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THE CONCEPT OF SACREDNESS IN CENTRAL ASIA (The Case of Kazakhstan)

Annotation. This article explores the concept of sacredness as a key element of the spiritual and cultural identity of the peoples of Central Asia, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan. Sacredness in this context encompasses a wide range of phenomena — from religious sites and natural landscapes to historical monuments associated with spiritual traditions and national memory. The analysis pays special attention to the state project «Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan», implemented within the framework of the program «Course towards the Future: Modernization of Kazakhstan's Identity» (Bolashaqqa Bağdar: Ruhani Jańgyru). This project aims to systematize and promote sacred sites as a foundation for strengthening the national code and fostering cultural self-awareness.

The article reveals how sacred places serve not only as objects of reverence but also as powerful symbols of unity, historical continuity, and spiritual revival. The author emphasizes the importance of sacralizing the natural and cultural environment for sustainable development, domestic tourism, and the education of the younger generation. The article also highlights aspects of traditional Kazakh worldview, in which native land, ancestry, and nature are perceived as carriers of sacred meaning.

The material is based on contemporary research and examples relevant to Kazakhstani society and may be of interest to cultural researchers, historians, sociologists, educators, and anyone interested in the spiritual heritage of Central Asia.

Keywords: sacralization, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, sacred sites, national identity, spiritual culture, cultural heritage, Ruhani Zhanyru, sacred geography, traditions, historical memory, cultural uniqueness.

Introduction

Central Asia has always been a special place where many cultures, peoples, and religions meet. Because it is located between China, India, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, it became a kind of «bridge between civilizations» [1, 17].

In this region, the idea of sacredness (from Latin *sacralitas*, meaning «holy») is very important. It helps us understand the deep spiritual and cultural traditions of the people who live there.



Sacredness in Central Asia is not only about religion. It also includes how people feel about places, time, objects, and important people who connect the human world with the world of spirits.

Even though Islam became the main religion and the Soviet government later tried to remove religion from daily life, many old sacred traditions are still alive. They have changed over time, but they are still part of modern culture [2, 112].

Materials and Research Methods

Before Islam, the main belief system among Turkic peoples was Tengrism - a type of monotheistic religion centered around the god Tengri (Таңır), who represented the Sky and symbolized divine order and destiny. The cosmology of Tengrism divided the universe into three worlds: the Upper World (home of the gods), the Middle World (home of living beings) and the Lower World (home of spirits and the dead) [3, 24-26].

A key part of this belief system was the worship of nature spirits, especially the spirits of the Earth and Water, known as Zher-Su. These spirits were seen as guardians of natural balance. People honored them with sacrifices, prayers, and rituals to stay in harmony with nature [4, 96].

Certain sacred mountains, like Khan Tengri and Ulytau, were believed to be special places where the Sky and the Earth touched. These mountains were seen as powerful spiritual centers [5, 48].

The Iranian-speaking peoples of Central Asia, such as the Sogdians and Bactrians, were strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism - a religious and ethical system based on the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra. At the heart of Zoroastrianism is the duality between the good god Ahura Mazda and the evil force Angra Mainyu, which reflects the eternal struggle between light and darkness.

Fire and water had special religious meaning as symbols of purity and life. Fire temples (called atashgyah) were not only places of worship but also held sacred and political importance [6, 182].

Alongside organized religions, animism and shamanism were also widespread. People believed that natural objects like stones, trees, and rivers had spirits. This belief formed the basis of animistic traditions.

Shamans (called baksı in Kazakh culture) acted as spiritual mediators between the human world and the spirit world. Through special rituals and entering into a trance, they performed healing, fortune-telling, and protection ceremonies.

Starting from the 8th century, Islam began to gradually spread into Central Asia. By the 10th–11th centuries, it had become the main religion. However, the process of Islamization was slow and complex, and often involved syncretism - the mixing of Islamic ideas with older, pre-Islamic sacred traditions [7, 86-87].

Many ancient sacred places - such as mountains, burial mounds, and springs - were reinterpreted through Islam and became ziyarats, or holy pilgrimage sites connected to famous preachers, sheikhs, or saints [8, 257].

One famous example is the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan. It combines Islamic sacred meaning with older Tengrism symbols. Other examples include sacred sites in Bukhara and Samarkand.



Sufism played a special role in making space sacred. Sufi orders like Naqshbandiyya and Yassawiyya adapted older spiritual traditions into an Islamic context, creating unique forms of religious life and experience [9, 101].

Research Results

In the post-Soviet period, interest in the sacred has grown significantly. This was driven by national self-identification and state programs aimed at reviving spiritual heritage. In Kazakhstan, for example, the «Rukhani Zhangyru» program, in Uzbekistan - the restoration of mausoleums, and in Kyrgyzstan - the protection of sacred sites, all show the official support of sacred values.

Today, sacredness goes beyond religion. It is found in national myths, hero worship (like Abai Kunanbayuly in Kazakhstan, the epic Manas in Kyrgyzstan, or Tamerlane in Uzbekistan), and in the sacralization of historical memory. Turkestan, for example, is now seen as the spiritual center of Kazakhstan, and some monuments have gained political-sacred meaning [10, 108].

Unofficial practices, such as visiting «places of power», pilgrimage to ancestral shrines, and the revival of ancestor worship, show how deeply sacred thinking is still rooted in society. These traditions have adapted to modern life and remain meaningful today.

Under globalization, digital transformation, and cultural modernization, sacredness in Kazakhstan is changing. Rather than disappearing, it is being reinterpreted in new, hybrid forms. This article analyzes both official and unofficial forms of sacredness today, showing how it is shaped by media, fragmentation, and national identity.

Sacredness, once linked only with religion and rituals, now plays new roles. In Kazakhstan, it has become part of cultural policy, a tool of political identity, a digital trend, and even a part of youth subculture. This research explores how sacredness adapts and functions in various parts of modern society.

One of the most visible trends is the digitalization of sacred practices: virtual pilgrimages, live-streamed religious events, and online maps of holy sites. Mosques, mausoleums, and religious monuments are now found on Google Maps, YouTube, and social media. Official Islamic pages share prayers, hadiths, and guidance for holy days - bringing the sacred into the digital space.

A good example is Nurlan Imam (real name: Nurlan Bayzhigituly Asanov), a well-known Kazakh religious figure, theologian, psychologist, and popular blogger. He runs active social media accounts on Instagram and TikTok, where he shares his views on religion, psychology, and family life. His accessible style has gained him hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of likes, especially among young audiences.

However, this digital shift also leads to the mediatization and fragmentation of sacredness. Sacred content becomes part of everyday media, where spiritual ideas are sometimes reduced to simple online formats [11, 17].

Today, many young people in Kazakhstan see sacredness as a personal spiritual experience, not necessarily linked to organized religion. The popularity of meditation, mindfulness, and ancestral memory shows this inner search for meaning. These practices are often eclectic and post-secular [12, 47].



Youth movements are also returning to nature and ancestral traditions. Activities like cleansing rituals, visits to «power places», or eco-campaigns like Taza Qazaqstan show a growing sacralization of nature. Nature is viewed as something holy, deserving spiritual and ecological care [13, 201].

In fashion and design, ethno-symbolism is widely used. Brands like Qazaq Republic and designers like Ansa_Mustafa rethink traditional sacred symbols to express modern Kazakh identity. The Kazakh language also becomes a sacred value - as a marker of ethnic roots and spiritual continuity. Language acts as a sacred code, linking generations and shaping cultural identity.

The state also uses sacred symbols to shape national identity. Moving the capital to Astana, building symbolic architecture, naming Turkestan a spiritual capital, and creating memorials to national heroes are all examples of how sacredness is officially promoted in public memory [14, 78].

Turkestan, in particular, has become a multifunctional symbol: it is at once a religious pilgrimage site, a tourist destination, and a place of political symbolism. In this way, sacred space becomes a tool for national unity and identity formation.

A special topic is the transformation of women's sacred roles. Women often lead family rituals, pass down ancestral memory, and preserve spiritual traditions. With growing interest in genealogy and heritage, women are increasingly seen as guardians of sacred knowledge within the home and family [15, 202].

Conclusion

The analysis of modern transformations of sacredness in Kazakhstan shows that sacred thinking has not disappeared under globalization, secularization, or digitalization. On the contrary, it has proven to be highly adaptive to changing social and cultural conditions. In the post-Soviet period, sacredness has been institutionalized through state programs, national myths, heroic symbols, and the sacralization of historical memory, all of which contribute to building a strong model of collective identity.

At the same time, informal and individualized forms of sacredness are actively growing in Kazakhstani society. Digital technologies, youth cultural practices, revival of ancestral and local cults, and the sacralization of nature and the body reflect the fragmentation and mediatization of the sacred. Sacredness is increasingly experienced as something personal, bodily, and subjective, moving away from traditional religious forms to everyday practices where the spiritual is closely linked with the worldly.

Thus, modern Kazakhstani society does not lose its sacred dimension - it reinterprets it in new ways. Sacredness becomes not only a part of cultural memory, but also a resource for self-identification, a symbolic language for political and social expression, and a tool for adapting to new challenges. In this context, sacredness should be understood as a flexible, multilayered phenomenon that plays a key role in integration and meaning-making within a modernizing society.

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Жұмабай Б., Артықбаев Ж.О.
ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ КИЕЛІЛІК ҰҒЫМЫ
(Қазақстан республикасы мысалы ретінде)

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Орталық Азия халықтарының рухани және мәдени бірегейлігінің маңызды элементі ретінде киелілік ұғымы қарастырылады, бұл ретте Қазақстанға ерекше назар аударылған. Киелілік ұғымы діни нысандар мен табиғи ландшафтардан бастап, рухани дәстүр мен ұлттық жадымен байланысты тарихи ескерткіштерге дейінгі кең ауқымды құбылыстарды қамтиды. Талдау аясында «Болашаққа бағдар: Рухани жаңғыру» бағдарламасы аясында жүзеге асырылып жатқан «Қазақстанның киелі географиясы» атты мемлекеттік арнайы жобаға ерекше назар аударылған. Бұл жоба ұлттық кодты нығайту мен мәдени сана-сезімді дамыту үшін киелі нысандарды жүйелеу мен танымал етуге бағытталған.



Мақалада киелі орындар тек қана құрметке ие объектілер емес, сонымен қатар бірлік, тарихи сабақтастық пен рухани жаңғырудың қуатты символдары ретінде қызмет ететіні көрсетілген. Автор табиғи және мәдени ортаны киелеудің тұрақты даму, ішкі туризмді дамыту және жас ұрпақты тәрбиелеу үшін маңыздылығын атап көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, қазақтың дәстүрлі дүниетанымына да тоқталып өтеді, онда туған жер, тектілік және табиғат киелі мәнге ие деп қабылданады.

Материал қазіргі қазақстандық қоғам үшін өзекті зерттеулер мен мысалдарға негізделген және мәдениеттанушыларға, тарихшыларға, әлеуметтанушыларға, мұғалімдерге, сондай-ақ Орталық Азияның рухани мұрасына қызығушылық танытқан барлық оқырмандарға пайдалы бола алады.

Кілт сөздер: қасиеттенуі, Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, киелі нысандар, ұлттық бірегейлік, рухани мәдениет, мәдени мұра, Рухани жаңғыру, сакралды география, дәстүр, тарихи сана, мәдени өзіндік болмыс.

Жумабай Б., Артыкбаев Ж.О.
ПОНЯТИЕ САКРАЛЬНОСТИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ
(на примере Казахстана)

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается понятие сакральности как важнейший элемент духовной и культурной идентичности народов Центральной Азии, с особым акцентом на Казахстан. Сакральность здесь охватывает широкий спектр явлений - от религиозных объектов и природных ландшафтов до исторических памятников, связанных с духовной традицией и национальной памятью.

В рамках анализа особое внимание уделено государственному специальному проекту «Сакральная география Казахстана», реализуемому в контексте программы «Болашаққа бағдар: Рухани жаңғыру». Этот проект направлен на систематизацию и популяризацию сакральных объектов как основы для укрепления национального кода и развития культурного самосознания.

Статья раскрывает, как сакральные места служат не только объектами почитания, но и мощными символами единства, исторической преемственности и духовного возрождения. Автор подчеркивает важность сакрализации природной и культурной среды для устойчивого развития, внутреннего туризма и воспитания молодого поколения. Также освещаются аспекты традиционного казахского мировоззрения, в котором родная земля, родословная и природа воспринимаются как носители сакрального значения.

Материал основан на современных исследованиях и примерах, актуальных для казахстанского общества, и может быть полезен для культурологов, историков, социологов, педагогов, а также всех, кто интересуется духовным наследием Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: сакрализация, Центральная Азия, Казахстан, сакральные места, национальная идентичность, духовная культура, культурное наследие, Рухани жаңғыру, сакральная география, традиции, историческая память, культурная самобытность.