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Abstract

Discourses on religious life during the late Soviet period have enduringly been hyper-normative in Central Asian societies and continue to obliterate the wide spectrum of Muslim practices performed daily from the 1960s to the 1980s. To circumvent this rhetoric, the present article proposes to focus on material life indicators as an innovative method for documenting the intensity of ritual life. It particularly investigates the case of Kazakh funeral rituals. During the Soviet period, honoring the dead according to the ritual prescribed by Islam remained a continual social and moral imperative within Kazakh society. However, the forms of control, institutionalization and repression implemented under Soviet religious policy altered the ways in which funeral practices were conducted. In addition, the material dimension of the ritual performances (remuneration of officiants, organization of meals, etc.), which was an essential concern as well as a means of regulation for the authorities, represented a persistent challenge for Kazakh society. The management of cemeteries and the organization of funerals were imbricated with existing constraints of Soviet economic life, including its shortages and circumvention practices. They required the mobilization of significant resources by the communities. The capacity of families to conform to customs and their investment in increasingly ostentatious rites of prodigality was linked to their respectability. But such rites also hearkened back to the authority of the deceased, derived in particular from their social position within statutory Soviet hierarchies. Given these challenges, the symbolic, social and material space of death thus constituted a place where practices could be deployed autonomously and where Kazakh Muslims could be socialized to religion in the era of late socialism.

Keywords

Ritual economy / Soviet Islam / informal economy / funeral practices / religious socialization

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“I’ll pray. I will lay out the dead man. I’ll say prayers.”

“Say prayers? You, Buranyi Yedigei?”

“Yes, me. I know all the prayers.”

“And this after what, sixty years of Soviet rule?”

“What’s Soviet rule got to do with it? People have been praying over the dead for centuries. It’s a man who’s died, not some beast!”¹

Introduction

In Kazakhstan, and more generally across Central Asia, the prevailing discourses on the Soviet past echo those that circulated during the socialist period itself. They have tended to highlight the fact of political control over ritual life and the compliance of the society with the prohibition of religious practices. When interviewed, the former local authorities or elites, even in rural areas, tend to emphasise how people feared being perceived as believers or religious practitioners. The statuses of former Party member and local guarantor of ideological conformism in society continue to shape the narratives around the Soviet past. As for “the ordinary people of the village”, their accounts of ritual and religious practices are more nuanced. They evidence their regular religious activity especially during the life-cycle ceremonies. Nonetheless, this retrospective discourse often remains heavily imprinted by Soviet proclamations and beliefs. Indeed, one observes that middle aged and older generations frequently make use of a hyper-normative rhetoric, which still prevails in the official circles, and conceals the rise of subjectivities and unconventional behaviors during late socialism. In this regard, the interpretive paradigm developed by Alexey Yurchak to analyse this apparent paradox is still useful for critically approaching the current narratives on the past.² The hyper-normalisation of language highlighted by Yurchak, which obliterates many nuances in practices, can be overcome by adopting a material perspective on religious life. Shifting the focus away from speech to the religious economy dodges the

¹ Aitmatov 1983, 21. The novel tells of the epic story of a single day in which Kazakh villagers go to bury one of their own in the heart of the steppe. But the historical cemetery is now in the territory of the Baikonur cosmodrome ...

² Yurchak 2006, cf. especially chapters 1 and 2, 1–75.

rhetorical constraints contained in discourses that invariably describe atheism as a dominant philosophy or set of behaviours, and that emphasize the marginal or clandestine nature of practices, or alternatively confine them just to the elderly generation. This discursive apparatus, which featured in the prolegomenon to almost every Soviet-era archival report or official text on religion, was internalized by Soviet-era officials and elites, and was perpetuated even in the decades after the fall of the USSR. This tendency can be discerned even in “sincere” representations of the past and the social realities of that time. When one conducts fieldwork interviews with former leaders, this hyper-normalized language is difficult to contest, and rapidly renders conversations sterile. In the face of this difficulty, I propose instead to focus on the material issues raised by the concrete organisation of life cycle ceremonies, as another perspective on religious life.

A wealth of anthropological work has demonstrated that feasts and rituals, as highly structured events, are densely meaningful and intensely memorable to participants. Such events involve the accumulation and expenditure of significant resources as well as a high degree of social coordination, by bringing people together and organizing their work. Focusing specifically on the economic challenge of gathering the necessary resources for such events allows us to obtain more concrete accounts of the events in question, and to gauge the intensity of this ritual life, even if one relies on oral history methodology.

Indeed, by exploring funerary rituals during the Soviet period, one can observe that burying the dead and honoring them according to the ritual prescribed by Islam and custom represented a continual social and moral imperative in the eyes of Kazakh society. Despite religious repression and close surveillance of activities at cemeteries and shrines, the social and symbolic space of funeral rites has historically been subject to far fewer ideological attempts to constrain or transform them than has been the case with other rites of the life cycle. Strikingly, the new Soviet ritual failed to introduce alternative celebrations for funerals, whereas by contrast it was highly effecting in creating new ceremonial forms to mark the events of birth and, in particular, marriage.³ The situation could vary considerably from one Central Asian republic to another, or to one social milieu to another, but the new atheist form frequently superseded or sometimes merged with Muslim rituals. The Kazakhs of the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Kazakhstan, particularly in rural areas (where, until the end of the 1970s, almost 70% of the Kazakh population lived)⁴ thus continued to honor their deceased according to what they perceived as their custom. In line with official data, religious funerals remained a practice respected

³ Lane 1981.

⁴ According to the 1979 Soviet census. Cf. Kozybaev 2010, 676; Zimovina 2003.

by 98 % of Soviet Muslims, regardless of the groups and republics under consideration.⁵

Nevertheless, the conditions of the funerary rite, its political and economic framework, the social roles and functions of cemeteries and the rules for their management and upkeep, all evolved over the course of the “Soviet century.” The Islam of the Kazakhs was distinctive in its dual minority status which was the result of both the demographic history of the Kazakh SSR and the religious policy of the USSR. Between 1926 and 1979, the proportion of the Muslim Kazakh population within the Kazakh SSR fell from 58.5 % to 36 % between 1926 and 1979.⁶ This was the consequence both of Kazakh human losses resulting from the famine of the 1930s and of non-Kazakh in-migration as a result of Soviet policies of deportation and the enforced economic migration of millions of people to the Kazakhstan steppes.⁷ Furthermore, religious repression and state atheism constrained existing practices and contributed further to secularization in the sense of a complex set of ongoing processes including the separation of religion from political rule, privatization or internalization of the faith, “nationalization” of Islam as a cultural marker. If policy towards the Muslim faith was reoriented multiple times, becoming more favorable or more hostile to believers, it nonetheless circumscribed Kazakh Islam to specific social spaces, particularly those relating to death.

Finally, in addition to demographic, ideological and denominational factors, a fourth parameter should be added in affecting how funeral rituals were carried out. Daily life in Soviet society, economically speaking, was marked by quite severe restrictions on private activity, by chronic shortages of consumer goods, and by the widespread use of informal economic practices.⁸ As a result, the organization of funerals was, in many respects, a material challenge for families and communities. For a historian of the Soviet period, this economic dimension emerges as a limiting framework for social life; it informs the social relations in their entirety and acts as a major lever for their transformation.

The period from the 1960s to the 1980s was one of general relaxation of ideological pressures, as well as loosened constraints on a domestic economy based on the cultivation of private plots or livestock raising. In rural areas, the period saw a growth in income from such familial produc-

⁵ Ro'i 2000, 515.

⁶ Zimovina 2003.

⁷ In 1946, Kazakhstan welcomed 866,000 deportees from Caucasus, Crimea and Western part of the USSR and, beginning in 1954, about 2.4 million Europeans, in order to promote the “Virgin Lands”. Cf. Ohayon 2013.

⁸ Ledeneva 1998.

tion, enabling increased “investments” in ritual sociability.⁹ Such changes thus had repercussions on the ways in which the dead were buried and on families’ strategies for demonstrating their respectability. One might note an increase in ceremonial expenses at the time of the funeral, the at times ostentatious show of largesse towards the guests, and, finally, the appearance of mausoleums consecrated to recently dead charismatic figures. It is this interweaving of the economic and the religious, as theorized by recent economic anthropology,¹⁰ that will guide our examination of Kazakh funeral practices in the era of late socialism. This period was marked by an exacerbation of the ongoing crisis within the planned economy – a crisis which was now structural – as well as by an increasing ideological routinization in the sense of an automatic reproduction of political tropes. Given these factors, formal or sincere adherence to the regime coexisted with various autonomizing forces and social transformations.¹¹ This led to a period particularly rich in social innovations. As will be shown in the first section, such an articulation of the economic and the religious had effects even in the attitude of the authorities vis-à-vis the Muslim faith. In the second section, I will analyze the way in which this articulation affected family practices during the various parts of the funeral ritual. In the final section, meanwhile, we will consider the social and religious function of the cemeteries and the new, ever more numerous mausoleums. Although it may seem counterintuitive to associate ritual life and private economic activity with the Soviet experience, both emerge as autonomous spaces that nonetheless became entangled in Soviet structures of local governance.

This article is based on archival sources from the State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan (statistical archives on household economy, tax inspection archives, archives of the administration of religion in the USSR and of Soviet Kazakhstan) and from the archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (archives of the Communist Party of the SSR). It also draws on an oral history survey carried out in 2016 and 2017, in villages and among inhabitants of a rural social and economic environment.¹² By drawing on this range of sources, we have attempted to capture

⁹ Humphrey 1999, 393 ff.

¹⁰ Gudeman & Hann 2015, 2–19.

¹¹ Yurtchak 2006; Elie & Ohayon 2013.

¹² Unstructured interviews collected from about thirty people from rural milieus, born between 1937 and 1969, and conducted in Kazakh or Russian with the assistance of Aybek Samakov (University of Tübingen) and in particular Ksenia Prilutskaia (University of Tübingen) in the Kzyl-Orda, Aktiubinsk, Akmola, Karaganda, Zhambul and South Kazakhstan regions. This survey focused on the material and political conditions of rural life of Kazakhs in the 1960s and 1980s. It was funded by the LabEx TEPSIS (EHES, Paris). In addition to this specific survey, I conducted a large number of interviews between 2005 and 2021 with former local party leaders, officials of regional Soviet

the view of a largely rural Kazakh population, established in kolkhozes or sovkhozes of mixed agriculture or else devoted to stockbreeding: a sector in which the Kazakhs specialized throughout the Soviet period, both in the multi-ethnic regions and in the less Russified areas where they constituted a majority.

1. Money: A Lever for Regulating Religious Practices

The economic dimension of the first anti-religious campaign launched in the 1920s was a major lever for Soviet authorities to weaken the organizational structure of Islam and to control or to repress religious practices. The campaign oscillated between measures to destroy the material basis of religious activity and operations to drain the resources of the Islamic institutions still allowed to function. For instance, up until the great turn of 1928, authorities pumped money out of *waqf* to finance other activities, including funding Soviet schools.¹³ In the years thereafter, the large-scale seizure of properties and the disbanding of *waqf*, sharia courts and madrasas, had the effect of undermining economically a large number of religious figures.¹⁴ For a wide array of them, from imams to *mudarrises* (madrasa teachers), the level of remuneration that they had received under the old system offered an instrumental index by which they could be identified and banished.¹⁵

With the Stalin reversal of his religious policy leading to the institutionalization of Islam during World War II, the economic aspects of Islam activities remained central even while their supervision took other forms. Four *muftiyats* (DUM: *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man*, spiritual directorate of Muslims, placed under the jurisdiction of a mufti), including the SADUM for Central Asia,¹⁶ were created. These were meant to win the loyalty of the Muslim populations and to prevent religious mobilization against the USSR amid the geopolitics of the war, a goal concretized through the constitution of an official clergy. The activity of these spiritual leaders consisted not only in presenting a sympathetic public façade to newly decolonized states in Africa and Asia with Muslim populations, but also, and primarily, in overseeing the training and 'ordination' of imams

trade and supply structures. Their statements are not directly reproduced here, but this corpus constitutes a source for cross-referencing the data collected in the archives and in the oral history survey mentioned above. The most recent surveys were funded by the French National Research Agency (CEREMONIAC, ANR-19-CE41-0013).

¹³ Pianciola & Sartori 2007, 486–487.

¹⁴ Eden 2021, 33–34.

¹⁵ Kamp 2010, 504.

¹⁶ SADUM (*Sredneaziatskoe dukhovnoe upravlenie musulman*) in charge of the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan).

and *qāḍīs*,¹⁷ and in guiding the practice of the faithful, particularly by publishing fatwas. This system was supplemented by a Council for Religious Affairs (*Sovet po delam religioznikh kultov* and later *po delam religii*, hereafter referred to as CARC). This body, created within the respective Councils of Ministers of the USSR and each of the individual Republics, was responsible for approving the mullahs. Soviet authorities took the term “mullah” to mean a multiplicity of religious functions, from mere lay officiants, sought by a community because of their moral reputation and/or their knowledge of religious formulas, to professional theologians¹⁸ or masters of a traditional Sufi Way. The CARC also examined applications for approval by communities of believers at the local level and ensured compliance with religious legislation. Regulations prohibited shows of extremism, proselytizing, undeclared religious activities, unlicensed officiants, and clandestine places of prayer, as well as any pilgrimage to “historic” holy sites (mausoleums, historic mosques, etc.). The CARC thus was tasked with identifying and denouncing deviant and, especially, sectarian practices; stimulating atheist propaganda; and contributing to the supervision of the financial aspects of religious practices. Along with this mission of surveilling and regulating religious observance, they were meant to accrue information, especially statistical, on believers. Representatives from the CARC, appointed by the local, regional and district executive committees – their biographies remain little known – carried out field work and reported to the CARC of the RSS. According to Yaacov Ro’i,¹⁹ such a direct relationship explained the generally high quality of these institutional archives (on which this article has drawn heavily).²⁰ Their content was often neither smoothed over nor aggregated by interventions from the CARC hierarchy. The system’s coercive attacks fluctuated in intensity until the end of Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign in 1964. Repression then weakened and became more circumstantial. It found new life in the 1980s, when it sought to mitigate the effects of war in Afghanistan on the development of religious fervor among Muslims in Central Asia²¹ and the Caucasus. Both the beginning and the end of the period under discussion

¹⁷ Tasar 2017, 242–297.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the activities of certain theologians in Uzbek Ferghana before the 1980s, cf. Babadjanov 2004.

¹⁹ Ro’i 2000, 13.

²⁰ As highlighted by Devin DeWeese, the surveys conducted by CARC representatives contain some ideological bias. However, they also reveal that the Soviet officialdom could and did debate the realities, not merely the ideology, of the religion’s place in Soviet society. Nevertheless, it remains true that the academic literature lacks an investigation into the personalities behind the positions and decisions. DeWeese 2002, 302.

²¹ Tasar 2017, 312–321.

in this present study are thus characterized by a certain leeway in religious practices.

The functions of official Islam, in the sense of the material maintenance of mosques and religious personnel, operated largely on a self-financing basis and, as paradoxical as it may seem, relied heavily on income from mosque donations from the faithful. Indeed, legal almsgiving was entirely banned. The prohibition of *zakāt* (the deduction of a share of one's annual income, established proportionally) was one of the most important measures adopted during the first plenum of SADUM in 1947, while other forms of free alms (*fiṭr* and *ṣadaqa*) were discouraged. Ideologically, such practices of alms-giving contradicted the assumption that the Soviet state would provide for all needs and that no Soviet citizen would have to depend on charity. However, theory was refuted in practice: income from religious services and donations was what allowed the few accredited mosques – between 20 and 25 for the territory of Kazakhstan, between 1952 and 1978²² – to remunerate officiants and a small staff, and to pay for compulsory transfers into Soviet solidarity funds,²³ as well as financing the USSR's foreign policy towards “Muslim” States.²⁴

In terms of everyday practice, the population once again was able to call on “official” mullahs, provided that these were accredited by the CARC and trained according to the legal provisions defined by the 1943 decree on the taxation of additional income for peasants or officiants.²⁵ According to this law, mullahs had to declare income received in money or in kind for the performance of religious rites, and pay the required tax. This legal framework was a way for the CARC and tax authorities to ensure the seamless compliance of such obligations by the registered mullahs, because they would then be guaranteed to exercise their office freely. A more difficult question was how to control the clandestine, so-called “itinerant” mullahs, who were increasing in number from the end of the 1960s onward²⁶ and who took up the bulk of the CARC's attention. The moniker “itinerant” did not only refer to those mobile officiants, who sometimes travelled over long distances to deliver their teachings or participate in ceremonies, even though they all had a stable local address. It was also deployed in a derogatory fashion by the Soviet religious administration as a code to refer to “non-registered” mullahs in order to underline their

²² Arapov 2017, 110; Auanasova 2007, 19.

²³ Cf. for instance, the accounts of the mosque of the city of Turkestan in 1964, Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, hereafter abbreviated as CGA RK) 1711/1/116/162; cf. too the accounts for the town of Temirlanovka CGA, RK 1711/1/116/166, for the same year.

²⁴ Tasar 2017, 249.

²⁵ Semenova 2017.

²⁶ Arapov 2017, 273–274.

“parasitic” nature and evoked a variety of negative presumptions. The versatility of the term can also be seen in the functions these officiants performed as professionals on collective farms. Indeed, they could take part in a range of redundant jobs, characteristic of the overpopulated Central Asian countryside, such as supervisors for irrigation systems.²⁷ The policy of the Religious Affairs Council oscillated on a local scale between the desire to make certain “mullahs” official, in order to better control them, and attempts to hinder their activities, all while requiring them to turn over part of their earnings to tax officials. The contradiction of applying a taxable system to unrecognized economic activities revealed the extent to which money was a means of regulation but also a lighter form of sanction than banishment within a period of loosening repression. In fact, this breach of legality did cause conflict between the CARC, the local organs of the Communist Party and the executive, and the fiscal authorities. For the latter, the absence of a statute for these mullahs was an argument for not embarking on an investigation against them. The fiscal administration also implied that taxing unregistered people would legitimize their activities and status. This was not to mention the real practical difficulties in estimating the incomes of the “itinerant” mullahs, discouraging the tax administrators, who were often castigated for their wait-and-see attitude.²⁸ However, the mullahs were regularly identified by the Council for Religious Affairs for the *oblasts* (regions), which annually drew up a precise list with name, date of birth, address and scope of activity.²⁹ For example, in Semipalatinsk *oblast*, in 1972, out of 73 unaccredited mullahs, only 23 had been taxed, each for an average sum of 210 rubles.³⁰ Six had declared giving up their practice in exchange for non-payment of tax; 34 had not been investigated by the Council for Religious Affairs by choice even though their income and activities were not a secret. Anyhow, taxation was no deterrent to their activities and the authorities were well aware of this.³¹

In the regions where the demand for rituals was strong, as in Chimkent or on the Mangyshlak peninsula, the Council for Religious Affairs took note of this state of affairs; its strategy of control regularly involved mak-

²⁷ Dudoignon & Noack 2014, 94; Dudoignon 2011.

²⁸ CGA 1711/1/116/34. In 1965, the Worship Affairs Council of the ispolkom (local Party executive committee) for Gurev *oblast* reported, “The directors of the *oblast*’s financial bodies did not demand the taxes owed to the persons listed”. The same kinds of complaints are often repeated. Cf. for example CGA RK 2079/1/189/38, Pavlodar, 1978.

²⁹ CGA RK 1711/1/82/48, 1960 East Kazakhstan *oblast*; CGA 2079/1/80/286–288, 1971, Semipalatinsk *oblast*; CGA RK 2079/1/189/54, 1978.

³⁰ The average monthly salary of a collective farm worker in Kazakhstan was 135–150 rubles.

³¹ CGA RK 2079/1/80/281–289. Cf. also Tasar 2017, 212.

ing the non-registered mullahs official. For example, in Chimkent *oblast*,³² CARC investigations concluded that there was a deficit of official mullahs, which explained why there were 220 unaccredited ones. The Council proposed approving between 70 and 80, such that there would be one for every two territories of kolkhozes or sovkhozes (of which there were 167 in the region).³³ In Mangyshlak *oblast*, a vast desert plateau, it was less population density and demand than the scattered, remote settlements that warranted a similar request. Here the Council proposed normalizing the status of the clandestine mullahs “because of the great distances and the impossibility of curbing their activity.”³⁴

This institutional regulation by the CARC regarding celebrants does not merely provide context for analyzing funerary practices in Soviet Kazakhstan. From a methodological point of view, data produced by the religious administration constitutes important sources for documenting such practices. Though such a corpus may skew our account of social reality, it nevertheless remains valuable in enabling the documentation of a link between the mullahs and the cemeteries in which they *de facto* carried out their activities. And it will also allow us to interrogate the economic – and political – burden that organizing funerals represented for families as well as for communities.

2. Investing Death, Investing in Funerals

In the Kazakhstan steppe, key funerary practices such as the funeral prayer (*janāza*) and the repast were highly conventionalized rituals that were observed out of a sense of respect for custom and a desire to uphold the honor both of the deceased and of the surviving family. This concern to maintain family reputation was particularly important within Kazakh society, where the vision of kinship and social relations is based on the lineage in the patrilineal line. Given the constant invocation of genealogy, this model of normative connections rooted in lineage and tribe shaped representations of the past, and therefore of the ancestors, and guided modes of comportment. However, genealogy and kinship functioned above all as a situated discourse.³⁵ Funerals – among other situations – lend themselves paradigmatically to such a discourse: they are an opportunity for communities to reaffirm or rearrange relations of filiation and alliance. While Soviet authorities did attempt to eradicate lineage relations in favor of class relations in their project to eliminate the “backwardness” of Central Asian

³² After 1992, it was renamed “*oblast* of Southern Kazakhstan”.

³³ CGA RK 2079/1/189/58–59.

³⁴ CGA RK 2079/1/189/34.

³⁵ Bourdieu 1972, 71–128; Jacquesson 2010, 23–52; DeWeese 1999.

societies,³⁶ a sense of lineal belonging continued to inform matrimonial strategies, particularly in rural areas, as well as in ancestor worship. If one wishes to explain why religious funerals during the Soviet period were so widely practised, however, it is insufficient to point to the centrality of the funeral rite and its sacred links to ancestors and to the otherworld. Another important factor was the state's low level of ideological intervention in this particular rite in the life cycle. There had been few efforts to introduce and normalize any alternative civil funeral ceremony, with attention primarily focused instead on birth and marriage, both of which were more likely to forge new gender roles and shape a distinct, Soviet-style family.³⁷ Of course, distinctly Soviet funerary ceremonies did emerge, featuring eulogies from comrades, speeches from colleagues, and orchestral music, but in reality such ceremonies were reserved for important public figures. In any case they were not mutually exclusive with religious services. After the secular service, local representatives and members of the Communist Party were taken down from their coffin to be wrapped in a shroud, then buried according to Islamic established practices.³⁸ For a family of civil servants to refuse the *janāza* undoubtedly exposed them to general opprobrium, while the fulfilment of the two rites upheld their dignity both as good communists and as believers.³⁹

However, in the Soviet socio-political environment, the organization of rituals required if not a certain ingenuity then at least certain efforts to gather the necessary economic means and human labour. This could push Soviet citizens into a variety of illegal behavior.⁴⁰ By documenting the expenses incurred during the funeral cycle, from someone's death to the first anniversary of their death, and in some cases also to the construction of a funerary edifice, we can shed light on a range of practices and society's capacity to deal with political and economic constraints.

The funeral ritual in Kazakh society generally involved a number of different stages, the performances of which might vary widely according to the region, family, and character of the deceased. Table 1 depicts a typical list of funeral expenses, based on examples mentioned in the informational reports by CARC representatives.

³⁶ Edgar 2004; Ohayon 2016.

³⁷ Lane 1981, chapter 5.

³⁸ CGA RK 2079/1/189/33; CGA RK 2079/1/189/49; Karklins 1980, 70.

³⁹ Interview with Alken, driver, born 1947, October 22, 2016, in Balhash (Karaganda *oblast*). Interview with Egenbai, born 1938, driver then herdsman in the kolkhoz, October 9, 2016, village of Atasu, Zhana-Arka district.

⁴⁰ Luehrmann 2015, 65–69.

Ritual Payment / Expenditure	Price (rubles) or goods	Region
<i>Fidiya</i> (redemption of sins)	800 rubles	Mangyshlak
Payment to a mullah for the <i>janāza</i>	1 foal	Kzyl Orda
Payment to a mullah for prayer	20–25 rubles / one sheep	Turgai
<i>Turgai Zhyrtys</i> (distribution of cloth)	300 fabric pieces of 0.5 × 0.5 m	Mangyshlak
<i>Shulen</i> (distribution of goods or money)	15 <i>chapan</i> (ceremonial coat)	Kzyl Orda
<i>Shulen</i> (distribution of goods or money)	5 rubles × 300 guests = 1,500 rubles	Aktyubinsk
Meal for the 3 rd day	2 heads of cattle	Aktyubinsk
Donation to the mosque after the funeral service	Carpet + 1,000–2,000 rubles	North Kazakhstan

Tab. 1: Examples of costly rituals incurred in Muslim Funeral Rites, Kazakhstan SSR, 1978 (Archival Sources: cf. footnotes 42–52)

Not all these ritual stages were (or still are) necessarily observed. Such is true for the redemption of sins, which was, moreover, condemned by one of the *qāḍīs* of Kazakhstan, Saduaqas Ghilmani⁴¹— as well as for the construction of mausoleums, reserved for particularly charismatic persons. Our estimates, based on the analysis of general and extreme cases (ostentatious expenses and particularly costly funerals) of the material investments occasioned by a funeral, reveal that the average expenses were considerable relative to rural income. As a point of comparison, the average monthly salary of kolkhoz workers at the end of the 1970s in the Kazakh SSR was 135 rubles.⁴² This might have been supplemented by income from the informal domestic economy, namely by private stock breeding in husbandry kolkhozes. This latter resource was of major importance; even apart from contributing to a surplus in the household economy, it guaranteed the subsistence of the countryside until the end of the 1950s.⁴³ Later, the practice would become a factor of wealth stratification, resulting in a situation where some households held ten times the wealth of others.⁴⁴ Finally, average prices of basic consumer goods as well as of live cattle on the kolkhoz markets can serve as a benchmark for appreciating the scale of

⁴¹ Muminov et al. 2018, 50.

⁴² Kozybaev 2010, 634.

⁴³ Saktaganova 2017, 184–185.

⁴⁴ CGA RK 698/5/835/160–161. This gap is calculated on the basis of an indicator that measures the annual income of households, not of individuals. It takes into account all types of resources a family may receive, including household members' salaries and other sources of income (various allocations; harvests from the plot or herd).

these funeral expenses.⁴⁵ According to archive sources and interviewees, the average cost of Kazakh funerals in rural areas, all services combined, amounted to 1,000 to 3,000 rubles in the 1970s.⁴⁶ Not included here are banquets commemorating the first anniversary of the deceased's death, nor even subsequent anniversaries, which transformed the deceased into the status of ancestor, nor the building of a mausoleum.

Several kinds of expenditures stand out and call for analysis. As we can see, the figure of the mullah was central not only in prayer but also in arranging the different phases of the funeral, even if his remuneration represented a minor part of all ritual expenses. However, the income of the mullahs could vary according to their skills and age. Whether official or, more often, clandestine, their training varied, as did their biographical trajectories. In general, their religious knowledge had been transmitted from father to son and they carried out their services up to a fairly advanced age. In 1970s Kazakhstan, most belonged to a generation that had been born between 1905 and 1910. They seem to have begun their office on the eve of retirement or just afterwards.⁴⁷ Their authority could also be combined with the prestige of a prior position accorded value by Soviet standards; such was the case for a certain Oraz Dzhamalbekov, a former kolkhoz accountant in the Suzak district region (Kzyl-Orda *oblast*).⁴⁸

For the *janāza*, mullahs charged between 10 and 200 rubles. The service could include, in addition to prayers, organizing ceremonies with the family up to the fortieth day, as well as distributing tasks among the relatives of the deceased at each stage. Money was not the only means of payment: families frequently rewarded a mullah with the gift of a head of livestock. From a goat, sheep, calf, or cow, up to a horse, the level of remuneration depended on the family's means; the animal was in almost all cases taken from the family herd. This variability in the sums or goods involved was considered to be acceptable, reflecting as it did the social differentiation of rural Soviet society. In the stockbreeding kolkhozes and sovkhoses, these differences could essentially be traced to variations in income from private

⁴⁵ Sugar (1 kg), 0.94 rubles; flour (1 kg), 0.34 rubles; potatoes (1 kg), 0.14 rubles; black bread (loaf), 0.16 rubles; milk (1 l), 0.28 rubles; butter (1 kg), 3.60 rubles; eggs (10), 1.10 rubles; vegetable oil, 1.70 rubles; beef (1 kg), 2.10 rubles; mutton (1 kg), 2.20 rubles; mutton in the market (1 kg), 3–4 rubles; live sheep, 25–30 rubles; live cattle, 400–500 rubles; standing horse, 1000–1200 rubles; black-and-white television, 296 rubles; refrigerator, 250 rubles; “Zhiguli” car, 7300 rubles.

⁴⁶ The same relationship between monthly income and lavish expenditure can be found in the Buryat kolkhozes at the end of the 1960s. Cf. Humphrey 1999, 392–393.

⁴⁷ CGA RK 2079/1/189/52

⁴⁸ CGA RK 1711/1/89/49–50.

livestock, which on average amounted to 10 animals per household but which could reach up to 150 heads for shepherd families.⁴⁹

As revealed by the wide range of gratuities that could be made to the mullah, these transactions were not determined by strict market principles. According to the archives and survey respondents, the standard cost of services was equivalent to a head of small livestock and was in part conditioned by the level of family income. In addition, moral considerations influenced the setting of the gratuities. Gifts were seen as a pledge to the hereafter as to the dignity and devotion of the deceased, and displayed the honor of his family. Finally, it was a kind of charity to religious servants who depended on families' "gifts."

In this economy of honor, where the exchange of goods and services mediates social ties and actualizes statutory, economic and political positions, the respectability of the mullah himself was reflected in the scale of his emoluments. One of the criteria for these was his place in the hierarchy of generations, in a society structured into groups by age. One amusing example of this can be found for the *oblast* of Turgay, in the interesting trajectory of Khali Kuzembaev, a mullah born in 1898. He lived in the sovkhos "40 Years of Kazakhstan" in the Amangeldy district; though he did not complete his studies at the *maktab* (primary school), he pursued his education on a personal basis with the mullah of his *aul* (Kazakh village, a term whose etymology refers to a nomadic camp) until he was 18. Between many interruptions, he received only four years of education in total. At the beginning of his "service" in the 1950s, he was, as he himself noted, considered a "5-ruble mullah", then a "10-ruble mullah." Only in 1963 did he finally become a proper mullah, remunerated between 20 and 25 rubles per performance, or alternatively receiving for his services a goat or a sheep.⁵⁰ The mullah's compensation represents a complex case of the gift economy, because it includes a dimension of remuneration and immediate exchange. Aspects of a gift economy were much more evident in the *zhirtys*, the *shulen*, and the funeral banquet. The latter three services could vary in scale, but often they required families to mobilize significant resources. In the most demonstrative cases reported by the CARC for the year 1978, we find quite a few examples of expensive funerals for elderly men of a high social position, in various capacities. Take, for instance, the funeral of a certain Karazhanov, former director of the warehouses of the sovkhos – a strategic position in respect of the control of economic resources – who had become a mullah in retirement. The funeral took place in the presence of 300 people as well as the imam of the mosque in Aktyubinsk, a city in

⁴⁹ CGA RK 1137/25/1014/189–191b. Interview with Aibolat, nephew of a shepherd, Kokchetau July 10, 2013.

⁵⁰ CGA RK 2079/1/189/52.

northern Kazakhstan. Two cows were slaughtered for the banquet and five rubles distributed to each of the guests, who were then honored with the *zhyrtys*, or distribution of a piece of cloth.⁵¹ In the Mangyshlak *oblast*, this rite was carried out in the cemetery: a piece of fabric fifteen meters long was cut into pieces of 50 cm, which were distributed to attendees. The first served were those who had participated in organizing the funeral. For the most highly-honored relatives, at the corner of each piece of cloth were pinned 10 or 15 rubles. The remainder of the cloth was distributed with no money attached.⁵² In turn, it was customary for guests, especially relatives, to bring as a gift an animal or a sum of money, which might be at least 10 rubles, particularly during the ceremonies of the seventh and fortieth days.⁵³ Moreover, it was not uncommon for kolkhozes to participate in funeral expenses by granting an animal from the collective herd.⁵⁴

From an economic anthropology standpoint, it is challenging to ascertain the extent to which these exchanges were perceived as reciprocal, due to the imprecision of oral history surveys and archival sources, and difficult also to discuss this point with the literature pertaining to gift-giving phenomena in Central Asian societies.⁵⁵ However, two of my respondents stated that they keep gift and return-gift books exclusively for funerals. In these books, they record the money or goods received to enable them to return the same in some form.⁵⁶ This practice could be also observed for marriages within the same family in the Kazakh society.

Another informant said, in a joking tone, that the funeral is a time of “exchanging sheep”: the family slaughters them for meals and receives them in return.⁵⁷ These gifts classically enjoin an obligation on the parties involved and presume a reciprocity that can be direct or indirect, symmetrical or asymmetrical. In accordance with his social status, an individual may present a gift higher or lower value than the one he has received and transmit it to a relative of the initial donor, thereby establishing a cycle of reciprocal giving. The notion of a “sheep exchange” aptly captures this concept of reciprocal giving. Finally, in this ceremonial economy, the

⁵¹ CGA RK 2079/1/189/8.

⁵² CGA RK 2079/1/189/32.

⁵³ CGA RK 2079/1/189/44.

⁵⁴ Interview with Gulmira, daughter of a shepherd, born 1962, March 17, 2017, in Aktobe (Aktiubinsk *oblast*).

⁵⁵ Cf. among many others: Abashin 2015, 462–478, 583–589; Werner 1998, 597–612; Trevisani 2016, 61–75.

⁵⁶ Interview with Saulie, librarian and trade union official, born 1951, May 8, 2017, city of Karkaralinsk (Karaganda *oblast*). Interview with Margulan, born 1937, animal husbandry inspector in the kolkhoz, October 8, 2016, Atasu village, Zhana-Arka district. Interview with Egenbai (cf. above).

⁵⁷ Interview with Gulmira (cf. above).

meals offered up to the fortieth day hold an important place and involve making available a large quantity of meat, flour (or rice), and sweets. These unavoidable expenses may be increased, in specific cases, by the construction of a mausoleum. These investments are subsequently granted for the burials onsite in the cemetery and contribute to its construction. Efforts to enhance tombs also work to shape cemeteries, raising further questions about their function in the Soviet era.

3. Cemeteries and Mausoleums: Sites Where Autonomous Practices Unfold

In the 1970s in Soviet Kazakhstan, according to observers from the Council for Religious Affairs, there actually spread a veritable fashion for mausoleums dedicated to authority figures, located in cemeteries. Their architectural forms were inclined towards emulating the tombs of tribal chiefs or valiant warriors from both colonial and pre-colonial eras (such as the figures of Zhangyr Khan, Shokay Baykanuly, Raymbek Batyr, among others)⁵⁸ or those of lineage ancestors, which individuals visited to undertake pilgrimages.⁵⁹ Actually, in the CARC reports the term “mausoleum” was used to refer to buildings of a fairly large size in line with a precise aesthetical code: a square, rectangular or hexagonal construction, made of bricks or stone, topped by one or more domes, containing a doorway, and housing a tomb. This model, reminiscent of the historical mausoleums found in the steppe and in Muslim Central Asia in general, was also tagged as “medieval” by officials of religious affairs. But instead of being isolated, in Soviet Kazakhstan they were built within existing cemeteries, i. e. in a category of space which takes on a central dimension for religious practice, most notably through the preponderance of secondary pilgrimages or ancestor worship. The single term *mazār* in popular usage can refer to either holy place or cemetery, attesting to the porous boundaries between these respective categories. Many typologies that researchers have drawn up underline the functional plurality of funerary places as well as the fluctuating borders between religious authority and social and political authority of venerated figures in the fashioning of burial monuments as *mazārs*.⁶⁰

However, as several recent works have shown,⁶¹ ordinary cemeteries have often served to enable people to overcome the difficulties in taking part in collective prayers. As we have already seen, the number of accredited mosques and communities of believers was highly limited, and this

⁵⁸ Muminov 2013, 27.

⁵⁹ Privratsky 2000; DeWeese 1999.

⁶⁰ Snesarev 1969; Muminov 2013.

⁶¹ Dudoignon & Noack 2014; Ro'i 2000.

state of affairs required strategies of circumvention for those wishing to practice their religion. Cemeteries were among the spaces that served as open-air mosques wherever there were no approved places of prayer, or else for those who preferred escaping being tagged and identified as a result of frequenting the few official mosques. Ariane Zevaco has usefully described this practice for the rural areas of Tajikistan in the 1970s, where kolkhoz residents went to the cemetery to pray during the day, during brief breaks from the cotton fields.⁶²

Institutionally, such usage of Soviet cemeteries was made possible by their very status and their *de facto* administration. In theory, the management of cemeteries in the USSR fell to local executive administrations, i. e. municipalities or village executive committees (*ispolkom*), whose domain of authority often corresponded with the territory of a kolkhoz or a sovkhhoz. In theory, therefore, the general maintenance of the cemeteries should thus have fallen under such authorities' control and budget. However, in practice, and with the exception of large cities, the *ispolkom* did not carry out such tasks. Instead these cemeteries were in large part managed by the community, especially given the fact that they were almost exclusively limited to a single faith. Cemeteries were organized separately not only on a religious basis but also on the basis of national identity. In Kazakhstan, in the many ethnically mixed regions (composed of Russians, Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, etc.), the Muslim cemeteries remained separate from the others, which were themselves often confessional. In some regions, Kazakh cemeteries were furthermore distinguished from other Muslim cemeteries by being devoted to a single lineage.⁶³

This practice of organizing cemeteries along confessional and national lines came under harsh criticism by the authorities of the Council for Religious Affairs, reflecting as it did how little the *ispolkom* were involved in managing the cemeteries. Such a task was instead delegated to the local population, enabling it to be taken on by undeclared "religious" personnel. Local authorities also granted funds for maintenance and equipment to "volunteers" outside the administration.⁶⁴ The very establishment of a cemetery was a response to community needs, as was the case with the uncontrolled proliferation of small cemeteries in Mangyshlak, on areas selected and identified by the communities.⁶⁵ One of my interviewees from an *aul* in the *oblast* of Dzhabul reported that there were no rules or regulations for the construction of the *mazārs*. This term is used here not to denote the shrine erected to a venerated holy man but to refer both to cemeteries

⁶² Zevaco 2014, 175.

⁶³ CGA RK 2079/1/189/3; CGA RK 1711/1/89/116. Cf. also Karklins 1980, 70.

⁶⁴ Ro'i 2000, 629.

⁶⁵ CGA RK 2079/1/189/34.

and to mausoleums or even tombs built to honor “ordinary” men: “We did everything ourselves. We used bricks.”⁶⁶ Another interviewee, from the Karkaralinsk region (Karaganda *oblast*) reported: “We built the *mazār* ourselves, from the raw earth. There were no rules even though the *mazār* belonged to the sovkhos, which also had a cemetery for Christians.”⁶⁷ In many cases, the keys to the cemetery were kept by religious and not secular authorities.⁶⁸ Some “itinerant” mullahs carried out their traditional activities as healers (*emshi*), exercising a skill intimately associated with their religious training, including reciting verses from the Qur’an.⁶⁹ Incidentally, the practices of thaumaturgical rituals were nevertheless not limited to such techniques, nor to specialists in the Qur’an, throughout Kazakh popular culture. For example, in the early 1960s, three mullahs from the Kzyl-Orda region settled in an abandoned *mazār* in the Chilibi district, where they revived the pilgrimage to the tomb of a reputed chief of local lineage. After rebuilding the tomb, they established it as the site from which to exercise their healing office, and drew substantial income from it.⁷⁰ In the midst of Khrushchev’s anti-religious repression, they were convicted of “charlatan-ism.” Such episodes regularly recurred throughout the 1970s. In the same region, extending to the Aral Sea, about fifteen cases have been recorded of restoring neglected “holy sites.” At the time, they involved not only the clandestine mullahs but also the district and aul *ispolkom* which organized the collection of goods and building materials to restore the *mazār* in accordance with the custom of donating free alms (though not identified as such), and to resume the practice of pilgrimage.⁷¹

Such low (though fluctuating) levels of supervision over cemeteries thus permitted communities to take an active part in them. The boom in mausoleum construction bears witness to this and, once again, it tapped into resources from the secondary economy.

Although it would not be possible to establish a precise geography here, the proliferation of these mausoleums may be noted in almost all regions, though with a greater prevalence in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan (the Mangyshlak, Guriev, Turgai and Kzyl-Orda *oblasts*), which had a reputation for being more “traditional” and demographically

⁶⁶ Interview with Aitzhan, born 1940, shepherd, Moynkum, Zhambyl oblast, July 8, 2017. Statements reaffirmed in interview with Roza, born 1952, manager of the regional consumer goods supply administration, daughter of a kolkhoz director, June, 2017, in Kandygash, Aktobe oblast.

⁶⁷ Interview with Egenbai and interview with Zhenis, born 1944, animal husbandry technician, Party official, June 11, 2017, village of Nurken, Karkaralinsk district.

⁶⁸ CGA RK 2079/1/189/26 in Kazalinsk. Ro’i 2000, 518–552.

⁶⁹ Privratsky 2000, 193–198.

⁷⁰ CGA RK 1711/1/116/67–72.

⁷¹ Arapov 2017, 333–334.

less Europeanized. Archival reports point to an expansion in large mausoleums and rivalries over who would build the largest monument. According to these documents, the mausoleums tended to abound atop hills, along roads and railway lines, and at the entrances to villages – that is, in highly visible locations.⁷² For example, in the *oblast* of Turgai, in the district of Amangeldy, where there were about a hundred mausoleums, epitaphs included not only the name and the dates of the deceased but also the name of the person who had taken on the construction of the building and financed it, as well as the name of the lineage, and sometimes also that of the tribe to which the deceased belonged. Here again, this aspect of funeral practice involved significant costs and procedures that ran contrary to the Soviet legal scheme.

In the Mangyshlak *oblast*, the buildings reached considerable dimensions. People employed a sought-after local white stone, called “*zhety-baj*,” which was considered of equal quality to marble. The majority of the mausoleums measured 3 meters by 3, and were 2.7 meters in height; the peak was around 3.5 meters. They required 10 to 12 m³ of stone, 2 tons of cement, 100 kg of paint, and a month of labour. To erect them, six to eight workers were generally required, assisted by one or two specialist craftsmen, as well as several vehicles and a tank truck. A special yurt or temporary accommodation – comprising a tent, wagon or cabins – was set up to house, feed, and allow the workers to rest. The sponsor maintained all this staff: several heads of small cattle would be slaughtered over the course of the construction. The cost of materials and logistics amounted to about 3,000 rubles, and the cost of wages 2,000–3,000 rubles. All the expenses incurred for these mausoleums came from purely personal resources, even if acquiring the materials required creating social liaisons through the factories or other, more complex forms of mediation in order to access these goods, which were notoriously lacking in the official state stores.

In the same region, several cases can be recorded in which mausoleums were constructed during the recipient’s lifetime. The camel herder of Ilyich sovkhoz, Saule, had one such monument built for himself. After his death, he was buried there by his sons. The shepherds in charge of the herds of camels were indeed said to be well-off, since they personally held the costliest livestock in the price hierarchy, rare in quantity and prized for *shubat* or camel milk, especially in the arid regions of western and southern Kazakhstan.⁷³

Many of these mausoleums were built to accommodate the tombs of well-known local figures who had worked in administrative positions of authority. This should not be taken to imply that these leaders had been

⁷² CGA RK 2079/1/189/35.

⁷³ CGA RK 2079/1/189/35.

bad, disloyal communists; on the contrary, their power and their charisma depended precisely on the success with which they performed their official functions. There are entire lists of local leaders bestowed with a mausoleum by their descendants: Erekenov, former Party Committee secretary for the Gurev *oblast's* automobile trust; Aitzhanov, former president of the Gurev *oblast* trade union and member of Kazakhstan's Party Committee; Dosmukhambetov, former head of the oil union *Ėmbaneft* (Gurev *oblast*); Tksenov, Chairman of the Arykbalyk aul soviet (Kzyl-Orda *oblast*); Erimbetov, former director of the Muratbaev kolkhoz school (Kzyl-Orda *oblast*); Koshekenov, director of the Tasytkelskii sovkhhoz (Aktiubinsk *oblast*). In the *oblast* of Kokchetau, the president of a district supervisory commission (a body for inspecting administrations and businesses in charge of identifying malfunctions) had a mausoleum built for his father.⁷⁴ The religious burial of these personalities, moreover, was not mutually exclusive with the observance of the atheist ceremony invented by the Soviet regime. For instance, after the meeting of comrades, during which the body rested in a coffin, there was a burial in which the body was wrapped in a shroud and placed on the ground as required by religious law; the empty coffin was burned.⁷⁵

The expenses assigned to these burials, the choice of a dedicated and visible site, the anticipation of their death on the part of certain individuals, the names of the members of the lineage placed in sharp relief on the stelae: all clearly reveal the extent to which the enterprise of memorializing a deceased person with a mausoleum was intended to demonstrate the honor of a man and his family to the community. Thanks to the collective engagement and material commitment surrounding the deceased, it was the relatives – dead, living, and in the mind of the latter, future generations – i. e. the entire lineage that secured for themselves the respect of the community, both within the aul and beyond. However, the issue of respectability was, it would seem, closely correlated with the economic status of the deceased. The resources invested in the mortuary building reflected the social disparities present in that same environment (a kolkhoz, a district), which made the cemetery in practice a place of social distinction, and the mausoleum a marker of economic position. This was all the more true since incomes from the private economy were not, among the Kazakhs, invested in the individual home (unlike the case with Uzbeks or Georgians in the Caucasus, whose incomes were also largely augmented by their ancillary activities). Moreover, it would be difficult to document here how and to what extent this process was linked to the construction or consecration of the figure of the saint, not to mention the making of sacred sites throughout the Soviet

⁷⁴ CGA RK 2079/1/189/29.

⁷⁵ CGA RK 2079/1/189/33.

era. It has been shown that certain deceased religious figures could be conferred mausoleums of varyingly imposing natures,⁷⁶ but it would probably be necessary to cross-reference archival data with other sources – in particular hagiographical ones – in order to interrogate such matters further.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to open some methodological avenues to approach the history of Soviet Central Asian Islam and to go beyond the normative discourses that seek to play down the significance of religious practices or reduce them to subversive or clandestine acts, such as we encounter in certain oral testimonies as well as in the bureaucratic production of the Soviet archives. Focusing on materiality allows us to interrogate anew all these conventional sources and to cast funerary practices in such a way as to render them visible and amenable to analysis. Concentrating our attention on goods and resources is particularly relevant in such holistic lineage communities as in rural Central Asian societies where given objects – gifts, consumer goods or offered meals and feasts, graves – mediatize the respectability of individuals and their groups, and more broadly ensure the reproduction of social norms and relations. By analysing the concrete efforts to fulfil ritual obligations, I have shed light on the intense activity around death within Soviet Kazakh society, both for the funeral rite itself and for the upkeep of its associated commemorative spaces. I have demonstrated that burials included a more visibly public dimension than did other religious practices. The stages of ritual – in particular the gatherings at the cemetery, along with the many meals and the preponderance of mausoleums – required no strategy of concealment, especially in rural areas. Only the prayers might have required some discretion. By contrast, religious marriage services conducted by mullahs and circumcision rituals (widely practiced but disapproved of, and indeed severely condemned as a potential source of health harm), were marked by much greater secrecy. In particular, religious wedding rituals were less often respected “statistically” speaking.⁷⁷ As Beate Ghieler points out for Tajikistan,⁷⁸ the local authorities, in this case at the level of the *kolkhoz*, did not interfere in the organization of funeral ceremonies. Moreover, since these events mobilized the whole of local society, it was not uncommon for the administration of a *kolkhoz* to grant a sum of a hundred rubles to families to help them meet funeral expenses. The absence of coercive intervention by the authorities for religious funerals and sites of death can probably be ex-

⁷⁶ Interview with Roza (cf. above). Bigozhin 2017.

⁷⁷ Karklins 1980, 71.

⁷⁸ Ghieler 2014, 136.

plained by a social consensus around the emotional burden of loss and the sacredness of death and the passage of the deceased into the other world. The leaders of the bodies of power, in the auls of Soviet Kazakhstan, were part and parcel of such a consensus. As I was searching in the archives for judicial condemnations of ordinary practitioners or mullahs overpassing their prerogatives or for other forms of censure or punishment, I in fact failed to find any evidence of repression.⁷⁹ Again, there is a telling gap between, on the one hand, the normative constraints the religious policy was meant to enforce and, on the other hand, the actual practices. The freedoms granted to cemeteries, as social and symbolic spaces devoted to death, enabled them to be used by believers and celebrants, whether self-declared or accredited, for prayers, pilgrimages, healing rites and so on. Death and its spaces – characterized by an openness, a versatility and a collective character – certainly played a key role in maintaining religious socialization within the Soviet system, and constituted legitimate opportunities to take part in such rituals. This kind of socialization functioned in particular by incorporating economic and political hierarchies emerging out of Soviet norms for life and work.⁸⁰

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⁷⁹ As Eren Tasar points out in his book, between 1961 and 1964, when the Khrushchevian anti-religious wave was at its highest point, one finds 1234 people convicted of religion-related crimes in the entire the USSR. Nobody was executed, and in Central Asia, prosecution was rare. Cf. Tasar 2017, 213.

⁸⁰ On this point, Bigozhin (2017) strikingly shows how a *Qozha* figure also derives his *baraka* (charisma) from his capacity to master a large Soviet tractor, symbolizing technical progress and modernization.

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