

TENGRI CALLING **DECOLONIZING CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY KAZAKHSTAN**

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ABSTRACT: Kazakh national identity is undergoing a process of redefinition and reconstruction in times of great cultural, social, and economic global transformations, represented by digitalization and decentralization of past cultural hegemonies.

Religious belief, which has been at the margins of Kazakh society during the Soviet Union, is being re-embodied through old and new forms of cults and spiritual practices, such as Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Tengrism.

The contemporary process of national identity construction in Kazakhstan is thus a meticulous attempt to re-construct and negotiate modern and traditional traits. The central Asian geographical area is characterized by a rich tradition of ancient spiritual beliefs, such as Tengrism, which represent an opportunity to reinforce concepts — such as authenticity — against forces that appear to be threatening the local culture, globalizing values, and erasing the articulated and diverse Kazakh heritage.

The perception that Kazakh society is experiencing modern, secular, digital and consumerist global forces is a broadly discussed topic. In this framework, Tengrism represents an opportunity to respond to the contemporary need for a belief that enhances sustainability, ecological engagement, and a balanced interaction among humans and between humans and natural environments.

Tengri “ideology” therefore is an interesting and multi-level identity marker especially for urban Kazakhs: it represents a feature of local heritage, which was overwhelmed by historical events such as Islamization and russification; it might also be seen as a “new age” belief that can easily coexist with other religious and spiritual practices, integrating, for instance, Islam; finally, it represents an ecological belief system because of its hierarchical structure in which natural elements are worshiped. Compared to other religious revivals, Tengrism entails further advantages, from a political point of view: it is not necessarily a communitarian religion, longing for public places of worship or public visibility, moreover, Tengrism does not challenge the contemporary restrictions on religious practices imposed by the Kazakh government.

Tengrism does not involve communitarian rituals, carried out by large groups of people, nor does it have organized proselytism or evangelization activity.

Functioning primarily as an intellectual trend for cultured urban elites, Tengrism is intended to be a religion of post-soviet and modern Kazakhstan.

Rooted in a post-colonial narrative, Tengrism represents an attempt to find a balance between adhering to postmodern values and anchoring oneself into the ethnic, authentic, pre-industrial past of the nation.

Tengrism is, therefore, mostly a cultural, elitist, individual phenomenon: its roots are in libraries and intellectual circles more than among people and villages. Tengrism looks like a cultural movement, having private living rooms or forests and natural landscapes as sacred places. The role of Tengrism in contemporary Kazakh society is mainly that of revitalizing, producing and disseminating knowledge on an almost lost spiritual belief as a means for decolonizing and – at the same time localizing – modern Kazakh identities.

L'identità nazionale kazaka sta subendo un processo di ridefinizione e ricostruzione in tempi di grandi trasformazioni culturali, sociali ed economiche globali, rappresentate dalla digitalizzazione e dal decentramento delle egemonie culturali del passato.

La fede religiosa, che è stata ai margini della società kazaka durante l'Unione Sovietica, viene reincarnata attraverso vecchie e nuove forme di culti e pratiche spirituali, come l'Islam, il Cristianesimo ortodosso e il Tengrismo.

Il processo contemporaneo di costruzione dell'identità nazionale in Kazakhstan è quindi un meticoloso tentativo di ricostruire e negoziare i tratti moderni e tradizionali.

L'area geografica dell'Asia centrale è caratterizzata da una ricca tradizione di antiche credenze spirituali, come il Tengrismo, che rappresentano un'opportunità per rafforzare concetti — come l'autenticità — contro forze che sembrano minacciare la cultura locale, globalizzando i valori e cancellando l'articolata e diversificata eredità kazaka.

La percezione che la società kazaka stia sperimentando forze globali moderne, laiche, digitali e consumistiche è un argomento ampiamente discusso. In questo quadro, il Tengrismo rappresenta un'opportunità per rispondere al bisogno contemporaneo di una credenza che valorizzi la sostenibilità, l'impegno ecologico e un'interazione equilibrata tra gli esseri umani e tra gli esseri umani e gli ambienti naturali.

L'“ideologia” Tengri è quindi un marcatore identitario interessante e a più livelli soprattutto per i kazaki che vivono nel contesto urbano: rappresenta una caratteristica del patrimonio locale, che è stato sopraffatto da eventi storici come l'islamizzazione e la russificazione; potrebbe anche essere visto come una credenza “new age” che può facilmente coesistere con altre pratiche religiose e spirituali, integrando, ad esempio, l'Islam; Infine, rappresenta un sistema di credenze ecologiche a causa della sua struttura gerarchica in cui vengono adorati gli elementi naturali.

Rispetto ad altri revival religiosi, il Tengrismo comporta ulteriori vantaggi, dal punto di vista politico: non è necessariamente una religione comunitaria, che anela a luoghi di culto pubblici o visibilità pubblica, inoltre, il Tengrismo non sfida le restrizioni contemporanee alle pratiche religiose imposte dal governo kazako. Il tengrismo non prevede rituali comunitari, svolti da grandi gruppi di persone, né ha attività organizzate di proselitismo o di evangelizzazione.

Funzionando principalmente come una tendenza intellettuale per le élite urbane colte, il Tengrismo è destinato ad essere una religione del Kazakistan post-sovietico e moderno.

Radicato in una narrazione post-coloniale, il Tengrismo rappresenta un tentativo di trovare un equilibrio tra l'adesione ai valori postmoderni e l'ancoraggio al passato etnico, autentico e pre-industriale della nazione.

Il tengrismo è, quindi, per lo più un fenomeno culturale, elitario, individuale: le sue radici sono nelle biblioteche e nei circoli intellettuali, più che tra le persone e nei villaggi. Il tengrismo si presenta come un movimento culturale, che ha come luoghi sacri i salotti privati o le foreste e i paesaggi naturali. Il ruolo del Tengrismo nella società kazaka contemporanea è principalmente quello di rivitalizzare, produrre e diffondere la conoscenza di un credo spirituale quasi perduto come mezzo per decolonizzare e — allo stesso tempo localizzare — le moderne identità kazake.

KEYWORDS: Tengrism, Identity, Authenticity, Spiritualism, Decolonization

PAROLE CHIAVE: Tengrismo, Identità, Autenticità, Spiritualismo, Decolonizzazione

1. Authentic reinventions. Searching for certainties in cultural roots

The last three decades have witnessed a significant revival of local – and long forgotten – cultures (or single cultural elements) in many different corners of the planet (Hobsbawm e Ranger 1992).

Tifinagh alphabet, for instance, re-emerged in 2003 as the “authentic” scripture of the Tamazight Berber language in Morocco, which, paradoxically, most of the Tamazight speakers were not able to use (El Medlaoui 2016).

The re-discovery of Tifinagh came in a top-down process, promoted both by academia and local authorities, as an elitarian, modern, urbanized form of knowledge.

The reproposal generated a public debate about the folklorization of Berbers led by Amazigh political activists, stating that the promotion of the Tifinagh alphabet was a “culturally artificial” choice that

would only contribute to further isolating and marginalizing Moroccan Berber groups (Gross e McMurray 1993). Similar examples of revitalizing, folklorizing, reinventing and reproposing lost, or marginal local cultures often involve processes of conflict and negotiation, as was the case with Zoroastrianism in Iran, throughout its recent history of secularization, re–islamization and re–secularization (Hejazi 2019).

A similar context is represented by the recent revival of Tengrism in central Asia, and in Kazakhstan (Laurelle 2007).

As in the case of Zoroastrianism and Tifinagh, the revival of Tengrism is not really about a practical, collective return to a specific ancient cult. Rather, it is about a return of Tengrism in public discourse and in cultural representation.

New narratives have emerged in the last few decades, placing Tengrism under a broader framework entangling culture, religion, academia, and politics to a modern sense of belonging to “original roots”, that were lost to outside cultural domination. In other words, revivalism is intertwined with top–down de–colonization attempts.

These attempts are sustained by a single, fundamental concept that is as much universal as it is local and has been one of the main topics for modern anthropology ever since the end of the 1990s: authenticity.

The quest for authenticity has been the *leitmotif* of the reemergence, revival, and restoration of local identities in contemporary global culture, characterized by the constant flow or crossings of physical, mental, geographical, digital, virtual borders of human cultures, societies, and individuals. The reiterated process of cultural reinvention driven by authenticity can perhaps be described in terms of a mathematical proportion: the more interactions between diverse cultural settings take place in everyday life experience, the more fundamental becomes the quest for authenticity, as a drive through which identities are displayed.

One might argue that the idea of authenticity is not in itself universal, as it originated in the “western world”, as anthropologist Richard Handler stated: “Our search for authentic cultural experience – for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional — says more about us (westerners, SH) than about others.”.

However, the concept of authenticity has been spreading around the globe together with goods, people, and other ideas in the last fifty

years. It has been driving social, political and identity battles in decolonization processes throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The rise of political Islam in the 1960s in Algeria and Iran was, for instance, one of the main results of the search for authenticity in those specific cultural contexts threatened by cultural domination “from the outside”. Islamist philosophies⁽¹⁾ emerged as “authentic” cultural markers to rebel against the threat of western domination.

Post-colonial identity and authenticity narratives have often been intertwined with political activism and forms of public discourse that would stress memory and heritage as the grounds for political battles and cultural revivalism.

Historian of science Ian Hacking explains these social phenomena calling them “the third era of politics” (Hacking 1991).

In the first era, power would be displayed through the body of the individual, as the works of Michel Foucault pointed out; in the second era, power would be displayed through the social and collective body of the population, as it happens with massive demonstrations in support of a government, for example; in the third era, power would be displayed through memory and the notions of history, heritage, genealogy, authenticity, which go along with the ability to forgive and to forget, to erase and to reinvent.

The Kazakh return to Tengrism can be considered from this perspective as embedded in a “third era of politics”. It represents the interplay of memory and authenticity; an attempt to both decolonize and modernize, to recollect and renew, to negotiate the spiritual and the political and to rethink ancient identity roots in global urban settings.

2. Discovering Tengrism: an anthropological case of serendipity in Almaty

In 2020 I had the chance to become adjunct professor at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, at the department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Philosophy and Political Sciences. Because of the pandemic, I started teaching online for two years

(1) Such as Iranian philosophers Ali Shariati's and Jalal Ahmad thoughts and works.

and could finally reach the cities of Almaty, Oskemen and the Altai Mountains as a visiting professor in the Fall of 2022.

While I started off with teaching the subject of “Global Cultures”, in 2021 Professor Nurlykhan Alyanova⁽²⁾ asked me to teach a course named “New Age Culture”. This came as a surprise, because of a cultural misunderstanding about what this category meant.

In the Italian language and, more in general in Western Europe, by “new age” we refer to those spiritual movements born in the ’70s of the twentieth Century, related to the 1968 hippy Movement and characterized by syncretic forms of spirituality, consisting of three main poles: alternative spiritualities interested in Oriental religions, esotericism and occultism, astrology and UFO research; alternative therapies advocating holistic medicine and wellbeing; and finally: alternative political or social organizations. Because concepts are also related to a system of values, new age practices in Italy have also been associated with “non-scientific” positions and irrationality.

But in Kazakhstan, this was not the case.

By “New Age Culture”, Professor Aljanova was referring to the understanding of a popular social phenomenon in Kazakhstan that has been on the rise in the three previous decades: the revival of Tengrism and other forms of ancient shamanic cults among the urban youth (Laurelle 2007).

While there are some parallels between European new age cultures and the Kazakh Tengri revival, they are deeply different phenomena: in the first place, they emerged at different times: new age cultures in Kazakhstan emerged only at the end of the Nineties, while in Western countries, new age spirituality became popular thirty years earlier.

Secondly, while European new age is a cosmopolitan, syncretic attempt to draw spirituality or spiritual meanings both from Eastern and Western tradition, Kazakh new age has at its center Tengrism, the ancient local pre-Islamic religion that dominated central Asia until the thirteenth century.

Lastly, while new age cultures in the European context were embedded in a bottom-up social movement attempting to challenge the

(2) Nurlykhan Aljanova is associate professor at the department of Religious and Cultural Studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University

status quo, in the Kazakh context, Tengri revivalism has been mainly an intellectual top–down movement, a search for cultural authenticity meant to challenge other dominant narratives: the Russian narrative, but also the post–capitalistic narrative of the exploitation of natural resources. While western new age presents itself as a counternarrative of minority groups, Tengri intellectual thought looks like a form of spiritual ecology, looking at the past to respond to present day challenges and issues (Shaimerdinova 2022).

3. Tengri Heart. How the cult is made

Tengrism is a form of animist religion having its roots in the Eurasian steppes, especially among Turkic and Mongolic ethnic groups.

Evidence of Tengrism’s antiquity can be found in archaeological artifacts, oral traditions, and historical texts dating back to around the second or first century BCE (Laruelle 2021).

Derived from the Turkic words “Tengri,” “tengr” or “tergir” (tän-ri in old Turkic) meaning “sky” or “heaven,” Tengrism encompasses a complex system of beliefs centered around the worship of a sky god named Tengri, a supreme deity associated with celestial forces.

The worship of the sky or its deities is confirmed by many written and archaeological sources dating back to the Turkic kingdoms of Siberia in the sixth to eighth century. According to these sources, the concept “sky” became at that time a political institution connected with the emperor, and it was used as such to unify the Turkic empires until their conversion to Buddhism, Manichaeism, or Islam.

Tengri represented the personification of the universe, a father–like figure to which worshippers related through the constant individual and collective search and achievement of a balance with the natural environment (Eliade 2011).

Tengri is the creator and sustainer of all life, symbolizing harmony, balance, and divine transcendence. In Tengri cosmology, the universe is envisioned as a multi–layered realm comprising the celestial male–like realm (Tengri), the earthly female–like realm (Ar), and the subterranean realm (Yer). Each realm is inhabited by ancestral spirits and

divine entities that mediate between the human and the supernatural worlds.

Tengrism can be classified as an animist religion because it ascribes spiritual significance to natural phenomena such as mountains, rivers, animals, and celestial bodies or bodily parts of animals, like blood, liver, skin.

Animistic rituals, including offerings, prayers, and invocations, are performed to honor and appease the spirits inhabiting the natural world and encompass a diverse array of ceremonies that reflect the cyclical rhythms of nature and the changing seasons, solar and lunar eclipses, equinoxes, and solstices. Tengrism's sacred sites and places of worship are represented by natural landscapes such as mountains, lakes, and groves, which are believed to serve as portals to the spirit world (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013). Pilgrimages to these sacred sites were undertaken to seek blessings, divine guidance, and spiritual renewal or prosperity and good luck.

The adoption of Tengrism was influenced by interactions with neighboring cultures, including Chinese, Iranian, and Indo-European civilizations, which determined the similarities between Sky God Tengri and the European sky-gods; the similarities between Zoroastrian celebrations of solstices and equinoxes and the importance of these transitional times of the year in Tengrism; and, finally, the search for balance between humans and nature that is found both in Tengrism and Taoism.

The political spread of Tengrism coincided with the expansion of Turkic and Mongolic tribes across Central Asia and Eastern Europe, leading to its integration into various regional cultures and traditions (Kitagawa 1989).

Tengrism rose to the level of a state religion closely associated with the khanate from the 13th century, which, through the later Mongols, was able to take its place alongside other important world religions, such as Islam. As various nomadic empires rose and fell in Central Asia, such as the Xiongnu, Göktürks, and later the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan, Tengrism became more rigid, organized and institutionalized. Sacred knowledge would be confined in the hands of cult ministers, making it an elitarian cult entangled with power.

Rulers often claimed divine mandate and legitimized their authority through religious rituals and ceremonies inspired by Tengri beliefs (May 2004).

The Arab conquest of Central Asia from the eighth century onwards, led to the gradual decline of Tengrism as a dominant religion. Islam — at the time, represented an egalitarian and liberating religion, especially for hierarchical societies. Many Turkic and Mongolic peoples converted to Islam, aspiring for a more egalitarian society.

Tengrism persisted in some regions, particularly among isolated nomadic communities, where it maintained its more spiritual character, but its influence waned over time, losing many practitioners.

Marlene Laurelle, a scholar who has extensively studied and analyzed the Tengri revival in central Asia, believes that what are understood to be contemporary Tengri practices in the modern context are not actually Tengrism, but co-opted Islamic practices (Roux 1956) on a Tengri cultural substrate, which make contemporary Tengrism look more like a monotheism than a polytheism, with Sky God being another version of Allah (Weller 2014).

Finally, the Soviet incorporation of the Kazakh cultural and geographical area, set up what scholar Nazi Reza Khan called a “specific model of modernity based on certain socialist principles and practices, such as philosophical atheism, rational reordering of collective life and centralized state system all according to Leninist principles.” (Kahn 2005).

In this process, though ample provisions had been made for cultural diversities and national self-determination in the statute, previous beliefs, religious practices, and value systems changed radically, were set apart, hidden, or even forgotten.

4. To believe or not to believe?

Although the Soviet constitution has traditionally guaranteed both freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda⁽³⁾, the implementation of this second constitutional freedom in the Islamic areas of the former USSR, implied a political, systematic,

(3) Article 52 of the 1977 Constitution reads: “Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, that is the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda. Incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds is prohibited.”

top–down effort to discourage any form of religious belief, especially among the Kazakhs.

During the Soviet Union, public schools, public health care and public services were organized and implemented by the state, so that Muslim religious leaders' influence would be limited and marginalized: the mosque progressively lost its charisma and shifted from being the heart of the community to being its periphery.

The religious based welfare and social activity that was traditionally at the heart of local communities, was substituted by public state–based offices and services, even in remote villages⁽⁴⁾. This process inevitably determined a cultural shift: the soviet lifestyle (together with Russian language as the official language of the academia, the elites, and the industry) soon was associated with modernity, which was an ambition to accomplish for most of the Kazakh middle–upper classes.

Those Kazakhs who wanted to enjoy the promised advantages of modernization, were supposed to stick to the soviet cultural model. This cultural shift is still perceivable in some kind of social behavior that can be observed among urban educated Kazakhs.

While the older people who grew up during the Soviet Union tend to legitimize the consumption of alcohol during social events, most of the youth avoid drinking in respect of Islamic principles. The same can be observed in mosques all over Kazakhstan, where especially the young people go, even without their parents.

It is true that Islam has represented a form of resilience and resistance to the russification of Kazakhstan among middle–lower classes, peasants and villagers (Yaacov 1984).

Kazakh Muslims, as all Muslims of central Asia, were predominantly Sunni Muslims belonging to the Hanafi School of interpretation, which gave the whole area a uniformity of belief and practice, rare to find in the Muslim world (Rashid 2001).

This uniformity made the Muslim Kazakhs particularly resilient to secularization *tout court*, or to atheism (Benningesen 1958).

(4) This information is extracted from my fieldwork and interviews with PhD students and professors of Amanzholov University, while visiting Oskemen and the villages of Altai, Zaysan and Birzhan.

However, most Kazakh academics and government representatives could not avoid being influenced by Soviet attitudes toward religion, thus leaving most of Islamic practices aside.

Nevertheless, students and educated youth in Kazakhstan have today not only massively returned to Islamic religion, in discontinuity with their parents and previous generations; they are also interested in and informed about Tengrism. The popularity of Islam among the youth goes together with the popularity of what the new Kazakh generation calls “our ancient roots”.

5. Sky God and skyscrapers. Contemporary Tengrism among urban youth

The Tengri revivalist ideology is based upon a so-called return to the allegedly ancient religion of Turkic peoples.

Tengrism is promoted by small intellectual circles in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in several national republics of the Russian Federation, including Tatarstan and Buryatia. Scholar Marlene Laurelle has pointed out that just as heroes of the national epic were set up as the nation’s symbol as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, the republic’s authorities as well as academic circles have institutionalized mythic figures and organized official celebrations that combine shamanism, Tengrism, epos and local myths with modern features. The foundation of national heritage museums and university courses are all to be read in this general framework, determined by a need to re-design national identity. However, this does not correspond to a real practice and widespread knowledge of Tengrism.

Most Kazakhs know little or nothing about the Tengri cult because the promotion of Tengrism and its presence in public discourse and representation has been going on in a top-down process. That is why Tengrism has become a course at the university, under the name “New Age Culture.” In a certain sense, the academia or elitarian knowledge is providing a framework to explain some traditions and cultural behaviors that Kazakhs never abandoned and never knew were related to Tengrism.

For example, it is common for Kazakhs to smoke the house with *adyraspan*⁽⁵⁾, which is a *tengri* ritual, or wear the *tumar*⁽⁶⁾, which is a *tengri* talisman. The “*tengrity*” within these practices was either unknown or just forgotten. Now, “*tengrity*” is highlighted in upper class discourses as signifying the hidden greatness of the Kazakh nation’s ancient spirituality (Laurelle (2021)).

The proponents of Tengrism were all raised within late Soviet culture. The search for authenticity to heal the cultural wounds of cultural domination has gone through the search for an autochthonous spiritual belief.

Quoting again Marlene Laurelle, Tengrism has been functioning primarily as an intellectual trend for cultured urban elites and is therefore today intended to be a religion of the “reborn nation”⁽⁷⁾.

It is a nation that is Islamic by faith and *Tengri* by culture. And the two features are not in opposition.

Most of the contemporary followers of Tengrism present their faith as monotheistic, as the existence of a pantheon of divinities does not contradict their belief in a superior abstract force: the sky god resembles the Islamic concept of Allah, which entails 99 names and qualifications.

Among my students at Al-Farabi and Amanzholov Universities, Tengrism was popular because it provided an environmentally friendly posture, a sort of religious ecocentrism. While students declared themselves Muslims, their sympathy for Tengrism would integrate their modern view on the human exploitation of natural resources, climate change and global challenges. They would denounce industrial modernity through *Tengri* narratives, which rehabilitate the spiritual to the detriment of the material. Students would then position themselves in favor of a political and economic deglobalization that would refuse to export Western values or neoliberal practices to the rest of the world. Maintaining the “pure” and ancient traditions such as Tengrism would represent a way to exit the risks of eradicating local cultures.

Through interactions with my students during class discussions, it was clear how national traditions, ethnic faiths, nation-states, and

(5) A local name for the *peganum*, the smoke of the burnt plant is considered to ward off the evil spirits and bring luck

(6) a Kazakh national talisman in the shape of a triangular ‘bag’ made of leather or silver with the lines from the Quran inside

(7) *Ibid.*

a doctrine of world peace and non-interference would somehow be granted within a cultural framework that could refer both to Islam, on the one side, and to Tengrism, on the other. Furthermore, both Islam and Tengrism, students pointed out, gave them the possibility to have an unmediated link between themselves and the divine: while the original message of Islam is that of the unity (Umma) of a community whose members are all equal to God's eyes, Tengrism is a faith without a prophet, without a holy text, without any institutionalized place of worship, without a clergy, without dogma or interdicts, without rites and prayers. These specific characteristics of Tengri make it finally possible for young students to be Muslim and sometimes refer to Tengrism, whenever they felt the need to or even when they found themselves in natural settings, such as the Altai Mountains.

Finally, while the Kazakh constitution does guarantee religious freedom, religious diversity has undergone great restrictions in Kazakhstan since 2011, with the ban on freedom of religions that do not undergo an official registration and a long and complex bureaucratic request for officialization.

Tengrism, however, has not pushed for an officialization, nor have Tengri groups asked for proper places of worship or a public representation. This makes it possible for urban educated youth to be Muslim and Tengri at the same time, in a constant attempt to find authenticity against the challenges posed by the evermore digitalized and hyper-connected society.

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