

Religion in Kazakhstan

Islam became the official religion of the Kazakhs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Its main centers were Turkestan, Khwarazm, Bukhara and Astrakhan. Merchants played an important role in the spread of Islam among the Kazakhs. While describing the events of 1508-9, Ibn Ruzbih an wrote that “Kazakh merchants study the precepts of Kazakh dresses, jewelry and their way of life in the sixteenth century, Mohammedanism and now their khans and sultans are Muslims. They read the Qur’an, say their prayers and send their children to school”. Islam did not, however, strike deep roots among the ordinary people, most of whom remained unaffected by its dogma, tending instead to cling to the beliefs of the pre-Islamic period, based on the worship of Tengri. The concept of Tengri was adapted to the new conditions: the deity gradually took on a monotheistic form and began to be identified with Allah. It is not only by chance that the dual concepts of “Tengri-Allah”, “Tin-Aruakh” and “Martu-Shaytan” came into popular use.

Despite the teaching of Islam, the people continued to worship their ancestors and kept images of them. The old rites were especially observed by the nomads, who were little affected by Islam. All these beliefs were denounced by the Islamic clergy (culama’). The shaykhs (head men, tribal leaders) and qazis (judges) of Bukhara, acting at the instigation of Shaybani Khan, drew up a fatw (legal opinion) in which it was asserted that since the Kazakhs were idolaters , the khan should proclaim a holy war against them.

The Kazakhs worshipped the spirits of the earth (Zher-ana) and water (Su-ana), to whom they consecrated unusually shaped mountains and cliffs, caves, groves, lone trees and springs. They also continued to worship the tutelary spirits of sheep (Sholpan-ata), cows (Zengi-ata , horses (Kambar-ana) and camels (Oysil-qara). Offerings of mare’s milk were made to the moon and sun, with prayers for obtaining the live-giving gift of water and dew. Fire worship (Ot-ana) played a

very important role in the life of the Kazakhs. Fire was regarded as the tutelary spirit of home and hearth.

Some elements in the brutal customs of the Kazakhs also dated back to ancient beliefs. On the death of warrior, his bow, spear, saddle and the head of his favorite horse were placed beside him in his tomb, and food and drink were left for him. The custom of the wake was observed when a man died at home. On the following day the deceased was subjected to purification by fire, after which he was buried. Hobbles were buried in holy places: for example, near the mausoleum of Khodja Akhmed Yassawi in Turkestan, mausoleums called kumbez (Persian, gumbad, dome) or sagana-tam of richly ornamented fired brick were built for members of the nobility. In the Mangishlaq and the north Caspian regions such mausoleums were built of coquina.

Used materials:

Zhanat Kundakbayeva, "History of Kazakhstan in the late medieval period of the XIII-the first third of the XVIII centuries"