

**M.Sh. Egamberdiyev<sup>ID</sup>, Y.M. Turgunbayev<sup>ID</sup>\***

Al-Farabi Kazakh National university, Almaty, Kazakhstan

\*e-mail: [turgunbaev\\_63@mail.ru](mailto:turgunbaev_63@mail.ru)

## **TRADITIONAL ISLAM AND SACRED PRACTICES OF THE KAZAKH STEPPE IN THE HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS OF THE FIGURE OF QARABURA**

The topic of traditional Islam in the Kazakh steppe represents an important aspect of the study of Islamic religiosity, as it is deeply connected to the nomadic way of life, the social structure, and the sacred geography of the region. In the context of a nomadic society, Islam became not only a religious doctrine but also an essential element in the formation of the cultural and social identity of the Kazakh people. One of the key features of traditional Islam was the veneration of saints, as well as the practice of pilgrimage (ziyarat), which allowed believers to strengthen their spiritual connection with Allah through visits to the mausoleums of holy figures (auliye). The veneration of saints, such as Qarabura, a friend and companion of Qoja Ahmed Yasawi, played a crucial role in reinforcing collective religiosity and preserving the cultural traditions of the Kazakh people. Sufi practices, particularly zikr (collective remembrance of Allah), played a central role in religious life, combining spiritual and social functions. Special attention was given to the role of the religious elite, including the kyz, who acted as keepers of knowledge and intermediaries between Islamic norms and local traditions, thereby facilitating the integration of Islam into the everyday life of the Kazakh people. The relevance of this research lies in the need to revise traditional approaches to the religious life of Kazakhs, as proposed by pre-revolutionary and Soviet historiography, which often distorted the understanding of Islamic religiosity. The study employs the theory of regional Islam, proposed by A. Abashin, as well as methods of historical and religious analysis, field research, including the search for informants and the collection of empirical data, and the study of the figure of Qarabura. This approach allows for a more accurate interpretation of the adaptation process of Islamic tradition in the context of a nomadic society. The hypothesis of the research is that traditional Islam in the Kazakh steppe represented a synthesis of orthodox religious teachings and Sufi spirituality, which was especially manifested in the figure of Qarabura and enabled Islam to harmoniously integrate into the cultural and social life of Kazakh society. The findings of the study highlight the importance of Islam in shaping and preserving the cultural identity of the Kazakh people.

**Key words:** traditional Islam, sacred practices, Kazakh steppe, veneration of saints, Sufi orders, pilgrimage, regional Islam.

М.Ш. Эгамбердиев, Е.М. Тургунбаев\*

Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

\*e-mail: [turgunbaev\\_63@mail.ru](mailto:turgunbaev_63@mail.ru)

### **Қарабура тұлғасын тарихи-дінтанулық талдау контексіндегі қазақ даласындағы дәстүрлі ислам мен сакралды тәжірибелер**

Қазақ даласындағы дәстүрлі ислам тақырыбы ислам дінін зерттеудің маңызды аспектісі болып табылады, себебі ол аймақтың көшпелі өмір салтымен, әлеуметтік құрылымымен және қасиетті географиясымен терең байланысты. Көшпелі қоғам жағдайында ислам тек діни ілім ғана емес, сонымен қатар қазақтардың мәдени және әлеуметтік өзіндік бірегейлігін қалыптастыруда маңызды элементке айналды. Дәстүрлі исламның негізгі ерекшеліктерінің бірі ол әулиелерді құрметтеу және зиярат ету тәжірибесі болды, ол мұсылмандарға әулие кесенелеріне құлшылық ету, Алламен рухани байланыстарын нығайтуға мүмкіндік берді. Әулиелерді құрметтеу, әсіресе Ходжа Ахмет Яссауидің досы әрі серігі Қарабура сияқты тұлғалар, қазақ халқының ұжымдық діни өмірін нығайтып, мәдени дәстүрлерін сақтауға маңызды рөл атқарды. Суфизм тәжірибелері, әсіресе зикр (Алланың есімін ұжымдық айту), діни өмірде басты орын алып, рухани және әлеуметтік қызметтерді үйлестірді. Діни элитаның, оның ішінде қожа ұрпақтарының рөліне ерекше назар аударылды, олар білімнің сақтаушылары және ислам нормасы мен жергілікті дәстүрлер арасындағы делдалдар болып, исламның қазақтардың күнделікті өміріне сіңіуіне ықпал етті. Зерттеудің өзектілігі қазақтардың діни өміріне қатысты революцияға дейінгі және кеңестік тарихнаманың ұсынған дәстүрлі көзқарастарын қайта қарау қажеттілігінде жатыр, себебі олар ислам дінінің шынайы бейнесін бұрмалаған. Жұмыста А. Абашин ұсынған аймақтық

діни талдау әдістері, далалық зерттеулер, ақпарат берушілерді іздеу және эмпирикалық материал жинау әдістері, сондай-ақ Қарабура тұлғасын зерттеу қолданылады, бұл исламдық дәстүрдің көшпелі қоғамда қалай бейімделгенін нақты түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеу гипотезасы қазақ даласындағы дәстүрлі исламның ортодоксалды дін ілімдері мен суфизм руханиятының синтезі болғандығын және бұл Қарабура тұлғасында ерекше көрініс тапқанын дәлелдейді, бұл өз кезегінде исламның қазақ қоғамының мәдени және әлеуметтік өміріне үйлесімді түрде енуіне мүмкіндік берді. Зерттеу нәтижелері исламның қазақ халқының мәдени өзіндік бірегейлігін қалыптастыру мен сақтау үшін маңызды рөл атқаратынын көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** дәстүрлі ислам, қасиетті тәжірибелер, қазақ даласы, әулиелерді құрметтеу, суфизм ордендері, зиярат, аймақтық ислам.

М.Ш. Эгамбердиев, Е.М. Тургунбаев\*

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан

\*e-mail: turgunbaev\_63@mail.ru

### Традиционный ислам и сакральные практики казахской степи в историко-религиозном анализе фигуры Карабура

Тема традиционного ислама в казахской степи представляет собой важный аспект изучения исламской религиозности, поскольку она глубоко связана с кочевым образом жизни, социальной структурой и сакральной географией региона. В условиях кочевого общества ислам стал не только религиозным учением, но и важным элементом формирования культурной и социальной идентичности казахов. Одной из ключевых особенностей традиционного ислама было почитание святых, а также практика зиярат, которая позволяла верующим укреплять свою духовную связь с Аллахом через паломничество к мавзолеям аулие. Почитание святых, таких как Карабура друга и соратника Ходжи Ахмеда Ясауи, играло важную роль в укреплении коллективной религиозности и сохранении культурных традиций казахского народа. Суфийские практики, в частности зикр (коллективное поминание Аллаха), играли центральную роль в религиозной жизни, сочетая духовные и социальные функции. Особое внимание уделялось роли религиозной элиты, включая кожа, которые служили хранителями знаний и посредниками между исламской нормой и местными традициями, что способствовало интеграции ислама в повседневную жизнь казахов. Актуальность исследования заключается в необходимости пересмотра традиционных подходов к религиозной жизни казахов, предложенных дореволюционной и советской историографией, которые часто искажали представления об исламской религиозности. В работе используется теория регионального ислама, предложенная А. Абашиным, а также методы историко-религиозного анализа, полевые исследования, включая поиск информаторов и сбор эмпирического материала, а также изучение фигуры Карабуры, что позволяет более точно интерпретировать процесс адаптации исламской традиции в условиях кочевого общества. Гипотеза исследования заключается в том, что традиционный ислам в казахской степи представлял собой синтез ортодоксальных верований и суфийской духовности, который был особенно выражен в фигуре Карабуры и позволил исламу гармонично вписаться в культурную и социальную жизнь казахского общества. Результаты исследования подчеркивают важность ислама для формирования и сохранения культурной идентичности казахского народа.

**Ключевые слова:** традиционный ислам, сакральные практики, казахская степь, почитание святых, суфийские ордены, зиярат, региональный ислам.

## Introduction

Traditional Islam, which took shape within the context of the Kazakh steppe, represents a regional variant of Islamic culture, closely intertwined with the nomadic way of life, tribal structure, and sacred geography. It became a vital element of the social order and symbolic system of Kazakh society, encompassing norms of everyday religiosity and stable forms of collective identity. One of the key features of traditional Islam in the region was the widespread veneration of saints (*aulie*). The practice of *ziyarat* – pilgrimage to their mausoleums and sacred

sites – played a significant role in the sacralization of space and the maintenance of spiritual continuity across generations. Saints functioned as symbols of righteousness, bearers of divine grace (*baraka*), and intermediaries between believers and Allah. In her research, N. D. Nurtazina points out that in pre-revolutionary and especially Soviet historiography, the religious life of the Kazakhs was interpreted in a one-sided manner – reducing it to pre-Islamic elements and portraying Islam as an exclusively elite phenomenon, limited to the khans and *qozhas* (Nurtazina, 2021: 3). Meanwhile, traditional Islam in the steppe functioned as a dynamic system that

combined elements of orthodox doctrine, Sufi spirituality, and local practices adapted to the mobile and decentralized structure of nomadic society.

Venerated saints (*aulie*) were perceived as bearers of *barakat* (divine grace) and as intermediaries between the earthly and the transcendent. The practice of *ziyarat* (pilgrimage to sacred sites) served as a vital expression of collective religiosity, deeply rooted in the spatial and cultural memory of the Kazakh people. Sufi practices, particularly *dhikr* – the collective remembrance of God – occupied a central place in religious life, fulfilling both spiritual and sociocultural functions. Through the mechanisms of *tariqahs* (Sufi orders), knowledge was transmitted, religious authority was established, and Islamic norms were reinforced within the nomadic context (Zhandarbek, 2003: 327-328). Representatives of the religious elite, known as *qojas*, also played a significant role in the dissemination of traditional Islam. They acted as custodians of knowledge, mentors, judges, and mediators between Islamic norms and local social practices. Through their efforts, Islam became an integral part of the Kazakh way of life, seamlessly embedded within tribal structures and everyday customs. Therefore, the specific features of traditional Islam are best examined within the framework of the concept of «*regional Islam*» proposed by A. Abashin, which emphasizes the importance of local religious practices, territorial rootedness, and the cultural adaptation of universal Islamic norms (Abashyn, 2007: 11-17).

The *qojas*, regarded as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and recognized custodians of Islamic knowledge, played a pivotal role in the dissemination, adaptation, and consolidation of Islamic tradition within the context of the Kazakh steppe. They accompanied *ziyarats* (pilgrimages to sacred sites), conducted ritual services, and preserved oral traditions about saints. One such highly revered figure is Qarabura, a religious authority and close companion of Qoja Ahmed Yasawi. According to information from local informants, it was Qarabura who performed the ritual washing of the saint's body and accompanied him on his final journey an act that underscores his elevated spiritual status and the deep trust he held within the Sufi community. This narrative reinforces the perception of Qarabura as a significant figure in the continuation of the Sufi tradition and the rooting of Islam among nomadic communities. He was venerated as a righteous man, a bearer of *barakat* (divine grace), and a mediator between worlds. His mausoleum became a focal point for *ziyarat*, collective prayers, vows, and sacred remembrance. Through the figure of Qa-

rabura, one can trace how Islam not only took root in the nomadic way of life but also contributed to the formation of a durable sacred infrastructure in which religiosity, historical memory, and geography were interwoven into a unified whole.

In this regard, the study of traditional Islam in the Kazakh steppe necessitates a critical reexamination of several entrenched narratives formed in pre-revolutionary and especially Soviet historiography, where Kazakh religiosity was often reduced to simplified notions of «pre-Islamic shamanism» or interpreted through the lens of a supposed conflict between «popular» and «official» religion. Such approaches distorted the actual landscape of steppe religiosity, portraying it either as a marginal phenomenon or as exclusive, elite knowledge accessible only to khans and *qojas*. In reality, traditional Islam in the steppe was genuinely popular not in the sense of being primitive, but in its deep rootedness in everyday life, practices, beliefs, and the social imagination.

Methodologically, this study is grounded in the concept of regional Islam proposed by A. Abashin, which emphasizes the territorial localization of the Islamic tradition, its adaptation to specific cultural and social conditions, and the significance of local ritual practices in the reproduction of religious identity. This approach allows for a departure from binary oppositions such as “orthodoxy vs. folk religion” and instead views Islam as a complex, multi-layered system in which universal dogmas are refracted through the prism of a particular historical and cultural context. Special attention in this work is given to the sacred geography formed in the steppe around holy sites, mausoleums, and natural landmarks associated with *aulie* (saints). These points on the map of the Kazakh world become geographic coordinates and nodes of cultural memory through which connections are established between generations, between the earthly and the celestial, between the past and the present. Within this context, Qarabura emerges as a figure around whom narratives of righteousness, spiritual devotion, divine grace, and protection crystallize. His image serves as a starting point for analyzing a broader system of sacred practices and religious institutions operating within the framework of nomadic culture.

The aim of this article is to identify the enduring mechanisms through which the Islamic tradition was reproduced in the context of the Kazakh steppe, using the figure of Qarabura as a sacred authority as a focal point. It also explores the role of Sufi practices, the institution of *aulie* (saints), the religious elite, and sacred geography in shaping cultural and

religious identity. This analysis enables a reconstruction of the internal logic of traditional Islam and challenges the reductionist and stereotypical interpretations characteristic of earlier historiographical traditions. Consequently, traditional Islam in the Kazakh steppe emerges not as a peripheral or distorted form of Islamic religiosity, but as a legitimate regional model, possessing its own internal coherence, stable institutions, and profound connections with the sociocultural reality. The figure of Qarabura, the sacred practices of *ziyarat*, collective *dhikr*, and the role of the *qojas* are all integral elements of this model, revealing the multidimensionality and resilience of the Islamic tradition within the nomadic world.

### Material and methods

The article employs a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that combines historical and religious analysis, a review of source materials, and ethnographic field data. The primary focus of the study is the figure of Qarabura, a significant representative of the sacred tradition within the Turkic-Muslim world, closely associated with the legacy of Qoja Ahmed Yasawi. Both written sources and oral testimonies were utilized in the preparation of this article. Particular attention is given to the text *Nasabnama*, in which Qarabura is mentioned among the closest companions of Ahmed Yasawi. This reference enabled a reconstruction of his spiritual and genealogical status within the Yasawiyya tradition. The study also draws on the work of prominent domestic scholars, such as Chokan Valikhanov (Valikhanov, 1985: 71-76) and N.D. Nurtazina (Nurtazina, 2024: 470). Their works provided the theoretical foundation for analyzing the transformation of Qarabura's image in historical memory and cultural representation. Additional sources included articles from encyclopedic publications, archival materials, and articles from the republican press, including the newspaper *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Duanbekov, 2016).

Field research data collected in the Turkestan region played a significant role in the structure of the study. During the expeditions, both the architectural features of the Qarabura Mausoleum in the village of Sozak (restored according to the design of architect Kural Erjanov) and its role in contemporary religious life were documented. Interviews were conducted with local residents, imams, spiritual leaders, and representatives of the older generation, which provided a deeper understanding of the role of the Qarabura cult in the system of folk Islam. These

empirical data allowed the authors of the article to conclude that the figure of Qarabura remains relevant in religious practice, continuing to be an object of sacred veneration and a symbol of historical and cultural identity. His mausoleum functions as an element of sacred geography, serving as a channel of spiritual continuity between generations and strengthening the connection between traditional Islam and local cultural memory.

The main focus is on the reconstruction of cultural memory and local concepts of holiness, integrated into the practice of *ziyarat* and related rituals. Furthermore, significant attention in the study is devoted to the role of saints (*auliya*) in shaping the local Islamic tradition and sacred space, as well as their influence on the religious life of the nomadic society. The figure of Qarabura holds a special place, as it exemplifies the mechanisms of territorial sacralization, the resilience of religious memory, and the characteristics of spiritual authority. The analysis demonstrates that it was the saints who played a key role in the establishment of Islam in the steppe environment, acting as intermediaries between the earthly and the divine, as well as symbols of righteousness and bearers of *baraka* (Kartabaeva, Nurtazina, Kasimbekova, 2024: 149-164).

The first category of sources consists of field ethnographic materials collected by the author in 2024 in the Turkestan region, Sozak district, and the city of Turkestan. During the research, 11 important interviews were conducted with representatives of the Shijereshy clan, mausoleum caretakers (*shyrakshy*), *aksakals*, as well as with residents of the city of Turkestan, Sozak, and the village of Sholakorgan. Special attention was given to the forms of sacralization of the figure of Qarabura and his descendants, as well as their connection with the *hikmets* of Qoja Ahmed Yasawi. For example, in one of the interviews, a resident of the village of Sholakorgan mentioned: "*Qarabura was not only a contemporary of Yasawi, but also one of the participants in the zikr ritual*" (PMA: Informant 1 – S.M.). These narratives form the basis for the analysis of local Islamic memory and concepts of the *«invisible saints»* (*kozge korinbeitin aulieeler*).

The second category of sources consists of academic works by domestic researchers, which examine the institutional development of Sufism in Central Asia, the characteristics of Ishanism, as well as the sacred semiotics of mausoleums and the practice of *ziyarat*. In this context, the works of A.K. Muminov hold significant importance, as he emphasizes that figures such as Koja and Qarabura occupy an intermediary position between orthodox Islam and



local religious practices rooted in tribal structures and the specifics of nomadic society (Muminov, 2004: 108-116). According to A.K. Muminov, Kojas, as representatives of the religious elite, played a key role in the spread of Islam in the steppe, combining Islamic teachings with traditions shaped by the nomadic way of life. The figure of Qarabura, in this context, is particularly significant as he embodies the connection between Islam and local religious practices, which was relevant for Kazakh society. He held a special place in the process of shaping the sacred space, which included mausoleums, pilgrimage sites, and the practice of ziyarat. A.K. Muminov notes that such figures contributed to the integration of Islam into daily life, allowing them to be seen as intermediaries between classical Islam and local cultural traditions.

Within the framework of this study, an important role is played by the conceptual apparatus developed in contemporary religious studies and ethnology, which allows for the interpretation of sacred spaces not only as objects of veneration but also as key elements of religious and cultural dynamics. Special attention in this context is given to the concept of «*local Islamic topography*» proposed by S. Abashin, in which sacred sites are viewed as structuring elements of Islamic daily life (Abashin, 2003: 118-140). In his approach, sacred space is not limited to geographical location; it is imbued with multiple layers of meaning that reflect historical memory, tribal connections, and spiritual legitimacy. These ideas are further developed in the works of M. Kojas, where the sacred landscapes of Southern Kazakhstan are defined as «*places of concentration of transcendent experience*» (Kojas, 2008: 164-169). In his view, such spaces perform a mediating function, connecting the earthly and heavenly dimensions.

The scholarly positions of S. Abashin and M. Kojas were confirmed during the authors' own ethnographic field research conducted in the Turkestan region. According to the recorded narratives, ziyarat, in the view of local residents, is a religious duty, and «*zhol*» is the path that simultaneously involves physical movement along a sacred route and internal, spiritual ascension. This interpretation of ziyarat is especially characteristic of the Yasavi spiritual tradition, where physical proximity to the saint's mausoleum symbolizes a journey toward spiritual truth. Informants emphasize that visiting places associated with the name Qarabura becomes meaningful only when the pilgrim embarks on the path with sincere intention and purpose, experiencing an internal transformation.

Methodologically, the study also relies on content analysis of visual and media materials, including folkloric narratives transmitted through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, where the popularization of pilgrimage to the Qarabura Auliye is accompanied by stories of miracles, healings and «*ashyk zhol*» (the open path). (Telekanal Almaty). The application of media analysis allowed for an understanding of how traditional religious images are represented within the context of digital culture. In the context of Kazakhstan's international image as a Muslim yet secular country, the figures of auliye serve as a tool for shaping a positive image of Islamic heritage.

### Historiography of the problem

Religious practices in the Kazakh steppe developed at the intersection of Islam and local spiritual traditions, giving rise to a unique form of traditional Islam. One of the most symbolic and respected spiritual leaders in this context is the figure of Qarabura Auliye. His veneration has been preserved both in oral tradition and in cultic practices, spanning the area from the Shu and Talas rivers to the Syr Darya and Zhayyk. Researcher A. Seydimbek, in analyzing the genealogy of the Kazakhs, emphasized that Qarabura (approximately 11th–12th centuries) was a religious figure from the era of the Oghuz and Kipchaks, originating from the Tamaa tribe of the Lesser Zhuz, who contributed to the spread of Islam without disrupting the socio-cultural structure (Seidimbek, 1993). His activities, according to this analysis, were expressed not so much in the violent imposition of dogmas, but in the gentle adaptation of Sharia practices to the realities of nomadic life. An important aspect is his spiritual connection with Qoja Ahmed Yasawi. Qarabura was seen as an ideological ally and companion of Yasawi in the task of adapting Sufism to the conditions of the nomadic world, which brings him closer to the concept of «*auliye*» linking the land, people, and metaphysics. This position is further strengthened in contemporary memory: the mausoleum of Qarabura in Sozak is perceived as a sacred center, attracting pilgrims from various regions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This points to the enduring nature of his cult and its transregional character.

In the historiographical context, the work «*History of Kazakh Clans and Tribes*» holds significant importance, as it highlights the Tamaa clan and the sacred figure of Qarabura (Qazaq ru-taipalarynyn' tarikhy. Tama, 2005). His image is regarded as an integral part of the spiritual tradition of the Kazakh steppe, linking Islamic concepts with archaic forms

of interaction with nature. Of particular interest is a popular narrative related to the regulation of water elements, in which the term «*qaraburalau*» is used a method of halting a raging stream using tied lassos, reeds, and turf. This technique functions both as practical knowledge and as a ritual act, rooted in the belief in the sanctity of Qarabura. Folkloric and memoir sources emphasize the enduring perception of Qarabura as a symbol of protection, order, and strength. His name is invoked in prayers and in actual practices aimed at overcoming natural threats.

On the other hand, the study of Kazakh genealogies, along with a comparative analysis of ethnographic and historical works on the origins of the Bashkirs and other Turkic peoples, allows for a deeper reconstruction of the historical and cultural environment in which Islam spread and underwent adaptation. These studies demonstrate that the processes of Islamization were neither instantaneous nor coercive; rather, they occurred gradually, becoming interwoven with the existing structures of tribal and clan self-identification. Islamic norms and rituals were perceived through the lens of traditional customs, and religious leaders often came from respected lineages, which enhanced their authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the community. In this context, it is crucial to understand that Islam in the steppe developed as a “*traditional*” form closely tied to the landscape, customs, and oral history where saintly figures such as Qarabura served as spiritual pillars, integrating the ethnic, sacred and social into a unified cultural fabric (Kuzeev, 1974: 233).

From a historiographical perspective, the sacralization of space and the cult of saints in the Kazakh steppe are viewed as a crucial component of the Islamization process in works dedicated to the tribal structure of the Kazakhs and the political history of the region. Particularly noteworthy are studies based on the *Collection of Chronicles*, in which R. Syzdykova and M. Qoygeldiev highlight the role of individual religious figures such as Qarabura as bearers of spiritual authority and intermediaries between traditional worldviews and Islamic teachings (Syzdykova, Qoygeldiev, 1991). The analysis of these materials demonstrates that saints became objects of local veneration and played a significant role in legitimizing Islamic practice within the framework of tribal organization. In parallel, works on the history of the Golden Horde particularly the research of V.V. Barthold emphasize the political function of religious authorities, who were integrated into

the administrative and ideological system of power, thereby contributing to the spread of Islam as both a state and cultural doctrine (Bartol'd, 1963).

A historiographical analysis of the figure of Qarabura Auliye reveals a notable absence of detailed scholarly research on his life and activities. Nevertheless, surviving materials including accounts concerning his daughter, who married Sanjar and became a victim of his jealousy, followed by Qarabura's subsequent curse upon him allow for the interpretation of Qarabura as an important figure in the spread of Islam among Turkic peoples. These narratives also provide a valuable foundation for analyzing Qarabura's role in the formation of sacred practices and religious identity in Central Asia. A key aspect emphasized in historical sources is Qarabura's connection to the Karakhanid state, evidenced by his genealogy, which traces his origins to the Quraysh tribe of Arab descent. This lineage links Qarabura directly to Islam and positions him as a crucial intermediary between Islamic teachings and the traditional beliefs of the steppe peoples. It is also important to note that Qarabura was a disciple of prominent religious figures such as Arystanbab and Jüsip Khamanadi, further underscoring his significance in the context of Islamic enlightenment and the spiritual life of the region. Moreover, studies dedicated to the genealogy of the Senior Zhuz assert that tribal leaders drew upon Qarabura's sanctity to reinforce religious identity and strengthen communal cohesion. This highlights the enduring importance of Qarabura and his descendants in the broader process of the Islamization of Kazakhstan (Bekpenbet (Shegelek) shezhire, 2020: 19).

Today, the mausoleum of Qarabura in Sozak, Turkistan Region, stands as a significant sacred site that continues to attract pilgrims and retains its importance as a religious center. Its role extends beyond the purely spiritual, as the mausoleum has become an essential element of the region's cultural landscape. In the historiographical context, the mausoleum of Qarabura is viewed as a symbol of spiritual continuity, reflecting a connection between various historical epochs from the Karakhanid period to the present day. This continuity illustrates the resilience of religious traditions and their impact on shaping the collective identity of the peoples of Central Asia, particularly the Kazakhs. An analysis of materials related to Qarabura reveals his dual role as both a sacred figure and a cultural monument, serving as an important link between the past and the present in the spiritual life of the region.

## Research results

Ethnographic field research conducted in the Turkistan Region, specifically in the Sozak District and its surrounding areas, revealed a resilient religious tradition centered around the veneration of Qarabura Auliye. According to local informants, the figure of Qarabura is regarded as one of the spiritual pillars of the Islamization of the Kazakh steppe and as a descendant of the saint Abdrakhim Bab, who is associated with the Karakhanid dynasty. Informants emphasize that the figures of Arystanbab and Khamanad played a significant role in Qarabura's spiritual upbringing and development, whose teachings he later disseminated among the local population (PMA: Informant 2 – R.A.). Based on oral accounts passed down through family lines, it is possible to reconstruct the religious and ethical principles attributed to Qarabura, such as justice, honesty, education, and piety virtues that, according to informants, he demanded not only of himself but also of others. According to informant G.T., *“Qarabura Auliye was a descendant of one of the rulers of the Western Karakhanid state, Ibrahim ibn Nasir. He was a contemporary of Qoja Ahmed Yasawi and, according to legend, it was Qarabura who performed all the burial rites washing the body, wrapping it in a shroud, and laying to rest the great Sufi master. The name ‘Qarabura’ derives from the expression Kara Boghra, indicating his lineage from the Karakhanid rulers. His actual name was Aqtan Sofy”* (PMA: Informant 3 – G.T.). In his collection of materials, A. Kekilbaev writes the following: *“Qarabura is a name that has remained on people's lips for centuries. In times of hardship, he is a source of support; in moments of anger, an invocation that brings strength”* (Kekilbaiuly, 2012: 39). Thus, A. Kekilbaev's statement indicates that the name of Qarabura has become deeply rooted in collective memory as a symbol of spiritual support and mobilizing force, playing a significant role in shaping the enduring cultural and religious perceptions of the Kazakh people.

A particular significance in collective memory is attached to the story of how Qarabura fulfilled the will of Q.A. Yassawi by preparing his body for burial. Informant R.A. emphasizes that this story was passed down as a testament to their spiritual friendship and shared involvement in the spread of Sufi teachings in the region. According to her, *«no one knew who would conduct the burial, and suddenly a man appeared on a black camel and it turned out to be Qarabura»* (PMA: Informant 2 – R.A.). According to her, this motif is known in several tribal

branches of the Younger Juz Tamaa and is passed down as a spiritual legend. According to field materials collected by R.M. Mustafina in southern Kazakhstan, the image of Qarabura Auliye has been preserved in popular memory as a contemporary of Q.A. Yassawi (Mustafina, 2008: 31-37). According to the stories of local *shyraqshy* (guardians of the shrines), the saint's real name was Burkhanaazar. He came from the family of the rulers of the Karakhanid dynasty and was a close companion of the famous Karakhan, the first of the Turkic princes to embrace Islam. The legend tells that before his death, Q.A. Yassawi predicted that his body would be buried by none other than an unknown man arriving on a black camel, carrying water for the ritual washing. After his death, a mysterious man indeed arrived in Turkestan on a black camel, performed all the rites without uttering a word, and then headed south. In one of the villages, he drank tea and passed away. A mausoleum was built at the place of his death. Since no one knew his name, he became known to the people as «Qarabura» after the color of the camel he arrived on. According to the informants, the cult of Qarabura is linked to the sacred mission of burying Q.A. Yassawi and is endowed with special spiritual authority in the Kazakh steppe.

The figure of Qarabura Auliye holds a central position in the historical and religious traditions of Central Asia, particularly in the process of the Islamization of Turkic tribes, especially in southern Kazakhstan and the bordering regions of Uzbekistan. His life and activities are closely tied to the spread of Islam in the Turkic steppes, which in turn is a significant part of the region's cultural and spiritual evolution. An essential aspect is the fact that Qarabura Auliye was born into the family of Abdi Tama, a scholar and religious figure who actively engaged in educational work in Nura Tau, one of the historical centers of the Islamic world in Uzbekistan. The education he received both in his family and in places of Islamic culture, such as Nura Tau and Bukhara, contributed to the formation of his religious and spiritual beliefs, which he later embodied in his religious activities (Kondybai, 2004: 121-124). This context allows us to view Qarabura as a figure who became a connecting link between the local Turkic tradition and the broader Islamic world.

Historically, it is important that Qarabura Auliye, like many other figures of that time, actively contributed to the spread of Islam among the Turkic tribes, especially among the Kipchaks and other groups residing in Southern Kazakhstan. The process of Islamization, which took place through the activities of figures like Qarabura, became funda-



mental in shaping the spiritual identity and religious practices of the Turkic peoples. As part of the broader movement of Sufi Islam, which began to spread in Central Asia in the late 11th century, he played the role of a spiritual mentor for local tribes. His religious activities were tied to the larger processes of cultural and religious transformation occurring in the region at that time. Particularly significant is the fact that Qarabura Auliye was closely connected to major religious centers like Bukhara and Samarkand, which enhanced his influence and ensured the transmission of more universal Islamic values at the local level (Kondybai, 2004: 134-137).

The spiritual and religious legacy of Qarabura Auliye continued to influence the Turkic peoples even after his death. Ethnographic and historical studies confirm that the figure of Qarabura remained significant in the collective memory of the region, especially among the Tami tribe. His name became a symbol of justice, spiritual strength, and devotion to Islam, which was solidified in local mythology and collective memory. In folk traditions, Qarabura Auliye was seen not only as a religious leader but also as a person endowed with supernatural abilities, adding an extra layer of depth to his image as a saint. This phenomenon, where the name of Qarabura became sacred, symbolizes the recognition of his religious merits and his importance as a figure shaping the spiritual identity of the local people (Kondybai, 2004: 151). Moreover, his influence on the Islamization of Southern Kazakhstan can be viewed within the broader context of the transformation of spiritual life in Central Asia. Qarabura Auliye's presence in the region as a spiritual mentor, along with his involvement in spreading Islam among the local tribes, significantly altered their religious landscape and perception of Islam. This, in turn, contributed to the strengthening of Islam's role as a fundamental element of the cultural identity of the Turkic peoples.

Informant A.N. associates two female figures with the name of Qarabura: Anbar bibi and Begim ana, whose tombs are also considered sacred. According to oral sources, Anbar bibi married Zangi Baba after the death of her first husband, Qul Suyeyman, and her grave is revered as a female sacred site in the vicinity of Maydantal (PMA: Informant 4 – A.N.). According to the informant, Begim Ana was married to Sultan Sanjar, and her mausoleum in Jankent is primarily visited by women. The legend of the tragic fate of Begim Ana, linked to the Oghuz capital of Jankent, represents an important layer of Kazakh oral tradition, where personal drama transforms into a sacred narrative in collective memory.

The story of how the young and beautiful Begim became a victim of her husband's jealousy, the ruler of Jankent, Khan Sanjar, reveals the internal tensions between power, morality, and the gendered vulnerability of women in a patriarchal culture. According to the legend, the Khan, without listening to his wife's explanations, accused her of infidelity and, in a fit of rage, humiliated her by cutting off her hair and the palm of her hand. Shaken by the injustice, Begim left the Khan's palace and took refuge in a minaret by the Aral Sea, which later became a pilgrimage site (Erniiazov, 2023: 202-210). Thus, her image is reinterpreted as that of a saintly woman, a symbol of suffering and spiritual purity.

The story of Begim's father, Qarabura, who as a respected spiritual figure, prayed for the restoration of justice, adds a miraculous element to the narrative. According to the legend, the hair and hand of his daughter were restored overnight, which in traditional belief is seen as a sign of divine mercy and moral triumph. However, despite the physical healing, the spiritual wound inflicted by injustice and cruelty remained incurable (Mamiyev, 2014: 300). These elements of the legend emphasize the important role of religious and folklore narratives in regulating moral norms: the religious authority, in this case Qarabura, acts as both a father and a mediator between the earthly and the divine order, affirming the triumph of moral law over arbitrariness.

Based on this legend, an etiological explanation for the decline of Jankent is also formed. According to the myth, the city was cursed and overtaken by snakes due to the injustice committed by its ruler, after which it was abandoned by its inhabitants. This folklore narrative engages in a dialogue with historical and archaeological evidence, which indicates that Jankent, known since the 8th century as the residence of the Oghuz ruler and an important trade-political center, was gradually abandoned in the 12th century, likely due to changes in trade routes and ecological conditions. However, popular memory explains this destruction as moral retribution, thus reinforcing the sacred status of the place (Lerch, 1870: 69-71). The artistic reinterpretation of this legend is also reflected in the works of 19th-century Russian travelers, particularly V. Vereshchagin, who noted the widespread local story of the «snake city». He writes the following: *«The Kazakhs told a legend about the existence of a great city here, and they said that there were buildings here that had been destroyed by snakes. There lived a ruler who married the daughter of a king, but for her infidelity, he wanted to take her life. The father-in-law was a sorcerer (baks). He sent snakes to the*



city, which devoured the king and all his subjects» (Vereshchagin, 1883: 85). Thus, the legend of Begim Ana becomes not only a part of the local sacred geography but also a significant cultural narrative that connects personal fate with the collective historical destiny of the region.

An alternative version of the legend, recorded by the researcher E. Aleksandrov, was partially published in the pre-revolutionary newspaper *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* and serves as a valuable source for the folklore of the peoples of the Syrdarya region (Aleksandrov, 1885: № 17-18). E. Aleksandrov, who conducted field observations in the steppe districts of the Syrdarya region, including the area of the historical city of Jankent, relied on the oral accounts of local residents. In the interpretation he presented under the heading «*Jankent*» there are notable variations: specifically, the ruler is referred to as «*Zhangit*» which, presumably, is a local or distorted form of the name «*Sanjar*» and the heroine is named «*Aysulu*» in contrast to the more common address «*Begim*» which in Turkic culture carries the meaning of a title, i.e., «*lady*» or «*your highness*» (Aleksandrov, 1885: № 45, 49).

The absence of the name «*Begim*» in this version may indicate both a local peculiarity of the narrative and a folkloric adaptation, during which sacred or status-related names were replaced with more neutral ones. This phenomenon fits within the broader trend of story transformation when passed from one sociocultural context to another. Furthermore, E. Aleksandrov's choice of different onomastics highlights his intention to document the local version of the legend, which gives the document ethnographic and historiographical value for studying the regional reception of epic heritage. Therefore, E. Aleksandrov's publication demonstrates the resilience and mobility of traditional narratives and serves as an example of how oral history adapts to different cultural, linguistic, and political conditions. This makes the source significant in the context of studying the mechanisms of folkloric dynamics and the reconstruction of historical memory in the border regions of Central Asia.

In the framework of the region's sacred geography, special attention is given to a tree growing near the mausoleum of Qarabura, which, according to local residents, is used in ritual practices for taking an oath. Informant Zh.K. claims that if a person is innocent, the sap of the tree they touch becomes light, whereas in the case of guilt, it turns red (PMA: Informant 5 – Zh.K.). This motif functions as a local marker of justice and is likely connected to ancestor worship and archaic beliefs. In the context of study-

ing the sacred space and ritual topography of Southern Kazakhstan, objects of natural origin integrated into local religious practices take on particular significance. This element of the natural landscape, according to recorded ethnographic data, operates as part of a complex system of local legal and moral sanction. The described ritual of touching the tree to reveal the truth is an example of the persistence of pre-Islamic forms of sacred trial, which gained secondary Islamic legitimacy within the context of Sufi sanctity.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon can be seen as one of the examples of the «*indigenization*» of Islam, i.e., the process by which universal religious norms and concepts are adapted and interwoven with local symbolic forms. In this case, the tree becomes a sacred intermediary, whose authority is based not on legal norms but on the belief in a superhuman justice emanating from the saint Qarabura as the protector of the community and the bearer of baraka (divine grace). An analysis of this ritual also allows us to speak of the existence of an autochthonous model of social ethics, in which the ritual practice serves to maintain public order and collective morality. Moreover, the inclusion of the tree in the sphere of cultic practices reflects the resilience of cosmogonical concepts, where the tree of life symbolizes not only the vertical connection between worlds but also the horizontal ties between generations and members of the community.

## Conclusions

The examination of the figure of Qarabura from a historical and religious perspective allows for the reconstruction of the stages of the Islamization of the Kazakh steppe and the identification of enduring mechanisms for the transformation of religious consciousness within a context of cultural diversity. Qarabura emerges as an emblematic figure of a transitional period, integrating elements of pre-Islamic cults (ancestor worship, the sacralization of natural objects, rituals of justice) with new Islamic practices, primarily in a Sufi interpretation. In this context, his figure acts as a mediator between the Tengriist worldview and the emerging Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school, which spread in the steppe region under the influence of religious activities by Central Asian ishans and Khalifa. The process of Islamization in Kazakh society, as evidenced by materials related to Qarabura, was neither instantaneous nor uniform. Islam in the steppe spread predominantly through institutional forms of Sufism, such as

tariqas, ishanism, and the authority of local awliya (saints), who possessed the ability to adapt religious norms to the local sociocultural landscape. In this regard, Qarabura serves as a sacred figure associated with revered geotopes (mausoleum, tree of oaths) and as an element of archetypal narrative integrated into local historical memory through mythopoetic and etiological stories. His cult was supported not so much by religious doctrine but by mechanisms of collective legitimization, including pilgrimage, oral tradition, and visual markers of the sacred (mazar, minaret, tree).

Special attention in this context should be given to the system of sacred geography that developed around the figure of Qarabura. It forms a spatial-religious semiotics, where each object, from the minaret of Begim Ana to the tree of truth, holds both symbolic and functional significance. Such objects mark the sacred and participate in the normative regulation of social relations through practices of trials, oaths, healing, and collective remembrance. Therefore, sacred space becomes not just a place of worship, but a structure of social regulation and identity, connecting the ontological, legal, and ethical-religious levels. The analysis of the legend of Begim Ana, closely tied to the figure of Qarabura, also confirms the deep integration of folkloric motifs into the religious consciousness of the population. The mythopoetic foundation of the narrative, which includes elements of injustice, female holiness, and supernatural retribution, allows it to be interpreted as a type of local hagiography in which female sanctity is a continuation of male sainthood. This element reflects the flexibility of the steppe religious culture, where the patrilineal cult of ancestors can coexist with the symbolic heroization of female righteousness. The legend, recorded both in oral tradition and in the publication of E. Aleksandrov, demonstrates how oral narratives can preserve

historical information while adapting it to the ritual needs of the community.

Overall, the figure of Qarabura and the associated sacred practices represent a complex cultural-religious phenomenon at the intersection of pre-Islamic archaic beliefs and Muslim theology. His cult is an integral part of collective identity, relying on both oral memory and material forms of sacred representation. From the perspective of historical-religious analysis, Qarabura is the key to understanding the ways in which Islam adapted to the nomadic environment, the forms of social authority of spiritual leaders, and the mechanisms of resilience of local religious systems in the face of external political-religious influences. His figure continues to function as a cultural code, ensuring a connection between the past, present, and future of the sacred landscape of the Kazakh steppe.

#### Authors' Field Data

PMA: Informant 1 – S.M., born 1947, male. Interview recorded on July 22, 2024. Turkistan Region, Sholakkorgan District, Republic of Kazakhstan.

PMA: Informant 2 – R.A., born 1958, female. Interview recorded on July 24, 2024. Turkistan Region, Sozak District, Sozak village, Republic of Kazakhstan.

PMA: Informant 3 – G.T., born 1962, female. Interview recorded on July 25, 2024. Turkistan Region, Sozak District, Sozak village, Republic of Kazakhstan.

PMA: Informant 4 – A.N., born 1953, female. Interview recorded on July 26, 2024. Turkistan Region, Maidantal village, Republic of Kazakhstan.

PMA: Informant 5 – Zh.K., born 1959, female. Interview recorded on July 29, 2024. Turkistan Region, Sozak District, Sozak village, Republic of Kazakhstan.

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#### **Information about authors:**

Mirzahan Sh. Egamberdiyev – Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: [mirzahan.egamberdiyev@gmail.com](mailto:mirzahan.egamberdiyev@gmail.com))

Yerlan M. Turgunbayev – Candidate of Historical Sciences, Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: [turgunbaev\\_63@mail.ru](mailto:turgunbaev_63@mail.ru))

#### **Авторлар туралы мәлімет:**

Эгамбердиев Мырзахан Шарипбайұлы – тарих ғылымдарының кандидаты, қауымдастырылған профессор (доцент), әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [mirzahan.egamberdiyev@gmail.com](mailto:mirzahan.egamberdiyev@gmail.com))

Ерлан Мұхаммеджанұлы Тұрғұнбаев – тарих ғылымдарының кандидаты, әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [turgunbaev\\_63@mail.ru](mailto:turgunbaev_63@mail.ru))

**Сведения об авторах:**

*Эгамбердиев Мирзахан Шарипбаевич – кандидат исторических наук, ассоциированный профессор (доцент), Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: mirzahan.egamberdiyev@gmail.com)*

*Ерлан Мухаммеджанович Тургунбаев – кандидат исторических наук, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: turgunbaev\_63@mail.ru)*

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