses for women). This is a different realm of artistic debate where one can no longer escape the domineering structure of religion and its practices and instead has to critically reflect on its presence in everyday life. During her trip to Bishkek, Umida Akhmedova, an Uzbek photographer who is interested in ordinary people's daily routines, was surprised to find an increasing number of veiled women. In an interview, she revealed that her initial surprise at this development led her to visit more places in the city, including bazaars and other public spaces, where she observed the same tendency toward women visually representing their Islamic identity in the city.29

Power and Authoritarian Governance in Tajikistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 37, no. 1 (2018): 137–159.

27 Nauruzbayeva, "Refurbishing Soviet Status"; E.M. Dubuisson, *Living Language in Kazakhstan: The Dialogic Emergence of an Ancestral Worldview* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism."

28 Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation."

29 Umida Akhmedova, interview with the author, June 12, 2018, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

In this section, I explore these two significant trends in Central Asian contemporary art, first looking at open searches for alternative spirituality before turning to consider critical views of contemporary digital Islam in art.

The steppe, as a silent remnant of past rituals and a source of the Tengri belief system, serves as a canvas for a number of artistic experiments. Said Atabekov brings the steppe into play in a number of his works, almost with- out questioning why and how this sacred image enters his artistic space and language. For example, he and Arystanbek Shalbayev constructed nomadic *altybakan* swings in Vienna, complete with all the traditional Kazakh decorations. In another work, Atabekov took red poppies—the symbol of the Kazakh steppe—and placed them within an enormous cube as part of the 2013 Arbat public art festival in Almaty. Even if it is pictured as a barren space, the steppe is constantly on the move in all Atabekov's works: it can be transformed and placed in the urban landscape and still make sense there.

Tengriism and depictions of the steppe as a sacred religious space serve as inspiration for a number of other contemporary artists from Kazakhstan. Almagul Menlibayeva (the punk shaman),30 Saule Suleimenova, Kuanysh Bazargaliev, and Syrlybek Bekbotayev all find inspiration in Tengriism. The openness and fluidity of the Tengriist framework is a particular inspiration to Kazakhstani artists, who assume (following writers Olzhas Suleimenov and Murat Auezov) that Tengriism as a religious doctrine accepted other religions and was inclusive of other religious rituals and worship, in contrast to the po- liticization, radicalization, and rigidity of Islam.

Almagul Menlibayeva's work is a telling example of a contemporary artist's efforts to reveal the past and overcome "cultural amnesia," as she put it, by exploring pre-Islamic practices and histories. Menlibayeva began her shamanistic journey at an important juncture: the rupture from the Soviet Union and transition to independence. An urbanite, she expressed feelings of not belonging, a sense of cultural disorientation,31 and the need to re-learn her cultural roots. For her, art and punk shamanism became modes of personal exploration, but also of a collective search at a time of cultural and ideological disorientation. Mythology, whether real or re-interpreted, became a space for questioning the past and the self.

Menlibayeva's work appeals to a space in which the mythological is revealed as integral to a people's culture, to their sense of self. It provides sustaining points of reference within a larger world of history and memory where shamanism is part of everyday life, belief, and desire. We may refer to this as a

30 See Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism."

31 Ibid.

form of animism. Animism, on Emile Durkheim's understanding, was not an outmoded belief structure but rather one which renewed itself in the face of challenges that threatened believers' livelihoods, if not their way of life. It was a way of organizing and conducting their lives to which nature and land were integral. To animism and the clash of the old and new lifestyles, Menlibayeva brings the context of the urban city, of the intermingling of different cultures and modes of life. This creates what she has called *punk shamanism:* the shaman who is so contemporary he or she lives and thrives in the city without forgetting the old ways of ritualization. This admixture makes clear the capacity to engage with—if not be a rebellious part of—urban modernity and an ideology of contemporaneity.32

The shamanism and search for alternative spirituality in Menlibayeva's work can be viewed as an attempt to step away from the dominant frameworks of Central Asian religious practices and the historicization and presentation of religion *per se*. The artist takes power over establishing the rules and rituals: she imagines the steppe and history in her work, but at the same time she critiques that system of domination and questions who has the power to determine the final truth about Central Asia's past or present. In her 2010 work "Wrapping History," she questions the multiplicity of Central Asian heritage as a transiting space but also the heart of the Silk Road and a space for constant change and competition between different religious practices that inevitably flourish through the constant exchange and import of ideas. In the center of this work is a woman wrapped in the traditional Central Asian silk, *ikat*; her head, eyes and body are covered to represent the transitory nature of the Silk Road and her own unawareness of the present situation. Behind her is a sacred place, a typical mausoleum, which serves as a remnant of the past and cur- rent space for religious pilgrimage in Central Asia. Sacred places like mausoleums serve as spaces of collective meaning-making: all rituals are constructed through common knowledge and it is considered important to visit the sites themselves.33 Similar to the explorations of Kyzyl Traktor members in Turkestan, Menlibayeva states her questions about her "self" identity and about her nation's past and future using the lens of spirituality and heritage. She warns the viewer, however, that there is no place for linear and straightforward answers: Central Asia as a region is far more complex than to be described simply as "Islamic" and at times in its history it is in the position of voiceless colonial

32 C. Merewhether, introductory essay to A. Menlibayeva, *Art Portfolio* (2015), p. 1–8.

33 Dubuisson, *Living Language in Kazakhstan*; W. Schwab and U. Bigozhin, "Shrines and Neopatrimonialism in Southern Kazakhstan," in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), 89–109.

subject upon whom such categorizations are imposed. Menlibayeva is one of the figures most vocal in support of Central Asian and Kazakhstani decolonization, for example, and this clearly shows through in her works.

The categories of private/personal and public are strategically present in the contemporary art of Central Asia. Just as for Menlibayeva a very personal search for the self becomes an issue of public discussion and even criticism, other contemporary artists interested in spirituality face the same challenge. Ulan Dzhapparov, a Bishkek-based art curator and contemporary artist, has been thrown into this dichotomy due to his work on nomadic burial. Driven by the very private tragedy of the funeral, he reconstructed the Islamic ritual of wrapping the body before the burial and created a sarcophagus made of felt to make this ritual more Central Asian. Felt is used in the region for various purposes: to cover the yurt, a nomadic movable house; to decorate the interior of the house; and even to make warm clothes and shoes for the winter. Thus, one of the interpretations of Dzhapparov's work is that the dead body wrapped in felt finds its final home in its own culture. In Dzhapparov's photos, one can follow the burial procession to the Islamic cemetery, where men hold the felt as though it were a coffin.

"A lot of my paintings come to me from somewhere, as if above or from the past. You know, I don't direct this process. I just take what I am given and I paint it," reveals Kuanysh Bazargaliev, another talented contemporary artist. Bazargaliev, who is from Kazakhstan, recently displayed his numerous works for a group of Russian artists, an elderly art historian, local curators, and local young artists, all of whom were present at the legendary saukuba working studio— the studio where Bazargaliev (kuba) and his wife, talented contemporary artist Saule Suleimenova (sau), create their works. Bazargaliev had painted a number of ornamented flags, each positioned carefully in the display—here an American flag with the traditional Central Asian or Kazakh ornament *kosh- kar myuyiz*, there a British Union Jack in the same style. The show concluded with a triptych very different from the rest of his work. The white background was drawn using the artist's unique technique of covering the space with 3D fractures and strokes to make relief visible when the viewer comes closer to the painting—it also makes it slightly heavier and more complex. In the center of each painting are a light blue cross, a light blue circle, and a square of a similar color (see Figure 2). The square is on the bottom, the cross in the middle, and the circle on top, but all three can also be placed horizontally. "What does this represent?" someone asked. "This is Tengri," responded the artist somewhat simplistically. Later, he went into a deeper discussion of how the three symbols appeared in his mind and haunted him for days until he started painting.

With his work, Bazargaliev does not pose any questions or criticisms; his explanations are as laconic as the depiction itself. People are moved by symbols

Figure 2 Kuanysh Bazargaliev, Triptych 2016.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

and some of the meanings of the symbols they use in daily life are forgotten or "deleted" from history or from a society's collective memory. Some artists canonize certain symbols; others, like Bazargaliev, are more interested in deconstructing and playing with the meaning of what is given.34 Meaning is built layer by layer, just as Bazargaliev constructs the background to each of his

34 Field notes following the discussion in saukuba studio in mid-June 2016 where Bazargaliev discussed this triptych.

paintings, but art is a practice of both searching and not searching, space and non-space, as much as spirituality is both full of meaning and void of it.

Syrlybek Bekbotayev, a young artist from southern Kazakhstan, takes a similar philosophical approach to Bazargaliev in some of his works. Two of his installations in particular were constructed as open-ended and unfinished discussions. In 2011, during an artistic festival near Almaty, Bekbotayev created an installation with an old Soviet TV set near a tree. In contemporary Central Asia, Tengriist belief accords special power to trees and nature. People tie rib- bons and pieces of cloth to the "sacred" trees near mausoleums, mosques, and other sacred places. Bekbotayev returned to the idea of ribbons with his 2014 installation "Leaf" in Russia (see Figure 3).

In 2011, Bekbotayev's main focus was time and generational ruptures. In his "Cinema for *Aruakhs*" (an *aruakh* is a Central Asian sacred spirit), the old TV set was supposed to represent the different value system of the new generation, to which Bekbotayev himself belongs: the first post-Soviet generation is more interested in consumer culture than traditions and spirituality, claims the artist (see Figure 4). When he tied the TV set to the wooden structure, imitating the threads and ribbons that feature in the Tengriist ritual, he wanted to draw attention to this specific generational and temporal rupture in values and worldviews. But "some people in the audience came up to me and asked who the TV was for, so I said it was for the ancient spirits (*aruakhs*)," the artist later revealed.35 This transformation of the initial artistic idea into something seemingly meaningless—how can ancient spirits understand such a modern

Figure 3 Syrlybek Bekbotayev, "Leaf" (2014)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

35 Syrlybek Bekbotayev, interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Figure 4 Syrlybek Bekbotayev, "Cinema for Aruakhs" (2011)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

creation as a TV?—indicates Bekbotayev's success in establishing artistic and interpretational freedom through his installations. To him, there are infinite angles from which to view any artistic work, and the viewer has the power to decide on what level (meaningful or meaningless) they will interpret it. Both Bazargaliev and Bekbotayev describe their openness to different interpretations as part of a search for some kind of artistic Tengriism—the sphere of thought where any meaning can be ascribed to any aspect of art, religion, or daily ritual. For them, Tengriism is and always has been a spiritual practice of openness and inclusiveness.

Hijab and the City

The issue of religious veiling for women has been a heated debate in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.36 In this section, I turn to look at

36 J. McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (2009): S127-S144; J.C. McIntosh, "Beyond the Veil: The Influence of Islam on Female Entrepreneurship in a Conservative Muslim Context," *International Management Review*, 6, no. 1 (2010): 102–111; N. Borbieva, "Empowering Muslim

the works of four female artists from Central Asia—Ekaterina Nikonorova, also known as the goddess Katipa apai; Saule Suleimenova; Umida Akhmedova; and Dilyara Kaipova—all of whom provide an important evaluation of this trend through their artwork.

Ekaterina Nikonorova's Katipa apai clearly and visually breaks cultural and religious boundaries and stereotypes. She does not discriminate against any- one based on their national, gender, or sexual identification and believes in universal acceptance of religiosity and inclusivity of all. Through the discourse of Katipa apai, Nikonorova reconstructs religious myths to create her own artistic form of a cult, with its own meaning, agenda, and performative value: she dresses up in a white veil and performs "Kazakh feng shui" by "cleaning the space" with what looks like a portrait of Kazakhstan's first president (see Figure 5). In her own words, Katipa apai is the "goddess of unrequited love, of water-saving, health, abstract art; she is the patroness of queer people and unborn children."37 Katipa apai claims that her religion stems from Tengriism, and it is her embodiment of this alternative view on spirituality and culture that makes her presence so strong. In the words of art activists from stab (School of Theory and Activism, Bishkek), where Katipa apai and her priest, LGBTQ activist and writer Anatoly Chernoussov, organized the biggest performance so far,38 Katipa apai, the artist, quite "sincerely" represents this artistic religious cult. They add that,

> At a time when societal discussion of religion and religiosity has become taboo and when every careless statement [about religion in Central Asia] can cause you to be accused of "insulting the feelings of believers," [Katya Nikonorova's] discourse of self-defined goddess [Katipa apai] is a very brave one, although it is also clearly demarcated from the usual artistic critique of religion.39

Women: Independent Religious Fellowships in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Slavic Review*, 71, no. 2 (2012): 288–307; J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Nozimova, "*Hijab* in a Changing Tajik Society."

37 "Kto takaia Katipa apai?" http://horde.me/Katipaapai/kto-takaya-katipa-apay.html (accessed August 17, 2017).

38 The video of the performance is available at "Pervoe prishestvie B-ni Katipy Apai," YouTube video, 20:41, uploaded by "Art Initiatives," April 19, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rMTzOi7tGI (accessed August 18, 2017).

39 "stab Spring 2017 report," http://art-initiatives.org/ru/content/my-izvrashchency-s-na- mi-bog (accessed August 18, 2017).

Figure 5 "Kazakh Feng Shui" from Katipa apai performance in Bishkek 2016. Source: Art Initiatives.

According to stab's activists, Katipa apai does not "radically deny" religion or religious cults but rather embodies her own version of it. This embodiment is a critique of the clearly demarcated postulates of religion and religious identity in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, with their specific rules and rituals. As a conceptual artist, Nikonorova follows up on her religious discourse of Katipa apai and her performances of "healing the nation" with explanatory texts that she shares online on her social media (blog and Facebook account) prior to or following each performance. In these texts, which are usually read by Katipa apai's priest, Anatoly Chernoussov, she explains that her actions are directed against the stereotypes associated with national and nationalist dis- courses, gender discrimination, and sexual discrimination against all people. For example, the text that accompanied Katipa apai's Bishkek performance explained that "Katipa apai, the creative mother and the mother who grants freedom, gives her children radical practices of materializing the emptiness that are called contemporary art in public." Through these "artistic practices," Katipa apai "reaches religious consciousness, integrates it with the universal and represents humanity at the exhibits of the artistic arrogance fair far be- yond the limits of dimensions."40 This type of art therapy also becomes a point

40 From Katipa apai's performance in Bishkek, "Pervoe prishestvie B-ni Katipy Apai."

of cultural and spiritual "training" of the viewing audiences to see alternative aspects of religious and artistic practices not as social or cultural deviance but as a new norm of artistic freedom.

Katipaapaism is a form of artistic performance but also an artistic practice and self-identification that evolves with every performance. Some critics in Almaty viewed Nikonorova's veiling as a protest and revolt at first, but later had to agree that what she does with Katipaapaism is "a far more complex artistic language and message" that engages with and counters the dominant stereotypes about spirituality, ethnicity, and gender.41 Her presence and the audience's sincere and warm reaction to her performances make her even more visible and valuable for the local contemporary art scene wherever and when-ever she appears.

Just as female artists are some of the most visible, most talented, and strongest representatives of the Central Asian contemporary art movement, female figures occupy an important position in these works. Certain artists seek to give women more agency than they have historically had, moving them beyond lifeless images of heroines of the motherland or objectified archetypes of national female purity.42 Women's spirituality has also become a major theme used by state discourses, as well as by social and religious institutions, to critique, condemn, or discipline them. What is at stake in these complex discussions are the aspects of tradition, history, and authenticity claimed by different actors, who portray themselves as being the protectors of these traditions and cultural values but tend to use these aspects to curtail women's freedom of expression and the pluralism of their views.43 Contemporary art plays a significant role in providing alternative and plural views on these discussions of re-traditionalization and religious fundamentalism. Each significant artistic

41 Art critic, interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

42 N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); D. Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *Millennium*, 20, no. 3 (1991): 429–443; C. Werner, "Women, Marriage and the Nation-State: The Rise of Nonconsensual Bride Kidnapping in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in P. Jones Luong (ed.), *The Transformation of Central Asia. States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 59–92; E. Marat, "State-Propagated Narratives about a National Defender in Central Asian States," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies,* 6/7 (2007); H. Blakkisrud and N. Abdykapar kyzy, "Female Heroes in a Man's World: The Construction of Female Heroes in Kyrgyzstan's Symbolic Nation-Building," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 25, no. 2 (2017): 113–135; D.T. Kudaibergenova, "Between the State and the Artist: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in the Formation of Ideas of the Nation in Central Asia," *Nationalities Papers*, 44, no. 2 (2016): 225–246.

43 Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation."

intervention into these discussions is taken as a point of contention, since it tends to simultaneously oppose the re-traditionalist nationalists, supporters of severe political disciplining of religious self-expression, and those who advocate for pious Muslim practices and veiling. Artists take active positions in discussions online, where the majority of their works are first revealed; many public debates take the form of discussions on Facebook and other social media.44

The works of Saule Suleimenova, which are based on archival or contemporary photos of Central Asian inhabitants superimposed on images of contemporary urban walls, garages and other urban structures, first appeared online in the form of photos of her original works. What makes this artistic intervention so successful is that it is based on Suleimenova's in-depth archival and urban research, allowing her to illuminate genuine parallels between the past and the present. In her works, real Central Asian women and men pray (see Figure 6), eat, observe other people, or just smile into the camera. Some of the paintings depict sacred spirits (*aruakhs*) and many represent the everyday performance of local spiritual practices. Suleimenova's works have become iconic in the genre depicting the mundane, everyday lives of people in history.

Figure 6 Saule Suleimenova, from *I am Kazakh* series (2010)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

44 Schwab, "Visual Culture and Islam"; Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation."

Contemporary artist, photographer, and director Umida Akhmedova works in a similar genre. In her most recent series, she focused on how ordinary people interact with Islam. During her 2017 trip to Bishkek (Akhmedova lives in Tashkent), she visited bazaars, public squares, parks, and other public places to explore the everyday routine of the Kyrgyz capital's inhabitants.45 Her camera captured the rise in veiling and hijab-wearing among local women, but also the ease with which they have incorporated this custom into their lives. Many veiled women do not wear long dresses and continue to live as cosmopolitan urbanites. In other words, spirituality and veiling are not uniform and leave women with agency over their bodies and lives.

Dilyara Kaipova, another contemporary artist from Uzbekistan, is concerned with the cultural transformations and Islamization taking place in contemporary Central Asia. She works with traditional materials such as *ikat* silk to juxtapose Central Asian culture, as represented by the fabric, with veiling and strict religious practices. Kaipova is also interested in everyday Islamic practices, including how people, especially women, interact with Islam and how they can be condemned or portrayed negatively. In general, her works focus on cultural transitions and the understanding of the unique, authentic local culture, in contrast to hegemonic state perceptions of national culture. She further juxtaposes *ikat* and women's social and cultural positions with globalized images of pop culture (Captain America, the Scream mask, Mickey Mouse). These globalized brands and consumerist slogans are woven into the traditional silk-making technique. Kaipova's focus here is not criticizing any particular views, whether traditional or globalized, but rather providing a multi-dimensional perspective of culture and condemning singular, dominant forms of expression. Her artwork almost asks, "Which is better: hiding in religion or retraditionalization? Is there any harm in either of these practices?"

While Kaipova is ambivalent in her answers to these questions, her younger colleague across the border in Almaty, Anvar Musrepov, is more firm in his criticism. In his portrayal of a Kazakh woman in a burka (see Figure 8), he plays with two radical dimensions of the "traditional." In the first picture, the woman is dressed up in what is considered an iconic version of Kazakh national dress. Used mainly for theatrical and Nauryz traditional performances on stage, Kazakh national dress has recently became a popular attribute of *Kyz uzaty*—the pre-wedding farewell party for the bride. However, very few people wear such national dress in daily life. In the second photo, the same

45 The album was initially published online by the BBC's Central Asia service in September 2017 and duplicated on Akhmedova's personal Facebook page.

woman is shown veiling herself in black material. In the third and final frame, she is presented fully dressed in a black burka.

Digital Islam and Performative Spirituality: Toward a New Universalism?

Anvar Musrepov is a noted critic and active participant in discussions on cultural forms in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. His works combine resonant everyday practices with pointed reflections on the reality surrounding him and his society. He has long been criticized in public but praised by the art community for his video art and photography, which are dedicated to the study of traditionalism, spirituality, and social norms. All Musrepov's works are widely shared online through his YouTube and Vimeo channels, as well as his Facebook and Twitter presences.

Musrepov's work "Praying" (see Figure 7) shows a group of Kazakh or Central Asian men dressed in different styles, from sports attire to the Islamic white cap. All four men are seen praying before a feast, which features traditional horse meat (*beshparmaq)* in the center of the table, salads, and bottles of vodka and cognac, as well as a traditional teapot of milky black tea. At first, no one spots anything wrong with this picture, though some viewers hone in

Figure 7 Anvar Musrepov, "Praying" (2017)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

on the beards: male religious expression soon to be controlled by the relevant administrative unit in Kazakhstan.46 Only a few viewers note and are disappointed by the irony that the prayer is performed next to at least three bottles of alcohol, which Islam considers it a sin to consume. Musrepov, for his part, is not bothered by this depiction of everyday reality, since Islamic practices in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia are often accompanied by the competing cultural practice of alcohol consumption. Traditions new and old are intertwined with the performance, which seems so natural to local contexts but also so alien to Islamic canons. In many ways, this work ridicules the contemporary approach to halal in Kazakhstan: in anecdotes, groups of Kazakh men are often described as buying excessive amounts of alcohol but asking whether the sausage they buy with it is halal. Far from condemning these practices, Musrepov's works aim to explore what is normal in this society and what has the power to be considered a norm in the "traditionalist" or religious sense.

The clash of these two concepts is also represented in his other works, including the aforementioned "Kazakh woman in a burka," which critically questions both Kazakh and Islamic traditions. Is it sinful to cover a woman's body or is it sinful to expose her long braided hair, a symbol so canonical of Central Asian culture that it is depicted in all visual classical artwork and literature and is still practiced? In contemporary Turkmenistan, for example, two braids are obligatory for schoolgirls and unmarried university students as part of

Figure 8 Anvar Musrepov, "Kazakh Woman in a Burka" (2016)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

46 "Kazakhstan Targets Beards, Pants In Fight Against 'Destructive Religious Movements,'" *rfe/RL*, February 4, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-targets-islamist-beards- pants-destructive-movements/29017566.html (accessed September 19, 2018).

the official uniform. Thus, in his work Musrepov questions the value of each tradition and how people can combine these conflicting views on what is authentically local and alien with the daily practice of religious and traditional lifestyles.

In the "Haram" video, Musrepov depicts a middle-aged Central Asian man with a beard and a white Islamic cap on his head. The man appears atop the yurt, above its main sacred piece, *shanyraq*. The round structure at the top of the yurt serves as the foundation of the house. There is a cross in the middle (see Figure 9) and every element of this structure, including the decorative colorful streamers, signifies cultural heritage and symbolizes happiness. To wit, when Kazakhs want to wish one another good things, they might say, "May your *shanyraq* always be bright and strong." In the video, the camera is focused on the open *shanyraq* from inside the yurt, as if a silent observer is looking up at the bright blue sky above. Suddenly, the viewer hears the knock of the nail and hammer. The camera slowly reveals a religious man in a white gown and white cap and with a beard. He takes one panel after another and hammers them down to close the *shanyraq*. After he finishes his job, the yurt is dark but the sound of hammering can still be heard in the background.

So far, Musrepov has been the most active critic among Central Asian artists of religious fundamentalism and the controlling forms of these religious practices. He has dedicated most of his artistic work to the discussion of these issues and even made an attempt to discuss these concerns with the wider public during a pre-arranged "talk with the artist" in Almaty in January 2018.

Figure 9 Still from Anvar Musrepov's video "Haram" (Sin) (2016)
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

His latest work, a video in Astana, questioned the combination of archaic ritualization and modern technology in the main building at the Astana expo 2017. In the description field, Musrepov wrote, "the smoke [of the ritualistic herbs] dissolves over the sphere of the expo 2017 [main pavilion building], destroying evil spirits and clearing the way to a new modernized Kazakhstan."47

Conclusion

In the absence of any stable centralized structure or museum of contemporary art, Central Asian artists are forced to take their works to botanical gardens (Artbatfest public art, 2016), playgrounds (Bishkek public art), and personal art studios (if these are not attacked, as they have been in the cases of Vyacheslav Akhunov in Tashkent and Erbossyn Meldibekov in Almaty). They also move their works and important texts online. A virtual museum of contemporary art has long been available via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Vimeo. Personal blogs, webpages, and photo albums of recent works replace curated museum spaces, and viewers do not need to travel or pay an entry fee to see and engage with these artworks. In addition, artists are quite active online, providing textual descriptions and engaging in discussions.48

The absence of institutionalization gives this vivid field of art producers substantial independence from any state structure. Thus, contemporary art in the region provides a space for multi-level pluralistic discussions of religion and spirituality. It makes an important contribution to discussions, criticism, and rethinking of the nature of spirituality, transgression of cultural and religious practices, the problems of self-identification, and communal issues connected to religion.

47 A. Musrepov, *Time and Astana* exhibition program, 2018.

48 Kudaibergenova, "Contemporary Public Art and Nation."