DIGITAL LANDSCAPE OF CONTEMPORARY SUFI GROUPS IN KAZAKHSTAN*

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Abstract. Innovative technology has changed the modern world. The development and mass availability of the Internet has expanded the possibilities for people to communicate. The processes of globalization and the popularization of social networks have practically erased the borders of states. The entire social and public life of people have undergone transformation. New religious communities and cults are being created. Religious postulates are changing. Proselytism and the translation of religious ideas are carried out in a new format - online or live, that is, it becomes more accessible, there are new ways and forms of transmission of spiritual knowledge. The content of Internet sermons seems relevant for modern society, but requires separate consideration in terms of structural analysis of texts.

Sufi practices in Kazakhstan are also undergoing changes. Many of the Sufi groups are actively involved in the processes of digitalization and use new technologies in religious practice. In this regard, the purpose of this article is to consider the activities of Sufi tariqats through the prism of digitalization. Accordingly, the objectives are to identify what modern technologies modern Sufis are using in Kazakhstan, the role of social networks in attracting new adherents, and the legitimacy of such practices. The article is based on materials from open sources, personal pages of Sufi leaders and their followers in social networks, as well as field materials of the authors.

Key words: Sufis and the Internet, Online Zikr, Digitalization of Sufi Teaching, Internet Sheikh, Sufis in the New Reality

Introduction

Historically, Sufism is traditional for Kazakhstan and is associated with the teachings of H.A. Yasavi. During the Soviet period, the centuries-long tradition of

Sufi tariqats was interrupted. The country regained its independence and began a process of renaissance. This renaissance of the doctrine had its positive and negative sides.

At present, a number of Sufi groups of the Naqshbandi line, the Jahriyah - who consider themselves followers of the tradition of H.A. Yasavi, the Qadiriyya, and Turkish communities of various trends - are active in the country [1, p. 108]. Modern tariqats, as before, have their own leader-sheikh, devoted followers, and an internal hierarchy. All of them, like the rest of the world, are users of new technologies and are involved in the processes of digitalization.

Industry 4.0 is changing people's everyday lives, including religious life. The development of new technologies, their accessibility, and their exponential spread throughout the world have changed the forms and ways in which religious teachings are being disseminated today. Whereas in the days of H.A. Yasavi the teachings were learned through the oral transmission of religious knowledge, today it is possible to disseminate information through access to the Internet space.

It is difficult to imagine modern human life without mobile devices, the Internet, social networks and messengers. Believers, including followers of Sufism, actively use various communication channels to broadcast their ideas to society. Almost all Sufi groups represented in Kazakhstan have pages in social networks (the exception is the Qadiriya tariqat – due to the closed nature of the group, presumably the followers use closed groups in messengers). In this regard, this article provides the activities of Sufi groups in the context of digitalization.

Methodology

The material in this article is based on open sources, particularly the personal accounts of Sufi leaders. In addition, the authors conducted field research on domestic Sufi groups in Kazakhstan and Turkey. As part of the study, Kazakh leaders and followers of the Sufi path were asked the question, «How do you use the Internet in your activities? Do you have websites, social networks?». Respondents were found through social media and using the «snowball» method. Interviews were conducted offline, online and by phone. At the choice of respondents - in Kazakh or Russian languages. To comply with international ethical norms, the data of the interviewees was not disclosed.

Mediatization: the Dynamics of Religious Landscape

The religious landscape of contemporary society is diverse, and the use of new technologies is constantly expanding. The Internet and new media have become widely used in the activities of social and religious movements. This is due to easy accessibility, affordability, access to a wide audience, extraterritoriality, greater freedom from traditional forms of social control and authority, and the opportunity

to put forward alternative religious views, civic positions, create new communities, and even, a new religion.

Campbell and Garner, based on an analysis of Christian communities, identifies several trends in the attitudes of religions toward digital technology, which are labeled technological optimism, technological pessimism, and ambivalent attitudes [2, p. 28-34]. Technological optimism derives from the value-neutrality of technology as a tool for transmitting religious attitudes that have replaced or exist in parallel with book culture. Technological optimists believe that digital technology positively affects the functioning of religious communities by enabling them to promote their teachings in a broad virtual space, to attract new followers, especially the younger generation, and to organize religious and social practices more effectively. In technological pessimism, the use of new technology does not change the content of religious teaching, but simply changes the form of transmission.

Technological pessimism is not simply a neutral tool, but a media environment with its own operating logic, with its own rules and laws. On this basis, the use of new technologies by a religious group and its entry into the media space leads to changes not only in form but also in other levels of the religious system. As Hjarvard points out, the media are becoming agents of religious change. For example, he notes that for a sociological understanding of the role that modern media play in religion, it is important to emphasize that modern media not only present and communicate religious tenets, but also change the ideas and authority of religions, and change the ways in which people interact with one another about religious matters [3, p.9-26]. The interaction of religion and the media leads to the dependence of religion on the media, which functions according to the laws of mass consumer culture, commercial gain, which determines the genre specificity, the way religious text, religious and social practices, and religious identity are represented. The freedoms and opportunities afforded by the media, from the perspective of technological optimists, are apparent and lead to the embedding of the religious community in a new configuration of power relations, where the individual is dehumanized and the religious community is reduced to an impersonal unit. In addition, the competitive environment of religious ideas in the media space leads to alternative religious interpretations that come into conflict with the doctrine of institutional religions and exacerbate the question of the authenticity of interpretation, the «authority» of religious authority.

The middle ground between technological optimism and pessimism is a discourse on the ambivalence and ambiguity of the relationship between religion and the media. This position proceeds, first, from the fact that new technologies and religions are not in a vacuum, but in a certain social context that conditions their interaction. Second, both media and religion are actors, which allows us to speak not about the one-sided influence of media on religion or vice versa, but about their interaction and mutual influence. Third, the interaction between religion and the media can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the

context. Within this discourse, Campbell has advanced the concept of the religious-social framing of technology. Thus, the religious group, before the challenge of new technologies, undertakes a process of discussion and evaluation in order to determine their authenticity to the values and directions of the community. This process of discussion, evaluation, and agreement goes through four stages. First, the history and traditions of the religious community, which determine their essence, their system of meanings and symbols, and therefore their correlation with the use of new technologies. Second, the beliefs of the religious community, which influence the choices regarding technology. Third, the process of discussion, negotiation, decision-making for the above two conditions, Fourth, the community's discourse about the new technologies in order to justify the adaptation of the new technologies, their correspondence to the values and identity of the community.

Turner, exploring the impact of media on Abrahamic religions, emphasizes the destruction of traditional forms of religious authority under digitalization, which were based on oral or printed (book) forms of learning and continuity. The global information society produces new ways and forms of transferring knowledge, new pedagogical technologies that lead to new forms of religious authority, to the emergence of new micro-intellectuals who put forward alternative interpretations, but no longer so much in the mosque or church as in the media space. As Turner notes, new technologies have played an important role in the spread of political Islam, whose followers are active online and in new media, mobilizing young people under Islamic ideas of justice, social equality, and defense of Islam. Ultimately, in media space, as in offline reality, the question of power over information, over the production of knowledge, and thus over people's minds and souls, becomes the main issue [4, p. 117-134].

As we observe, the interaction of religion and the media becomes in the contemporary context a constant process of discussion, evaluation, negotiation about the possibility of using technology, as well as about the limits of this use.

The United Nations has defined access to the Internet as a «basic human right», so the global effort is to ensure that everyone has equal access to what is perhaps the most important innovation of our time. According to the Digital 2022 Global Survey, more than two-thirds (67.1%) of the world's people use cell phones. At the beginning of 2022 the Internet audience was 4.95 billion users. Today we can state that more than 60% of the world's population uses the Internet. In addition, there are 4.62 billion social network users in the world. According to the world ranking, the most popular among users are WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and in sixth place TikTok.

A global study shows that the world's population will spend 12.5 trillion hours online in 2022. With social media users spending an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes a day on social networks, these platforms account for the largest share of all the time we spend online - 35%. Indeed, in the early days of the pandemic, there was a growing awareness of how dependent the world had become on the

Internet, especially when states of emergency and lockdowns began to be imposed in some countries. Despite the constant imposition and removal of pandemic restrictions over the past two years, people are actually spending more time using Internet-enabled devices than ever before. Experts predict that the number of social media users will reach 60% of the world's population this year [5].

Modern Sufis and the Digital Environment

«Hazireti Shaikh Kurbanali Ahmed Ishan» is an official channel on the video hosting site Youtube, active since 2014 to the present. The number of subscribers is 22.8 thousand [6]. The number of subscribers shows a positive trend. For example, during the full lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic the growth was over 5.5 thousand subscribers. New videos appear weekly, both from various meetings and recorded in the studio. There is feedback from the audience in the form of comments, likes and dislikes. There is an account in the social network Vkontakte, but it has not been maintained since 2017. On Facebook, the last post was in December 2020. In Instagram there is a user registered under the nickname «qurbanaliishan», however, there are no publications. During the conversation with the followers of this tariqat, they reported that there is a closed group on the Telegram platform, where they exchange information. Thus, in this Sufi group, the key media platform for spreading the teachings is a channel on the video hosting site Youtube.

«The Jahrists». This Sufi group, founded at the dawn of independence, had an extensive network of representations across the country, both in large cities and small towns. Given the number of representations across the country, a large number of followers could be assumed before the leader was imprisoned. Leader Ismatullah Abdugappar did not have an official account, but videos of his performances and the musical group «Yasavi» organized by him are periodically posted on personal pages in social networks of individuals, presumably supporters of his ideas. The head of the Sufi group I. Abdugappar was convicted in 2011 and sentenced to prison, but the activities of the Sufi tariqat have not ceased. Active adepts continued to develop the teachings, who began to spread the teachings by posting old archive videos on social networks and the video-hosting platform Youtube [7]. In 2019, Ismatullah Abdugappar, released from prison, recorded an appeal to the Presidents of the United States, Russia, and Turkey [8] to allow the widespread reading of zikr and to get rid of the COVID2019 pandemic. The appeal contained an audio sequence, but the video was accompanied by portraits of the heads of states. Since the publication of these appeals, there has been no information about it in public sources for more than two years. Field data indicated that the leader of the tariqat is located in Almaty, Kazakhstan. In September 2022 videos with I. Abdugappar were published on the video hosting platform Youtube on the channel «Zhas qazaq» [9]. He was invited to an international conference in Ufa, Bashkortostan, where he gave a speech. He also gave a sermon at a local mosque. During his

visit, he was accompanied by Talgat Safich Tadzhuddin (a Soviet and Russian religious and public figure, Chairman of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, Grand Mufti of Russia). As part of the trip, the foundation of the future mosque was jointly laid. His speeches were recorded and published in popular social networks. He then visited the capital of the Republic of Turkey, in particular the famous Hagia Sophia temple, about which there was also a video on this channel. As can be seen from the published video, he was accompanied by a young journalist Abay Seyfullah during the trip. In addition, in September 2022, the video-hosting platform Youtube channel «Qasqa Jol / Qasqa Jol» published an interview with Sayat Ibyrai, doctor of technical sciences, who is one of the followers of the teachings of I. Abdugappar and was also convicted to imprisonment in 2011, released in 2018. Journalist Abay Seyfulla was interviewer [10].

Another part of this Sufi group became involved in writing books, as well as translating foreign works into Kazakh [11]. They use new marketing techniques to distribute their books. They organize online broadcasts with university professors, psychologists, scientists, and public figures, where the conversation broadcasts Sufi values to all who are connected. An announcement about the planned event is posted in advance. Videos with stories of Sufi legends and parables by the adherents themselves and their children are posted [12]. Thus, this Sufi group uses Youtube, Instagram more often.

Naqshbandiya branch of the Haqqaniya. The leader is Sheikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil al-Kubrusi al-Rabbani, who takes his chain of succession from Sheikh Muhammad Nazim al-Kubrusi. Followers of this Sufi school in Kazakhstan interact through closed groups on messengers. As noted by one of Kazakhstan's followers, due to the extensive network of distribution of the tariqat in various countries abroad, there are international closed groups in messengers.

«Suhba» spiritual-intellectual school. In this tariqat an innovative step has been taken, namely the leader - Marat Smagulov (Murat Hakim) has changed the form of recitation of zikr. Thus, the zikr is conducted both in a traditional form and online. Videos of online zikr are posted on the social network Instagram, but subsequently deleted [13]. During the online zikr, the leader of the tariqat M. Smagulov first makes an introduction on religious topics, then begins recitation and rocking the body back and forth, thereby entering the ecstatic state. The head of the tariqat also conducts online lectures on current topics in Islam on the platform of an organization run by the state. This Sufi group uses the following social networks: Instagram, Vkontakte, Facebook. In addition, closed groups in messengers, (WhatsApp), e-mail to distribute books and materials of the teachings among the followers are used. Thus, a popular platform is Instagram, daily communication takes place in a closed WhatsApp group.

Turkish tariqats. The development of trade and industrial relations with Turkey contributes to the growth in the number of Turkish citizens in Kazakhstan. In this regard, the number of Turkish Sufi tariqats is increasing. At the moment

there is no data on the purpose of their activities, but it is known that these tariqats are actively engaged in social and charitable activities in Kazakhstan. The tariqats are represented in popular social networks in Turkish language. At the same time, some publications under the authorship of the Turkish Sufis can be found in Russian [14]. According to open sources, there was a case in Kazakhstan when a girl suffered from the activities of the Turkish tariqat suleimenjiler in Kazakhstan. In addition to meetings (sokhbet), practice of zikr and Rabita [15]. Thus, presumably communication takes place in closed groups.

«European» Sufism. International Sufi School Spiritual mystical practices. This school belongs to New Age that uses the syncretism of Islam, Sufism of different «tariqats» with different energetic, esoteric, business and coaching methods. The leaders are Ruslan Zhukovets (Russia), Konstantin Usov (Russia) and Arman Khamitov (Kazakhstan). There are schools-communities both in Kazakhstan and abroad. On the official website you can read articles by followers, where they describe their esoteric experience. For example, some see spirits, including the spirit of the Naqshbandi Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani, as well as their leaders. As one follower of this group pointed out, communication takes place three times a week through the ZOOM cloud platform, both with foreign leaders and with Kazakh leaders. Interaction takes place in a closed group of messenger WhatsApp. There is a channel on the video-hosting platform Youtube «International Sufi School of Spiritual and Mystical Practices» [16], where videos with the leader Konstantin Usov are posted. Thus, in this group the interaction takes place both offline and online.

It should be noted that in Kazakhstan's media space Sufi values are broadcast by domestic scholars. For example, domestic researcher Z. Zhandarbek organized an online event during the ZOOM pandemic where he talked about the benefits of the practice of loud zikr, in particular the one that promotes healing and prevention of respiratory diseases due to coronary infection. However, the announcement of the event was subsequently removed from Facebook by the user. Also, Kazakh scientist Ainur Abdrasilkyzy, through his personal Instagram account, periodically conducts paid trainings and lectures, where the topics include such aspects as: «Types of Zikrs. Loud and Secret Zikr», «History of saints», «The teachings of H.A. Yasavi» and others. Note that she has a large number of subscribers on Instagram and Youtube [17].

Thus, Sufi teaching, which has centuries-old roots, adapts to the new reality and continues in the context of the global digitalization of society. It is worth noting that some modern Sufis have their own equipped recording studios. In general, are represented in all Internet platforms currently popular in the world and in Central Asian countries.

Conclusion

Therefore, the pandemic has enabled virtually everyone on Earth to redefine human values. It has opened up new possibilities for communication. Thus, we

have all mastered a wide range of online platforms for business meetings, scientific events, education and even worship. It is positive that many mosques and churches have switched to a new format for interacting with their flock and carrying out religious activities. As religious leaders note, there has been an influx of parishioners through the Internet. In addition, believers now have the opportunity to participate online in worship services abroad. It is all thanks to the development of digital technology and of course, the progressiveness of modern religious leaders who meet the spirit and needs of today's believers. It is no secret that the Internet space today is used to spread destructive ideas. New digital religions are emerging. In this regard, there is a need to study these phenomena for timely response.

At present we are witnessing not only the use of the results of scientific and technological progress by believers to preserve, present and develop religion, but also the construction of new religious forms directly related to the development of high technology. At the same time, the role and place of religion in connection with the development of technology and the Internet is ambiguous. Thus, the presence of religion in cyberspace can be classified into types; the first is just a new form of representing an existing religion; the second is virtual religions that exist only in virtual space. [18, p.150] Technological progress on the one hand provides opportunities for freedom of self-expression and creativity, and on the other hand, it actualizes the danger of human withdrawal into virtual reality and loss of connection with the real world.

In this article we examined the activities of Kazakhstan's Sufi tariqats in the context of digitalization. As can be seen from the above, almost all domestic Sufi groups use new technologies, in particular the Internet space to spread their religious views, ideas and increase the number of followers. Social networks, video-hosting platforms, and messengers have become a relevant platform for proselytism. Analysis shows that when a particular social network loses its popularity, its adherents stop using it and move on to more interesting sites for users. For example, the Russian network Vkontakte has become less popular due to the development of Instagram and as a consequence Sufi adherent have actually stopped posting content in this social network. In addition, short videos of 3-7 minutes are now popular among the population, so long sermons or speeches are edited into shorter ones for the convenience of users. In general, each Sufi tariqat has different digital resources. For example, an equipped studio for audio and video recording, an administrator, an editor and other specialists competent in attracting a new audience - subscribers, while others have no such resources.

The question of the legitimacy of such proselytizing through the use of new technologies to disseminate Sufi teachings is little studied. However, based on current realities and the use of social networks by global Sufi groups, one can draw an analogy and conclude that such dissemination of the doctrine is quite legitimate. In addition, Kazakhstan has legislation in the sphere of religion that suppresses any unlawful actions, statements, etc.

However, it is important to note the key role of the «Teacher-Learner» concept in Sufism, which the Internet space cannot replace. Communication in social networks and messengers serves to increase the number of followers and maintain the attention of adherents, but it cannot replace live communication. Thus, with each new breakthrough in communication technology humanity gets a chance to show itself not only from the best side, but also from the worst side. The digitalization of religion in this case also has both positive and negative sides. Sufism in modernity has also changed and transformed in the new socio-cultural environment, adapting to the demands of modern consumers of spiritual knowledge.

In general, the very fact of widespread use of modern technology in the dissemination of Sufi tradition through the World Wide Web testifies to its adaptability and relevance for modern man.

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Темірбаев Т.Т., Темірбаева А.А.
Қазіргі Қазақстанның сопылық тариқаттарының цифрлық ландшафты

Аңдатпа. Инновациялық технологиялар қазіргі әлемді өзгертті. Интернеттің дамуы мен жаппай қол жетімділігі адамдардың қарым-қатынас мүмкіндіктерін кеңейтеді. Жаһандану процестері мен әлеуметтік желілерді танымал ету мемлекеттердің шекараларын жойды. Адамдардың бүкіл әлеуметтік және әлеуметтік өмірі өзгеріске ұшырады. Жаңа діни қауымдастықтар мен культтер құрылуда. Діни постулаттар өзгеруде. Прозелитизм және діни идеяларды тарату жаңа форматта – онлайн немесе тікелей эфирде жүзеге асырылады, яғни қол жетімді болады, рухани білімді берудің жаңа тәсілдері мен формалары пайда болады. Интернеттегі уағыздардың мазмұны қазіргі қоғам үшін өзекті болып көрінеді, бірақ мәтіндерді құрылымдық талдау тұрғысынан бөлек қарастыруды қажет етеді.

Қазақстандағы сопылық тәжірибелер де өзгеруде. Көптеген сопылық топтар цифрландыру процестеріне белсенді қатысады және діни тәжірибеде жаңа технологияларды қолданады. Осыған байланысты, осы баптың мақсаты цифрландыру призмасы арқылы сопылық тариқаттардың қызметін қарау болып табылады. Тиісінше, қазіргі заманғы сопылардың Қазақстанда қандай заманауи технологияларды қолданатынын анықтау, жаңа адептерді тартудағы әлеуметтік желілердің рөлі, сондай-ақ мұндай тәжірибенің заңдылығы міндеттер болып табылады. Мақала ашық көздерден алынған материалдарға, сопылық көшбасшылар мен олардың ізбасарларының әлеуметтік желілердегі жеке парақтарына және авторлардың далалық материалдарына негізделген.

Түйін сөздер: сопылар және интернет, онлайн зікір, сопылық ілімді цифрландыру, интернет шейх, жаңа шындықтағы сопылар

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Аннотация. Инновационные технологии изменили современный мир. Развитие и массовая доступность интернета расширяют возможности коммуникации людей. Процессы глобализации и популяризация социальных сетей практически стерли границы государств. Трансформации подверглась вся общественная и социальная жизнь людей. Создаются новые религиозные сообщества и культы. Изменяются религиозные постулаты. Прозелитизм и трансляция религиозных идей осуществляется в новом формате – онлайн или в прямом эфире, то есть становится более доступными, появляются новые способы и формы передачи духовных знаний. Контент интернет проповедей представляется актуальным для современного общества, однако требует отдельного рассмотрения с точки зрения структурного анализа текстов.

Суфийские практики в Казахстане также претерпевают изменения. Многие из суфийских групп активно вовлечены в процессы цифровизации и используют новые технологии в религиозной практике. В этой связи, целью настоящей статьи является рассмотрение деятельности суфийских тарикатов через призму цифровизации. Соответственно задачами являются выявление какими современными технологиями пользуются современные суфии в Казахстане, роль социальных сетей в привлечении новых адептов, а также легитимность подобной практики. Статья основана на материалах из открытых источников, личных страницах суфийских лидеров и их последователей в социальных сетях, а также полевых материалах авторов.

Ключевые слова: суфии и интернет, онлайн зикр, цифровизация суфийского учения, интернет шейх, суфии в новой реальности