

Central Asian Encounters in the Middle East: Nationalism, Islam and Postcoloniality in Al-Azhar

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A dramatic resurgence in religious identification in Central Asia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been termed in the regional scholarship 'Islamic renaissance' or 'Islamic revival' (Malashenko and Polonskaia, 1994, p. 109). However, the study of this 'renaissance' phenomenon from the social science point of view has been, I think, somewhat disproportionate. Much attention has been given to radical Islamic movements, which although much feared by the national governments and the USA, remain marginal in terms of their social base. At the same time, few scholars have looked into the ways in which Islamic knowledge and culture are being reestablished in the region. If we can describe the Islamic renaissance quantitatively in terms of the number of newly-opened mosques and *madrassahs* and the number of mosque attendees, how can we describe the change in people's attitudes towards religion? What does it mean to be islamised or re-islamised in a postsoviet context? How does revived Islamic identity overlap and interact with other social identifications?

These are the questions that I am engaged with in my larger ongoing research on Islamic revival in Kazakhstan. I began my fieldwork by interviewing students from Kazakhstan at the Al-Azhar university in Cairo; I assumed that to a great degree their presence at Al-Azhar was due to the phenomenon of 'Islamic renaissance'. After completing their studies at Al-Azhar, I assumed, these students would return home to become empowered agents of Islam.

Many scholars have pointed out that religious practice in the postsoviet space has its own peculiarities, resulting from the extremely secular environment created by the Soviet authorities. Although the state-promoted atheism and Soviet propaganda could not eradicate faith in God, by prohibiting religious education and containing religion within the private sphere the authorities managed to create a profound ignorance of religious practices within the self-perceived religious communities. It was of course impossible that this religious ignorance would disappear overnight with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As far as the resurgence of Islamic identification is concerned, many educated people have perceived a lack of foundation in mass 'conversion' to Islam. I remember some friends of mine (professionals) sarcastically discussing the new 'fashion' among young people of going to the mosque on Fridays. One friend told me about some young women colleagues of his who usually dressed in a liberal fashion (mini-skirts) but who would put on scarves on Fridays to go to the mosque to read the Quran¹ and give *sadaqa* (voluntary charity, alms). 'Is this Islam?' he asked me.

Widespread confusion about what constitutes right (orthodox) Islamic practice has been aggravated by a shortage of individuals capable of providing religious guidance. The handful of religious functionaries left over from the Soviet-era Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia² were not enough to satisfy the growing need for high-quality religious instruction and religious services. In addition, many of them had little credibility with the people either because of their past collaboration with the communist authorities or because of allegations of corruption. In the first years of independence Kazakhstan witnessed a boom in public Islamic activities such as the building of mosques,³ the opening of Islamic schools, pilgrimage (*hajj*) and little pilgrimage (*umra*). Responding to the shortage of individuals with proper religious knowledge, Kazakhstan, like the other Central Asia republics, turned to the Middle East as a provider of Islamic education. This was one aspect of the general trend among the Central Asian states to embrace the opportunity to reinforce and to assert their Islamic identity by renewing political and cultural relations with the rest of the Muslim world, from which they have been ideologically and physically isolated for 70 years.

Central Asian Identity and the Middle East: the Experience of Central Asian Students Studying at Al-Azhar

My interviews with Central Asian students at Al-Azhar have exposed some ambivalent attitudes toward Egyptian Muslim society in general and about the Al-Azhar educational system⁴ in particular. As a historic religious symbol of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar continues to attract Central Asian students. However, these students are often dissatisfied with the experience of the Al-Azhar programme of religious education. Although my interviewees reveal much about the Al-Azhar system of education and express criticism of Egyptian society, they reveal more than anything else something about the way Central Asian identity may respond to the Muslim 'other'.

Mona Abaza has reached somewhat similar conclusions about the experience of South Asian students in the Middle East. She writes:

The 'imagery' of the Middle East in Southeast Asia entails an ambivalent and dialectical relationship of great appreciation as a center of 'high culture,' knowledge and religion and yet of dissatisfaction towards the current social and economic reality of the Middle Eastern countries; of compassion to the holy lands and yet aversion of the feudal traditions and violence of contemporary politics. (Abaza, 1994, p. 108)

She also notes, however, that in South-East Asia 'the experience of having lived or studied in Cairo or Mecca is a passport for religious and political credibility and activism' (Abaza, 1994, p. 110). In the Central Asian context, although it might be too early for anyone to assess the prestige of Azhari or Medinan⁵ religious education, since educational connections between Central Asia and the Middle East have been reestablished only for a decade, I would say that the only 'passport' that Azhari education might give to its holders is into the clergy or the field of Oriental studies. This is first and foremost because of the Central Asian secular sociopolitical environment.

In her article Abaza notes that in South-East Asia 'the importation of Arab habits is quite often accepted and venerated since the Arabian desert is a cradle of Islam and thus gives great credibility to physically and psychologically "transformed" returning

scholars and wanderers' (Abaza, 1994, p. 109). Comparing my findings with Abaza's I would say that unlike South-East Asian students, Central Asians have been quite reluctant to borrow anything from Arab culture apart from the language and knowledge of religious texts. Most of the Kazakh students I talked to drew a distinct line between themselves and the Egyptian environment around them. The general attitude amongst students was that they had come to Cairo to learn language skills and religious know-how that would confer a certain 'cultural capital' upon them back home. Although they regarded Egyptians as their coreligionists, they were eager to emphasise their difference from 'Arabs'.

One of the most interesting issues that I have sought to pursue in my research is the transformation of identity on an individual and group level when Central Asians travel to the Middle East. If we assume that they come to the Middle East with the manifest purpose of rediscovering and reinforcing their Islamic identity, what happens after people have studied and lived in the Middle East for a period of time?

As a theoretical framework for my interpretation of students' experiences I used anthropological literature on identity. At the simplest level, notes Jillian Schwedler, identity is how individuals and groups define themselves and their relations to others (Schwedler, 2001, p. 2). Like individuals, groups strive to distinguish themselves positively from other groups (Seul, 1999, p. 556). For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan the natural 'other' from which to distinguish oneself would be the Russians, who now constitute about 30 per cent of the population. One cannot overestimate the role of religion in this 'othering' process. Although in the secular environment of Kazakhstan people may relate to Islam on a very symbolic and nominal level, 'Muslimness' as such remains part and parcel of Kazakh identity, an essential attribute, which makes Kazakhs distinctive from the Russian other.

At the same time, when we refer to the role that 'the other' plays in one's identity construction, it seems we often underestimate the degree of interaction with 'the other', accommodation of 'the other', and even assimilation into 'the other'. Here, I think, Michael Rywkin provides a very insightful perspective into the nuances of identity construction in Soviet Central Asia.

We must accept the fact that despite regional differences, enhanced by ethnic factors, the Soviet way of life could not have failed to influence all but the most culturally isolated individuals. The resulting acculturation (as well as bilingualism that is part of it) does not necessarily lead to assimilation. On the contrary, a certain degree of acculturation might increase one's resistance to assimilation. Thus smoking instead of chewing tobacco, learning to drink vodka, or wearing European clothes at the office has even less assimilative effect than learning Russian as a second language ... The Soviet Central Asian is, of course, not simply a mirror image of his across-the-border coreligionists. He has acquired enough Soviet traits and Russian habits to make him distinctive. But in his opposition to the Russian *Homo sovieticus* he truly remains ... *Homo islamicus*. (Rywkin, 1990, p. 106)

In order to contextualise the sociohistorical environment from which Kazakh students are coming, we should note that Kazakhstan was the most developed among the Soviet Central Asian republics, with the highest degree of industrialisation and urbanisation. In a sense, Kazakhstan could be considered the most successful case of socialism transplanted to an 'Eastern people'. However, we also have to remember that 'Eastern people' themselves were not the agents of the socialist transformation. It

was imposed on them regardless and often in spite of their will, while they had to pay a great human and cultural cost for the 'building of socialism' and Soviet 'progress'. During the forced collectivisation of the 1930s one-third (or half, according to nationalist historiography) of the Kazakh population died of starvation. The demography of Kazakhstan changed dramatically with the influx of Russians and other nationals from the European part of the Soviet Union. By the 1950s Kazakhs had become a minority in their titular republic and remained such until the mid-1980s. The Russian population of Kazakhstan, which at its highest point in the 1970s was more than 50 per cent, contributed enormously to Kazakhstan's development. In the 1960s and 1970s Russian culture and education deeply penetrated Kazakh society to the remotest villages.

In postsoviet Central Asia Kazakhstan has held its lead in terms of economic indicators and standards of living. Demographically, by the mid-1990s Kazakhs had won back their majority status, while the proportion of the Russian population has steadily declined, not least because of emigration (Russians now constitute less than 30 per cent of the population). Politically, the country has managed to remain somewhere between liberalism and authoritarianism. As Oliver Roy notes,

Kazakh society is more complex and less monolithic than that in other countries of Transoxania. Its ethnic diversity, the size of the country, the scale of Russification, the existence of a private sector and a high degree of urbanization make it far harder to achieve political and policing control. (Roy, 2000, p. 135)

According to information from my interviewees and some embassies, there are somewhere between 900 and 1000 students from the former Soviet Union (the Muslim regions of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) studying at the colleges and schools in Al-Azhar. All of these students have come to Egypt to pursue education in religion or Arab philology. The fact that thousands of students from around the world come to study at Al-Azhar speaks of the high standing that Al-Azhar enjoys in the Sunni Muslim world. At the same time, it is no secret that Al-Azhar suffers from major inadequacies, such as a poor material and technical base, overcrowding, and a deteriorating quality of teaching. Incoming students very soon become aware of these shortcomings, as well as of the low prestige that Al-Azhar has at home as an institution for the underprivileged.

As a rule, because of their poor Arab language skills students from the former Soviet Union do not go directly to the college but start at the *thanawiyya* (high school), the *adadiyya* (primary school), or the *dirasa khasa* (preparatory school). This means that in order to gain a bachelor's degree from Al-Azhar they need to spend a total of six to nine years in the Azhari system.

The first group of 20 students from Kazakhstan came to Al-Azhar in 1992. In accordance with an Egyptian-Kazakhstani intergovernmental agreement, Al-Azhar would take a number of Kazakh students annually; they would be provided with a place to stay in the Madinat-al-Booth and receive free board and a stipend of \$25 per month.⁶ Between 1992 and 1997 100 students from Kazakhstan studied at Al-Azhar within the Azhari quota. However, most of them (about 90) dropped out after two to three years. I did not have an opportunity to talk to dropout students personally, but those who remained listed poor living conditions, the different system of education, language problems and the harsh climate as among the major reasons for students to drop out. In fairness to Al-Azhar we should note that there were a similar number of

dropouts from secular Egyptian universities, particularly Cairo, Ayn Shams, Helwan, Tanta and Alexandria, where the Kazakh Ministry of Education also sent large groups of students in the mid-1990s.⁷ This fact, of course, tells of a major problem in Egyptian-Kazakhstani educational contacts.⁸

When looking into the reasons for such a high withdrawal rate, I think we also have to take into consideration the socioeconomic environment from which the students are coming, which differs from country to country and even from region to region within a particular country, as well as between rural areas and the city. For instance, the largest group of Central Asians at Al-Azhar, numbering 250, is from Tajikistan. Tajikistan was the poorest and least developed republic in the USSR, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union it went through civil war and only now is undergoing a period of reconstruction. This situation in their home country, I presume, partly explains why the dropout rate among Tajik students is the lowest among postsoviet students.

As of today, four Kazakhstanis have obtained a bachelor's degree from Al-Azhar. All of them have returned home. The first graduate of Al-Azhar, Qayrat, who is teaching at the Nur-Mubarak University,⁹ is known as an influential religious figure and despite his youth (he is 26) has many followers. He is also the author of several religious books published in Kazakh. Currently there are 140 students from Kazakhstan studying within the Azhari system (this includes not only ethnic Kazakhs but also Uighurs, Dungans and Uzbeks); about 30 of them are at the college level. Half a dozen students are expected to graduate this year. I presume that the impact of Azhari students on Islamic revival and Islamic discourse in Kazakhstan will be felt ever more greatly as more and more students return home with a degree from Al-Azhar.

During my fieldwork in Al-Azhar in winter and spring of 2004, I came to know several Kazakh students very well. I would like to present profiles of some of them.

Learning Religion but Keeping the Culture: a Kazakh Student Family at Al-Azhar

Marat, 40 years old, is a fourth-year student at the Kuliyyat Usul-ud-Din.¹⁰ He came to al-Azhar some eight years ago and received a scholarship from the Kuwaiti Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation, which pays the rent, \$40 per month stipend, and reimbursement for an air ticket home once a year. Marat is a professional flute player. He lives in the Hai Thamin district of Cairo with his wife, Reza, also a professional musician (a pianist), and two small children. Marat and Reza consider themselves to be the most educated and 'advanced' among Kazakhstani students as they were raised in the city and had a good education before coming to Al-Azhar. Marat does not get along well with the cohort of students (about 20 people) of rural background from southern Kazakhstan who have taken on the responsibility of 'supervising' the Kazakh community at Al-Azhar. Perhaps the north-south division within Kazakh society comes into play here.¹¹ Marat says that southern student leaders (from the first wave of students sent to Al-Azhar), who were designated by the embassy to help incoming students and represent Kazakh students before sponsor foundations, abuse this power by obtaining scholarships for their relatives and do a disservice to young students by preventing them from socialising within Al-Azhar's cosmopolitan environment under the pretext that they might join some 'radical' foreign group.

Like the wives of many students in Al-Azhar,¹² Marat's wife Reza went to study Arabic and religion on her own; she has excelled in learning the whole of the Quran by heart.¹³ She has a certificate of *hafiza* (a woman who knows the Quran by heart) from

a *markaz* (centre of religious learning). She is popular among Kazakh, Russian and Uzbek women who live in her area; they often come to talk to her and seek her advice. However, despite her enthusiasm for learning Arabic and studying religion, Reza has quite a critical attitude towards Egyptian society. In our conversations she indicated that she was wary of some Egyptian customs. For instance, she said she did not like extensive kissing when greeting people; she thought that Egyptian hospitality was fake; she also said she had problems with the low hygiene standards of the people living around her. In one of our women's meetings she and several other female students expressed distaste for the Egyptian *Aid-al-Idha* custom whereby a whole family gathers to watch the act of slaughtering a sheep. They recalled how in Kazakhstan the act of slaughtering is only men's business, performed in the backyard, while women and children never watch the 'death of the sheep'. My Egyptian neighbour Dua was present during this discussion and I translated to her (into English) what we were talking about among ourselves. Dua said that there was a *hadith* (saying or teaching of the prophet Muhammed) explaining why people should take part in, and watch, the slaughter of a sheep. None of us had anything to say in the face of the authority of an educated native Arab speaker, except for Reza, who softly doubted the existence of such a *hadith* by asking Dua what selection the *hadith* in question was from and through whom it was related. Dua did not know the answer. This incident shows how Reza is not just a passive recipient of the knowledge imparted to her. It seems that she always critically engages with the religious knowledge and needs a '*dalil*' (in this context a proof of the authenticity of the *hadith* in question) in order to verify it.

The way Reza and Marat give *tarbiyyah* (nurture) to their children is indicative of the interplay between the religious and national identities of Kazakh students at Al-Azhar. Once I was present when the children were told a bedtime story about a beautiful place called Astana (the northern capital of Kazakhstan) where Maryam (4½ years old) and Muhammed (3 years old), both born in Cairo, would go and play at snowballs with their cousins. What was quite a 'cultural shock' for me, however, was that at a certain point in the story there appeared a dragon which would eat only non-Muslim children.

Turkish Islam versus Arab Islam

Erkebulan, 22, is a third-year Kazakh student in Kuliyyat-USul-ud-Din. He came to Al-Azhar five years ago immediately after high school and, like Marat, received a scholarship from the Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation. He is evidently very capable, having finished *adadiyyah* (primary school) and *thanawiyya* (high school) in just two years. He can read Arabic, Turkish and Ottoman Turkish. He lives with Turkish students (five Turks and a Kyrgyz live with him in his flat) and is apparently a Nurcu network member.¹⁴ Talking about education in Al-Azhar, he complained that students had no chance to talk to professors, ask questions or critically discuss the material. He also said that unlike Cairo and Ayn Shams universities, Al-Azhar did not teach its students research skills. When we talked about Central Asian-Arab and Central Asian-Turkish Islamic connections, he said that Turkish Islam was closer to the Islam of Central Asia as it was more 'modern' than Arab Islam and more applicable to the situation there. He criticised the tendency of Arabs to politicise religion. Even when they go to Central Asia, he said, they are more interested in exercising political influence than in the people themselves. He also thought that the Baythat-ul-Baptin Foundation, from which he receives his scholarship, could have

done a better job in creating a network among the Muslim students it supports. 'If this foundation were run by Turks, they would have done it more effectively', he said. 'They are interested in each person.'

Nurcu students in Al-Azhar hold their traditional gatherings (*suhbat*) where they discuss political, religious and social issues in the light of the teachings of Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen. From my conversations with Kazakh students I understood that those who have been recruited by the Nurcu are usually taken good care of. They move in with the Turkish Nurcus, which usually means living in better conditions than they could otherwise afford on their stipend. It seems that the Nurcu try to create an environment conducive for study and learning, and Nurcu students usually do well in school and college. I heard that a couple of Kazakhs have even left Al-Azhar to study in Turkey.

According to my findings, Central Asians have been more inclined to borrow from Turkish culture and Turkish Islam than from Arabic culture and Islam, partly because of cultural and linguistic affinities with the Turks and partly, perhaps, because of the fact that Turkish Islam is more involved with secularism, which better suits the secular conditions of Central Asia. On a sociocultural level, I think, the affinity is evident in the rate of intermarriage between Kazakhs and Egyptians on the one hand and Turks on the other. It is very rare for a Kazakh student at Al-Azhar to marry an Egyptian, while on the other hand, on the one occasion when I attended a Nurcu women's *suhbat* in Almaty (the southern capital of Kazakhstan) all the women present had studied in Turkey and almost half of them were married to Turks.

Gendered Perspective: in Search of a Moral Order

During my fieldwork in Al-Azhar I made friends with two young single Kazakh women, Roza (aged 31) and Gulnar (aged 29), who had been active practising Muslims for a long time and had studied Islam in one of the newly-opened Islamic universities, after which they had decided to come to Al-Azhar to learn Arabic and expand their knowledge of religion. They had been enrolled in *dirasa khasa* (preparatory school) for about a year. Their case was unusual as they did not have scholarships and were covering their own living expenses in Cairo. Their experience in Cairo was especially interesting for me as it had a gendered perspective.

The Kazakh 'diaspora' in Al-Azhar had helped them to settle down in the area where most of the Kazakhs live. Because of their sensitive position as single females, they would ask male Kazakh students to help them, for instance, to negotiate with the landlord, in order to impress upon the Egyptian community around that they were to be respected.¹⁵ When I was conducting my fieldwork I also felt this kind of 'protective aura'. After I had conducted an interview, for example, male Kazakh students would usually ask me if I felt comfortable taking a taxi alone, and even if I told them that I was completely comfortable about it they would take time to talk to a driver in Arabic and explain where I was going and even negotiate a good price for me. I think I would not get this kind of treatment from similar people if I were conducting interviews in Kazakhstan, so I assume there is a subtle understanding that gender relations amongst Kazakhs are different from gender relations in Egypt, and that Kazakh women need to be 'protected' from Egyptian men.

Gulnar and Roza are not the only single women from Central Asia in Al-Azhar. There is another single girl from Kazakhstan who is now finishing the *kuliyyat* (college). There are also several girls from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It may be that many women who are now married were single when they began to study:

for instance, I talked to a recently married Tajik couple and found that the wife had been studying in the *thanawiyyah* at Al-Azhar on her own for two years before the marriage.

Roza and Gulnar told me that they were suffering from the excessive attention being paid to them and from overcrowding. For this reason, they did not like using public transport. Overall it seems that living and studying have been not easy for them, and they said that they were not going to persist through the college. They were thinking about staying one more year and then leaving after getting a certificate from some *markaz*.

When I first met Gulnar she was wearing the *naqab* (a veil which covers everything but the eyes), which seemed rather remarkable; in the secular environment of Kazakhstan even the *hijab* (which covers only the hair) is very rarely worn, let alone the *naqab*. She said she started covering her face with the *naqab* after her arrival in Cairo, thinking it would make her feel more secure on the street and more decent. After a while, however, she stopped wearing it. When I asked why, she said that it felt unnatural, while another girl who was present said jokingly '*jihad* has finished' (she was referring to 'inner *jihad*', as it is understood by believers, the inward spiritual struggle with one's self, the struggle to attain perfect faith, to be good and to do good).

I had many conversations with Gulnar and Roza on a wide range of issues including religion, society, relationships and marriage. Since we were all acquainted with both Egyptian and Kazakh society we were able to discuss them in 'comparative perspective'. On one occasion we were talking about the growing gap between rich and poor and the escalating crime rate in Kazakhstan. Roza said that the high crime rate was a manifestation of the breakdown of social order and morality and that justice and 'moral order' would be achieved when people became more religious (Islamic). Playing devil's advocate, I asked why there was so much poverty and inequality in Egypt when religion was so prominent in Egyptian society. She answered that from an Islamic point of view the wellbeing of society is not measured by wealth alone. Although Roza and Gulnar now lived in what could be called an Islamic community, it was of course far from the ideal of 'moral order'. From time to time problems would arise which caused Roza to question the intrinsic connection between the moral and the religious. When confronted with these problems Roza would 'rationalise' the situation, pointing out that it is written in the Quran that there are so many '*munafiqun*' among Muslims: people who look and act like Muslims but who are not true Muslims. My interviews with single women in Al-Azhar once again seem to prove Hans Mol's thesis on 'affinity between identity-defense and sacralization' (Mol, 1976, p. 6). Women's turning to religion and finally coming to Al-Azhar can be best explained by their need to find some 'order' or 'maximize the order' in the face of postsoviet 'chaos' (Mol, 1976, pp. 8–14).

Renegotiating Identity

In my interviews with Azhari students I asked them what the term 'Islamic renaissance' meant as applied to Kazakhstan. Most of them said that the collapse of the Soviet Union had created a 'spiritual vacuum' which was being filled with Islam. At the same time, they also disapprovingly noted that nowadays it was not only Islam which was filling the 'vacuum', but also a whole range of other religions and sects. In this regard, most of them felt that the government was not doing enough to stop the onslaught of foreign missionaries from the West.¹⁶ Some also expressed their religious

concern in terms of 'conspiracy theory': that the whole country was being run by American and Jewish businesses,¹⁷ which were supposedly anti-Islamic by their very nature.

We also talked about the 'spiritual vacuum' and the 'crisis of morality' in Kazakhstan in my conversations with female students. On one occasion I pointed to a certain contradiction in the argument: if the vacuum is a problem created with the collapse of the Soviet Union, does this mean that under Soviet rule there was no vacuum, but real spirituality? Interestingly, the women agreed that there was more spirituality under Soviet rule than at the present time. Reza, for instance, said that 'then people believed in the future and the attitude of people to one another was different'.

To say the least, then, there is strong ambiguity among Azhari students, especially among the women, in their attitude towards the Soviet past and Russian influence. On the negative side, in Soviet times there were atheistic propaganda and atheistic education and reprisals against clergy and pious Muslims; nowadays it is the flow of morally questionable information and programmes from Russia.¹⁸ Meanwhile many aspects of the Soviet period are now viewed positively: public services provided in the past by the Soviet state; the accessibility of quality education and medical care; and even the communist ideology of egalitarianism, which is becoming valued in the light of growing stratification in Kazakhstan. It is notable that whenever women had any health-related problems they would prefer to go to the Russian hospital or turn to Russian-educated doctors for advice. Gulnar and Roza told me they went to the hospital at the Russian Embassy in Doqqi after they had tried the local hospital in Madinat Nasr and had been appalled by the conditions there. Reza would take her children to a Karachai student who had a medical degree from a Russian institution, even though he was no longer a practising doctor.

Conclusion

The fact that Kazakh students are living away from their homeland helps to crystallise their individual quest for identity, which might be indicative of the same quest on a wider national level. The major drive here is to recover something authentically spiritual which has been lost with russification and sovietisation. This is very much in line with Chatterjee's thesis on how the postcolonial world imagines its modernity by reinventing the distinctness of its spiritual culture, while acknowledging the West's superiority in the domain of the material (Chatterjee, 1996, p. 217). So the students come to Al-Azhar to recover and reinforce their Muslimness, which in a sense can be interpreted as strengthening their spiritual distinctness from the former colonising 'other'. However, in Cairo students find themselves in the midst of the new 'other' – the Arabs. To position themselves vis-à-vis this new other they have to renegotiate their relation with the previous Russian 'other'. Thus the experiences of Kazakh students in Cairo reveal the character of the postcolonial situation and discourse within Kazakhstan itself. Kazakh students' coming to Al-Azhar to study Islam is broadly an expression of their drive for ultimate decolonisation of consciousness from the remnants of Russianness, atheism and communism. However, their experience in Al-Azhar slows down these negative sentiments to an extent that students find themselves able to give the communist colonial project a certain credit for spirituality.¹⁹ For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, Kazakh identity is usually constructed vis-à-vis Russian identity; for Kazakhs in Cairo it becomes clear to what extent Russianness has been internalised and has in fact become an integral part of

postsoviet Kazakh and postsoviet Muslim identity. Their translocal position helps students to come to terms with the hybridity which is a result of their colonial past and a reality of their postcolonial situation.

Notes

- 1 There is a tradition in Kazakhstan of reading the Quran (*'Quran oqutu'*) for the sake of deceased relatives.
- 2 In the Soviet Union, after the initial phase of outright repression in the 1920s–1930s, the Soviet government returned to the Russian imperial tradition of regulating Muslim activities through muftiates (Muslim Spiritual Boards). Four muftiates covering four regions were created in 1943: one based in Baku for Azerbaidzhan, one in Dagestan for the Northern Caucasus, one in Ufa for European Russia and Siberia and one in Tashkent for the whole of Central Asia. After declaring independence in 1991, Kazakhstan established its own muftiate, independent of the muftiate in Tashkent. Its structure follows the country's administrative divisions, i.e. it also has district-region-centre subordination.
- 3 In 1989 there were only 69 functioning mosques in Kazakhstan; in 2001 the Muslim Spiritual Board reported that it had registered more than 1500 newly built mosques.
- 4 In modern day Egypt, Al-Azhar is not just a university, but a whole system of religious education, which exists alongside the secular education system. As such it includes not only colleges but also secondary and high schools over the country, where people who lack access to secular education can study.
- 5 Indeed, I would argue that students who came from Medina to Kazakhstan are looked upon suspiciously even in religious circles as having adopted Salafiyya or Wahhabi ways.
- 6 There are many more Kazakh students who come to Al-Azhar independently beyond the quota. Education at Al-Azhar is free, and several religious trusts and foundations from the Gulf, such as the Al-Baptin foundation in Kuwait, help students to cover their living expenses.
- 7 A teacher of Arabic at the Eurasian University in Kazakhstan told me that he was in the group of 140 students sent by the Kazakh Ministry of Education to Egypt in 1994; he said that only eight of them graduated.
- 8 Despite the fact that Al-Azhar was chosen as an official site of religious education, today it is not Al-Azhar but the Islamic University of Medina which holds the lead in the number of graduates from Kazakhstan. Eight people have graduated from Medina versus four from Al-Azhar. Medina is the second most popular destination for Kazakh students to travel to in order to study religion privately. The University of Medina has a much better material base than Al-Azhar. The education at the Medinan University is also free and admitted students are provided with a stipend of \$220. According to information from the Kazakh graduates of the Islamic University in Medina, the application process there is more selective while the education system is more effective than in Al-Azhar.
- 9 Nur-Mubarak University, named after presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev and Hosni Mubarak, was founded in 2001 by a Kazakhstani-Egyptian intergovernmental agreement. It is considered to be an affiliate of Al-Azhar.
- 10 Kazakh students are studying at the colleges of Usul-ud-Din, Sharia, Sharia wa Qanun, Dawa and Lughat-al-Arabiyya.
- 11 There is a widely acknowledged division within Kazakhstan (as indeed there is in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) between the industrially developed north and the traditional agrarian south. It is in fact something of an oversimplification, as there are pockets of greater and lesser development in both north and south.
- 12 Most of the male students who are over 25 (which is about the half of all the Kazakh students in Al-Azhar) are married.
- 13 At Al-Azhar foreign students are not now required to know the whole of the Quran by heart even at college level.

- 14 For more information about the Nurcu movement see Balcı, 2003. Somewhere between 20 and 30 students from Kazakhstan identify with the Nurcu movement. According to accounts by non-Nurcu students, Turks are very selective in choosing Central Asian students and inviting them to live with them. Reportedly, they recruit the most bright and promising students; this is reminiscent of Turkish (Nurcu) schools' recruitment practices in Kazakhstan.
- 15 I might initially have gained a somewhat idealised view of the 'helping hand' of the Kazakh community at Al-Azhar. Apparently, relations between the community and single female Kazakh students are not always smooth. Gulnar once complained, for instance, that she was receiving some persistent marriage proposals. It seems that some of the Kazakh males help the females out of more than simple 'national' solidarity.
- 16 Kazakhstan has a very liberal law on religious associations, adopted in 1992, which allows all religious associations which have been through a rather simple registration procedure to engage in missionary activity. Since then quite a competitive religious market has been created, and many so-called 'sects', such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Krishnaites, the Baha'i and the Ahmadiyya, are freely operating in Kazakhstan; this has caused considerable anxiety among nationalists and 'Islamists' about the potential conversion of Kazakhs to other religions.
- 17 In this context I heard students talking about the largest holding in Kazakhstan, the 'Eurasian Group' run by Mashkevich, a Jew born in Kyrgyzstan, who is also head of the Jewish Eurasian Congress, a part of the World Jewish Congress.
- 18 There is growing concern about 'scandalous' and 'morally degenerate' Russian talk shows such as 'Windows' ('*Okna*') and 'Laundry' ('*Stirka*') in which celebrities or ordinary people discuss their private lives and 'issues' in public. These shows are aired during the evening prime-time in Kazakhstan and attract huge audiences.
- 19 This positive assessment of some aspects of the socialist past by the students of Islam might also be a manifestation of a certain ideological affinity between communism and Islam, noted by many scholars (Maxime Rodinson as quoted in Rywkin, 1990, p. 87). Both Islam and communism have a certain moral vision of society, the achievement of which requires restrictions on individual freedom. In this sense, both of them are antiliberal.

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