

Article

Sultans, Merchants, and the Issue of Islamic Patronage on the Kazakh Steppe (1820s–1850s)

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Abstract

This article challenges historiographical interpretations that emphasize tsarist sponsorship of Muslim religious institutions on the nineteenth-century Kazakh steppe. Drawing on both tsarist archival records and local Muslim sources, it highlights the crucial role of Muslim patrons in fostering an Islamic transformation—or revival—marked by the rapid expansion of mosques, madrasas, and networks of Islamic scholars that connected the steppe to other centers of Islamic learning in the region. These patrons included influential political leaders, Muslim tsarist administrators, and merchants such as Qunanbay Oskenbay-ughli, Tinibay Kauken-ughli, and Jolaman Jandarbek-ughli, who financed Islamic institutions while navigating increasingly restrictive tsarist religious policies. Paradoxically, while the tsarist regime imposed legal constraints on Islam, its broader policies inadvertently contributed to the rise of these Muslim benefactors by enabling their accumulation of wealth, status, and political leverage.

Keywords: Russian empire; Kazakh steppe; Islam; religious patronage; mosques; madrasas

1. Introduction

The patronage of Islamic institutions on the Kazakh steppe remains one of the most contentious issues in the religious history of this region under tsarist rule. Closely tied to the broader phenomenon of Islamic transformation—or revival—on the steppe, this patronage facilitated the rapid growth of Muslim religious institutions, including mosques, madrasas, and networks of Islamic scholars who connected the steppe to major centers of Islamic learning and culture across Inner Russia, Central Asia, and East Turkistan.

Traditional historiographical approaches, particularly those developed by late tsarist and Soviet scholars, primarily focused on documenting Russian governmental efforts to finance the construction of religious facilities and to recruit mullahs to serve Kazakh communities (Miropiev 1901, p. 375; Tolstoi 1886, p. 342; Valikhanov 1985, pp. 71–77; Meier 1865; Krasovskii 1868, vol. 1, p. 260; Abramzon 1978, pp. 44–67). These scholars largely acknowledged that by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the tsarist state had transitioned from a policy of “active support” to efforts aimed at containing the growth of Islamic institutions and curtailing Kazakh ties with their co-religionists both within and beyond the borders of the Russian empire. However, their emphasis on supposed imperial patronage in the first half of the century helped solidify a narrative that framed the Islamic revival on the steppe as largely the product of a centralized tsarist state initiative. Within this framework, some even argued that the Islamization of the Kazakhs occurred only in the nineteenth century and was almost entirely orchestrated by the Russian government as



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part of its broader “civilizing mission” policy—that is, to make the Kazakhs more loyal and governable through the promotion of Islamic institutions.

However, more recent scholarship, drawing on both tsarist archival records and local Muslim sources, has challenged the long-standing narrative of top-down religious patronage (A. Frank 2003; Kabdylkhak 2024). These studies demonstrate that official Russian support for Islamic institutions was, at best, sporadic and largely rhetorical, often motivated by political calculations, particularly the desire to secure the loyalty of Kazakh elites. In practice, imperial patronage rarely translated into sustained material investment or meaningful engagement with local Islamic institutions.

This article moves beyond state-centered accounts of religious patronage by exploring the role played by local Muslim actors in the development of Islamic institutions on the Kazakh steppe. It focuses specifically on the first half of the nineteenth century, a period often cited as the height of tsarist support for Islam. More precisely, it examines the transformative decades from the 1820s, when the Russian government launched sweeping administrative and political reforms to consolidate its authority over the steppe, to the 1850s, when imperial policy started shifting toward an explicit containment of Islam and increasing restrictions on local religious institutions. Through an analysis of both imperial and Muslim sources, this article shows that it was not the Russian administration but Muslim patrons—wealthy individuals, merchants, and local elites—who played the most critical role in establishing, financing, and defending local mosques, madrasas, and Islamic scholars. These patrons often acted independently of, and at times in opposition to, the imperial state, navigating complex political landscapes to sustain religious institutions on the steppe. Paradoxically, however, this article also reveals that the tsarist regime inadvertently created the conditions that enabled the rise of these Muslim benefactors. By facilitating trade and integrating segments of the Kazakh nobility into its administrative apparatus, the empire unwittingly empowered individuals who would later emerge as key actors in the local Islamic revival. In this sense, even as the state sought to regulate and contain religious institutions, it indirectly contributed to their flourishing on the Kazakh steppe.

Because this article examines the history of Islamic institutions on the Kazakh steppe under tsarist rule during the first half of the nineteenth century, it excludes the territories of southern Kazakhstan, which were incorporated into the Russian empire only after the military campaigns of the 1860s. Its geographic focus is instead centered on the central and eastern Kazakh steppe, regions that fell under the jurisdiction of the Western Siberian Governorate-General (1822–1882), with its administrative center in the city of Omsk. This focus distinguishes it from studies of the western Kazakh steppe, which was largely administered from Orenburg. These two regions were governed under different legal frameworks and colonial policies, resulting in divergent political, economic, and social dynamics.

The article begins by contextualizing the long-standing tradition of religious patronage in Muslim societies, with particular emphasis on the role of *waqfs*, or charitable endowments, in sustaining local religious institutions. In many Muslim-majority polities, waqfs operated within well-established legal and bureaucratic frameworks that protected their autonomy and ensured their durability over generations. In contrast, the Russian empire imposed significant legal and administrative constraints on the formation and maintenance of waqfs, offering no formal mechanisms for their recognition. As a result, religious endowments on the Kazakh steppe remained largely informal and institutionally fragile.

The main body of the article presents three case studies that illustrate how local Muslim patrons negotiated imperial limitations and worked to establish and further develop local Islamic institutions. These patrons included political leaders and affluent merchants such

as Qunanbay Oskenbay-ughli, Tinibay Kauken-ughli, and Jolaman Jandar-bek-ughli. Each of them played a pivotal role in founding and financing mosques, madrasas, and other religious infrastructure on the steppe in the early nineteenth century. Taken together, these case studies reflect a broader pattern of grassroots religious patronage and underscore the complex interplay between local Muslim communities and the tsarist administration, challenging reductive narratives that attribute the region's Islamic revival to the designs of the Russian imperial state.

2. Islamic Patronage and the System of Waqf in Central Asia

The institution of waqf (plural: *awqaf*) played a foundational role in shaping both the social welfare and economic structure of Muslim communities across the Islamic world. Rooted in Islamic legal traditions, a waqf referred to the endowment of property—often buildings, parcels of land, or other valuable assets—permanently set aside for charitable or religious purposes. Through this system, awqaf became vital mechanisms for sustaining a wide range of public services and communal needs.

Historically, waqf endowments supported a variety of civic and humanitarian projects. These included the funding of hospitals, hostels for travelers, cemeteries, and public kitchens; the provision of tools and supplies for tradespeople; and even the care of stray animals, such as birds, cats, and dogs (McChesney 1991, p. 3). In some cases, founders designated the benefits of a waqf to support specific family lines or communities, ensuring generational welfare. However, most relevant to this study is the central role of waqf in sustaining religious institutions, including mosques, maktab-madrasas, and their staff and students.

The establishment of a waqf typically occurred when a property owner voluntarily renounced their legal right to sell or otherwise dispose of a property and instead dedicated it as a permanent charitable endowment. Such property could take numerous forms, ranging from agricultural land and marketplaces to buildings and livestock. The formalization of a waqf generally required the drafting of a *waqfnama* (deed of endowment), which was legally validated by a *qadi* (Islamic judge).¹ This document outlined the purpose of the endowment, the types of revenue it would generate, and the beneficiaries it aimed to support. Often, alongside endowing their property as waqf, the donor designated a *mutawalli* (administrator) responsible for overseeing the property and utilizing its funds for the objectives specified in the waqfnama (McChesney 1991, p. 7).

Typically, endowed property could not be sold, lent, rented, or exchanged. However, in certain cases, mutawallis were granted broad powers to manage the endowments to their best advantage and dispose of them in any manner, if such provisions were specified in the waqfnama. In such instances, mutawallis could act similarly to landowners or businessmen, leasing or selling waqf properties, employing additional individuals to oversee their administration, and collecting revenues from their use (McChesney 1991, p. 18). When mutawallis breached the terms of the endowment deeds, they could be dismissed by a judicial overseer (McChesney 1991, p. 11). In the region of Central Asia, mutawallis administering large waqf holdings could amass significant political power and economic influence (McChesney 1991, p. 10).

Another key party involved in the management of waqf, alongside the endowment donor, qadi, administrator, and beneficiaries, was the state, which held a crucial role in establishing the legal framework for governing waqf operations. Mutawallis were required to adhere to the legal standards set forth in religious laws or local *‘adat*, as adapted and enforced by the state. Additionally, the state regulated the taxation regimes applicable to waqf endowments, which could be exempt from taxation or subject to certain tax liabilities (McChesney 1991, p. 14). In some instances, governments established specialized agencies

tasked with overseeing extensive waqf endowments (McChesney 1991, p. 17). Furthermore, the Muslim ruler served as the ultimate authority in resolving any contentious issues pertaining to the utilization and disposal of waqf assets (McChesney 1991, p. 14).

In Muslim lands, waqf contributions constituted a key source used for establishing and sustaining religious institutions, including mosques, Islamic schools (*maktabs*), and colleges (*madrasas*). These endowments were instrumental in funding the maintenance of facilities and in providing support for the staff and students of these institutions. Endowing assets for such noble purposes was considered a virtuous act, promising divine rewards to the benefactor.

Waqf endowments associated with religious institutions typically enjoyed unique fiscal privileges, often being completely exempt from state taxation. This ensured that the entire income generated from waqfs could be utilized for the benefit of Muslim establishments and their beneficiaries (McChesney 1991, p. 15). These factors collectively fueled the widespread practice of endowing waqfs for religious institutions, fostering their steady expansion and profoundly shaping the religious fabric of Muslim communities.

In Central Asia, waqf endowments played a pivotal role in the preservation and advancement of Muslim institutions across the region, notably contributing to the Islamic revival in the nineteenth-century Khanate of Khorezm. Emerging from a period of profound political instability in the late eighteenth century, Khorezm witnessed the rise of the Qunghrat dynasty, which assumed power in the 1760s. Seeking to secure popular legitimacy and cultivate competent administrators for their expanding bureaucratic institutions, the Qunghrats made significant investments in local Islamic establishments.

The Qunghrats created a new framework of Islamic colleges, supported by extensive land allocations designated as waqf. By the early twentieth century, their capital, the city of Khiva, boasted sixty-four madrasas, half of which were founded after 1873. Furthermore, sixty-one additional madrasas were dispersed throughout the territory of Khorezm, showcasing the substantial growth and proliferation of educational institutions facilitated by waqf endowments (Sartori 2016, p. 106).

The newly established Khorezmian madrasas emerged as substantial educational institutions, capable of accommodating large numbers of students and personnel. Typically, a local madrasa comprised fewer than twenty cells, each accommodating up to three students. However, larger madrasas in Khorezm, such as the one commissioned by Muhammad Amin Khan (r. 1846–1855), boasted as many as 125 cells (Sartori 2016, p. 107). Moreover, these madrasas often possessed additional facilities, providing a hundred or more extra cells, allowing them to accommodate hundreds of students in total.

These new Islamic educational establishments not only bolstered Khorezm's regional prominence as a center of learning but also attracted scholars and students from the Muslim lands beyond the Khanate of Khorezm, including the Volga-Urals, Siberia, and the Kazakh steppe (A. J. Frank 2020; Sartori 2016, p. 113; Bustanov 2016, pp. 183–204). It goes without saying that the royal patronage of these institutions was indispensable. Maintaining and staffing such facilities, along with providing for the livelihoods and educational materials of numerous students, demanded substantial financial resources, primarily provided by waqf income.²

In the vast expanse of the Kazakh steppe, waqf endowments traditionally served to bolster major Islamic institutions located in the urban centers along the Syr-Darya River in southern Kazakhstan. Prior to the Russian conquest in the 1860s, this region predominantly fell under the jurisdiction of the Khanate of Khoqand. Among the prominent religious landmarks in the area stood the mausoleum of the revered Central Asian Sufi saint and scholar Khoja Ahmet Yassawi. Commissioned by Amir Timur (Tamerlane) in the late fourteenth century, this architectural marvel graced the city of Turkistan, historically known as Yassi.

For Central Asian Muslims, Kazakhs in particular, Turkistan held profound political and religious significance. Many Kazakh khans established Turkistan as their capital, further solidifying its status as a hub of spiritual and administrative importance. The shrine of Khoja Ahmet Yassawi also served as the final resting place of several prominent Kazakh rulers, including the renowned Abilay (Abilmansur) Khan (r. 1771–1781). As the last powerful and independently ruling Kazakh monarch, Abilay skillfully navigated the competing imperial ambitions of the Russian and Qing empires throughout his reign.

In the central and northern Kazakh steppe, the status of waqf endowments differed markedly from that in southern Kazakhstan. Unlike the south, where urban centers provided fertile ground for the establishment of large-scale Islamic institutions, the northern and central steppe lacked such urban infrastructure. Additionally, the region's predominantly pastoralist economy stood in stark contrast to the settled agricultural landscapes traditionally associated with waqf endowments.

Further complicating the situation was the steady expansion of the Russian empire into the steppe, particularly from the 1820s onward. As Russia consolidated its military and political control over Kazakh territories, it gradually imposed its legal framework on the region. Crucially, the tsarist legal system did not recognize waqf as a distinct category of land ownership. Consequently, any land that might have been endowed as waqf remained subject to taxation as private property, with no formal exemptions granted under imperial law.

This, however, does not mean that waqf endowments were entirely absent from the Kazakh steppe. Local Muslim sources reference waqf wills, indicating that Kazakhs and other Muslim communities engaged in endowment practices despite the lack of official recognition. Yet, from the perspective of the Russian government, such endowments held no legal standing, being recognized by the tsarist government as simple donations (*darenie*) (Ross 2017, pp. 107–10). As a result, they were taxed and administered in the same manner as any other privately owned property, effectively negating their status as religious endowments under imperial rule.

Such conditions significantly hindered the emergence of large-scale waqf complexes, institutions that were central to the economic and religious life of many Muslim societies but were conspicuously absent in Muslim regions under tsarist rule, including the Volga-Urals, Siberia, and the Kazakh steppe (Sartori and Ross 2020, p. 18). The lack of stable income sources secured by substantial waqf endowments forced local religious institutions to depend heavily on charitable contributions from their communities and followers. Alternatively, they had to seek financial backing from influential and affluent individuals who could allocate their personal wealth to sustain Islamic institutions. This form of patronage was particularly vital in the early nineteenth-century Kazakh steppe, where stationary Islamic establishments were either scarce or entirely absent. Establishing such institutions required considerable investment, not only in construction but also in securing qualified personnel to lead religious instruction and administer these centers of learning and worship.

The following section explores several remarkable cases of patronage, highlighting the contributions of affluent Muslim merchants and influential noblemen who not only transitioned into roles as tsarist officials but also played pivotal roles in the development and support of religious institutions across the Kazakh steppe. These individuals utilized their wealth and political influence to sponsor mosques, schools, and other key elements of Islamic infrastructure, leaving an indelible mark on the religious and cultural landscape of the region. Their patronage served as a bridge between traditional Kazakh communities and the imperial administration, shaping both the religious and socio-political fabric of the steppe during this transformative period.

3. A Muslim Patron and a Tsarist Official

Among the most influential patrons of Islamic institutions on the Kazakh steppe were powerful and affluent individuals who also held official positions within the tsarist administration. Balancing their dual roles as both formal leaders within Kazakh society and appointed Russian officials, these figures wielded significant authority, allowing them to mobilize public support and allocate essential financial resources for the construction of mosques, the establishment of schools, and the invitation of prominent Muslim scholars.

Their substantial wealth enabled them to personally finance the founding of religious institutions and to recruit qualified personnel to staff them. At the same time, their bureaucratic standing within the Russian administration placed them in a unique position to negotiate the formal recognition of these institutions and to advocate for state-sanctioned privileges on behalf of the Islamic clergy. One prominent figure who exemplified this dual role was Qunanbay Oskenbay-ughli, a distinguished Kazakh *biy* (customary judge). Over the course of his career, he served as the head of a *volost* before rising to the influential position of Senior Sultan of the Qarqarali (Karkaralinsk) district.

Qunanbay was born in 1804 into the influential family of Oskenbay Irgizbay-ughli, a local *biy* of the Tobiqti clan of the Arghin tribe. In Kazakh society, *biys* served as both clan leaders and arbiters in legal disputes. The title of *biy* was traditionally bestowed upon individuals as a mark of honor, recognizing their profound comprehension of Kazakh traditions and their adeptness in impartially resolving disputes (Martin 2001). In dispensing justice, *biys* drew upon both *shari'a* (Islamic law) and local customary norms known as *adat*.³

Following the Russian annexation of the Kazakh steppe in the 1820s, the role of *biys* underwent a significant transformation as they were incorporated into the colonial system as official judges responsible for adjudicating legal disputes among the Kazakhs. By the 1850s, the Russian government had begun regulating the nomination process for *biy* positions and asserted the authority to approve or reject candidates. By the 1860s, the Russian government had completed the integration of the *biy* system into the newly established judicial framework, transforming the role of the *biy* into an official position within the colonial administration (Martin 2001).

As a judge and clan leader, Qunanbay's father, Irgizbay cultivated strong ties with the tsarist administration, earning their trust and recognition as a loyal servant. In return, the Russian government rewarded him with prestigious honors and lavish gifts.⁴ Qunanbay followed in his father's footsteps, deftly leveraging his social and political standing as both a community leader and a servant of the colonial government.

By his forties, Qunanbay had risen to prominence as a *biy*, presiding over legal disputes within the entire Tobiqti Kazakh community (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 25). Renowned for his impartiality and deep understanding of Kazakh legal norms, he garnered widespread acclaim as a fair and knowledgeable legal arbitrator. Owing to his expertise and leadership qualities, the Tobiqti Kazakhs began to regard him as one of the foremost leaders of their clan. Soon thereafter, Qunanbay embarked on a political trajectory, assuming the formal leadership role of the Tobiqti Kazakhs, a position recognized and endorsed by the tsarist administration.

In 1822, the tsarist state implemented a sweeping set of legal and administrative reforms that fundamentally restructured the political organization of the central and eastern Kazakh steppe. These reforms introduced a new hierarchical framework, dividing the region into large districts (*okrugs*), intermediate subdivisions known as *volosts*, and smaller nomadic communities referred to as *awils*. Simultaneously, the Russian government abolished the title of *khan*, which had traditionally marked the highest level of political authority among the Kazakhs. Historically reserved for direct descendants of Chinggis

Khan (c. 1162–1227), the title of khan held profound symbolic and political meaning within Kazakh society. Its elimination represented a significant rupture with established political traditions and threatened to undermine the status of the Chinggisids—the noble lineage that traced its ancestry to the Mongol conqueror.

Aware of the potential for unrest among the Kazakh nobility, the tsarist administration sought to mitigate the impact of these reforms. To ease concerns over the loss of hereditary privileges, the imperial government reserved the newly created position of district head for members of the Chinggisid lineage. These officials, formally designated as “Senior Sultans” (*Aga Sultans*), retained a title that evoked the traditional authority of Chinggisid rulers, thereby preserving a degree of continuity with established norms of legitimacy and governance.

In contrast, officials at lower levels of the new administrative structure were granted more modest titles. Leaders of volosts were officially known simply as “sultans”, without the elevated status accorded to their district-level counterparts, while the heads of awil communities were titled “elders” (*aqsasals*). This hierarchical arrangement allowed the Russian empire to assert greater control over the steppe while simultaneously co-opting existing elite networks, thereby facilitating the transition to imperial rule with minimal resistance from the traditional ruling class.

By the 1830s, Qunanbay had risen to prominence as a powerful leader of the Tobiqti clan. In 1836, leveraging his informal status, he presented himself as a candidate for the position of head of his native Kushik-Tobiqti volost in the Qarqarali district ([Kasymbaev 2004](#), p. 44). Unlike the position of senior sultan, volost sultan roles were opened to all Kazakhs regardless of their lineage. However, from their inception, these positions were also predominantly occupied by Chinggisids. Qunanbay’s non-noble origin did not hinder his ability to win his first competitive election, paving the way for a successful career as a Russian colonial official. Over the next four years, he served diligently, consolidating his position as both a respected Kazakh leader and a dedicated tsarist bureaucrat. As the tsarist government tightened its control over the steppe, new avenues for advancement in Qunanbay’s political career began to emerge.

In the summer of 1849, the Russian government announced an election for the position of senior sultan in the vast Qarqarali district. This decision followed a two-year investigation into allegations of corruption and abuse of power against the then-district ruler, Qusbek Tawke-ughli ([Kasymbaev 2004](#), p. 36).⁵ Although Tawke-ughli was never formally charged, it was evident that the tsarist administration sought a change in district leadership, with Qunanbay emerging as a potential successor.

By this time, the Russian government had introduced new reforms to local regulations, reshaping the administrative framework on the steppe. Under these updated rules, the position of senior sultan, previously reserved exclusively for Chinggisids, was now open to non-noble Kazakhs. However, the new regulations stipulated that all candidates must either hold a Russian military rank or demonstrate “diligent and zealous service” to the Russian government ([Kasymbaev 2004](#), p. 33).

With the opportunity at hand, Qunanbay seized the moment and put forth his candidacy for the position of senior sultan of the Qarqarali district, aiming to become one of the first non-Chinggisid Kazakhs to hold such a high administrative post in the local tsarist bureaucracy. In addition to fulfilling all bureaucratic prerequisites, Qunanbay benefited from substantial support within his community and, crucially, secured the backing of Russian officials. The latter factor played a pivotal role in shaping one’s political career within the state bureaucracy.

As a dedicated tsarist subject, Qunanbay effectively leveraged his position as clan leader and head of the volost to maintain his community’s loyalty to the colonial rule.

He successfully persuaded his people to remain neutral during the turbulent years of the Kenesary khan revolt (1837–1847), the largest anti-tsarist rebellion on the Kazakh steppe. Although the Qarqarali district became a stronghold of Kenesary’s movement, Qunanbay’s Kushik-Tobiqti volost remained largely unaffected by the uprising (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 75; Sydykov 2019, pp. 101–2). His unwavering commitment to the tsarist regime did not go unnoticed, earning him gifts from the state as a token of appreciation for his loyalty and service.

As a dedicated tsarist official and an influential political figure within the Kazakh community, Qunanbay reached a significant milestone in July 1849 (Khālid ūghlī 1911, p. 444). He secured the support of the majority of electors, individuals carefully selected and approved by the tsarist administration, thereby positioning himself for elevation within the imperial political hierarchy. Three months later, Prince Petr Gorchakov, the governor-general of Western Siberia, formally confirmed Qunanbay’s appointment as senior sultan of the Qarqarali district.

With this appointment, Qunanbay assumed leadership of the Qarqarali district’s administrative apparatus, known as *diwan* (or *duwan*) in Kazakh and *prikaz* in Russian (Khālid ūghlī 1911, p. 375). The district encompassed 18 distinct volosts, making it one of the most extensive and administratively significant regions on the Kazakh steppe (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 33).

As previously discussed, Qunanbay hailed from a prominent and well-connected family. His father, Oskenbay, had served both as a *biy* and as an official within the tsarist colonial system. This familial legacy of wealth and political influence undoubtedly facilitated Qunanbay’s rise. Yet his own accomplishments must not be overlooked. Most notably, his election to the office of senior sultan represented the highest administrative rank accessible to Kazakhs within the colonial bureaucracy.

Qunanbay’s appointment marked a significant departure from longstanding political conventions on the Kazakh steppe. Since the introduction of the 1822 administrative reforms, the position of senior sultan had been largely reserved for members of the Chinggisid nobility—those who traced their lineage directly to Chinggis Khan. By securing this role, Qunanbay became one of the first non-Chinggisid Kazakhs to rise to such a high administrative rank within the tsarist colonial system (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 40; Sydykov 2019, p. 164). His elevation reflected a quiet but consequential shift in the composition of local governance, signaling the imperial state’s growing willingness to prioritize political loyalty and administrative competence over hereditary prestige.

Historically, only direct descendants of Chinggis Khan could assume the titles of sultan and khan, granting them exclusive rights to claim supreme leadership on the Kazakh steppe and beyond.⁶ Even in three Central Asian khanates, where new ruling dynasties emerged during the eighteenth century, non-Chinggisid leaders often adopted the titles of sultan and khan with caution, fully aware that their lack of genealogical legitimacy placed limits on their authority.⁷ Qunanbay’s appointment thus marked not only a local shift in steppe politics but also a broader regional recalibration of what constituted legitimate rule.

In addition to his esteemed social standing within the Kazakh community and his remarkable political career within the tsarist bureaucracy, Qunanbay was known for his substantial wealth, predominantly in the form of vast herds. In the nomadic society of the Kazakh steppe, the size of one’s herds traditionally signified wealth, as livestock served as a primary form of currency among the Kazakhs. Although precise estimates of Qunanbay’s overall fortune are unavailable, historical records provide glimpses into its scale. For instance, in the fall of 1837, while serving as the head of a volost, Qunanbay arranged the marriage of his younger sister. In accordance with Kazakh custom, he provided his sister with a portion of her dowry, which included more than a thousand horses, underscoring

the immense extent of his wealth (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 26).⁸ Furthermore, in 1846, during his brother's funeral feast, Qunanbay slaughtered 200 sheep, further highlighting the scale of his assets (Kasymbaev 2004, p. 69). Russian colonial documents likewise attest to Qunanbay's impressive fortune, which stood out even among other influential sultans of more noble origin (Kasymbaev 2004, pp. 27, 66). Taken together, these indicators underscore the remarkable wealth and influence Qunanbay wielded within both the Kazakh community and the broader tsarist administrative hierarchy.

4. The Mosque of Qunanbay

Qunanbay's legacy in the realm of religious patronage is most prominently embodied by the renowned "Mosque of Qunanbay", as it is known today, erected in 1851 in the town of Qarqarali. However, his support for religious institutions extended beyond this singular facility. As early as January 1845, during his tenure as head of the Kushik-Tobiqti volost, Qunanbay demonstrated his commitment to education and community development by proposing the establishment of a school within his jurisdiction. To realize this vision, he submitted a formal request to a higher-ranking tsarist official, seeking approval to open the school and requesting the appointment of an instructor. Although officials in Omsk expressed support for the initiative, they clarified that they were unable to provide an instructor. Instead, they tasked Qunanbay with finding a suitable candidate for the role himself (Sydykov 2019, p. 114).

With official permission in hand, Qunanbay promptly arranged for the establishment of the school on a parcel of land known as "Eski Tam". To oversee the project, he carefully selected instructors to serve at the new institution. Initially, he invited a teacher named Sari Mullah (Sarmolda), who was later succeeded by 'Abid khan 'Abd al-Nazar-ughli (also known in documents as Gabitkhan Gabdinazar-ughli), a religious scholar with a more advanced educational background. 'Abid khan dedicated several years to the educational initiative at Eski Tam, providing primary instruction not only to Qunanbay's sons and nephews but also to the children of other local residents (Sydykov 2019, p. 114).

Two years after Qunanbay established a maktab in the volost under his leadership, the heads of other Qarqarali volosts, together with the then senior sultan of the entire district, Qusbek Tawke-ughli (Kuspek Taukin), convened a meeting to discuss a proposal for building a mosque in the district capital, the town of Qarqarali. After unanimously voting in favor of the initiative, the Kazakh political leadership of the Qarqarali district jointly drafted a letter to the Russian government requesting permission to construct the mosque. In the document, Qunanbay's signature appeared immediately after that of the senior sultan Tawke-ughli, suggesting his informal prominence within the district's political hierarchy.

Adhering to tsarist instructions, the senior sultan and volost leadership prepared an architectural plan for the mosque, which they appended to their petition before dispatching all documents to the Western Siberian capital, Omsk. In October 1848, the governor-general of Western Siberia, Petr Gorchakov, responded to the petition by endorsing the mosque's plan and expressing general support for the proposal. However, the Russian governor imposed a condition that the mosque must be erected outside the town limits, without offering a clear explanation for this directive (Sydykov 2019, p. 154).

Armed with the governor-general's permission, Qunanbay and other Kazakh rulers of the Qarqarali district embarked on the meticulous planning of the mosque. They diligently procured building materials and enlisted qualified construction workers, while simultaneously mobilizing efforts to collect donations from the district's Muslim population. The project initiators hoped that these donations would serve as the primary source of funding for the mosque.

Despite careful planning and preparation, the construction of the mosque was delayed by over a year. This setback was due to several factors, including the slow pace of donation collection and the impending election for the Qarqarali district's highest political office, that of senior sultan. It was not until January 1850 that Qunanbay, now the newly elected district ruler, took decisive action. He wrote a letter to tsarist officials in Omsk, reaffirming the intention to build the mosque near Qarqarali. In a significant move, the Kazakh nobleman personally pledged to cover all expenses associated with the project, underscoring his steadfast commitment to bringing this important religious institution to fruition (Kasymbaev 2004).

For Qunanbay, the construction of the mosque in the district capital became a deeply personal undertaking, symbolizing his leadership over the local Kazakh population (Khālid ūghlī 1911, p. 444). Recognizing his growing political influence, Qunanbay initiated a dialogue with the Russian government to revise the approved location of the mosque, advocating for its relocation from the outskirts of Qarqarali to a site closer to the district administration building in the town.

In his negotiations, Qunanbay artfully presented the mosque project as more than just a religious facility. He envisioned it as the cornerstone of a vibrant new neighborhood in Qarqarali, one that would encompass not only the mosque itself, but also an imam's residence, a nearby school, and housing for new Muslim settlers in the town. Skillfully leveraging longstanding Russian interests in sedentarizing predominantly nomadic Kazakhs and promoting commercial activity in tsarist-governed towns, Qunanbay emphasized the project's economic potential. His correspondence highlighted that the development would attract Muslim merchants from various regions and backgrounds including Tatars, Bukharans, and Tashkentis. He further noted that a religious facility would encourage many Kazakhs to visit the town and eventually settle in the area. Furthermore, Qunanbay underscored the educational advantages of the mosque's school, asserting that large number of Kazakh students would gain exposure to Russian laws and customs through interactions with the local Russian community (Kasymbaev 2004, pp. 78–80).⁹

The Russian government responded favorably to Qunanbay's compelling arguments, leading to the commencement of the mosque's construction. By the summer of 1851, the vision Qunanbay championed was materialized: the new mosque along with several school facilities, entirely funded by the district's senior sultan himself, stood proudly in the heart of the town of Qarqarali (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Mosque of Qunanbay, Qarqarali, Qaraghandi Province, Kazakhstan (2019) © Abai.KZ.

To oversee both institutions, Qunanbay enlisted the expertise of Hasan Akhund Saifulla-ughli Saratawi, a distinguished religious scholar hailing from the Saratov region who received his training in Kazan (Mustafin 2017; Khālid ūghlī 1911, p. 444). Hasan's

revered title of “akhund” underscored his exceptional religious education, vast knowledge, and extensive experience. Qunanbay’s deliberate choice of Hasan to lead these institutions reflected his earnest effort to turn Qarqarali into a prominent center of Islam and Islamic education in the region.

What motivated Qunanbay to support Muslim religious institutions? On the one hand, as a prominent and affluent figure, societal expectations compelled Qunanbay to shoulder social and economic responsibilities, including the welfare of his community. For individuals of his stature, supporting schools and mosques symbolized a steadfast commitment to community well-being. On the other hand, Qunanbay also pursued personal interests through patronage of Islamic institutions. Notably, the maktab he established in his native volost primarily served the educational needs of his own children and nephews.¹⁰ Furthermore, such acts of charity and generosity toward religious establishments helped enhance his social capital within the Kazakh community. Additionally, by negotiating with the tsarist administration to facilitate the opening of religious institutions, Qunanbay strengthened his position as a protector of Kazakh interests in dealings with the Russian government.

Similarly to the new ruling dynasties in Central Asia that lacked the prestige associated with the Chinggisid lineage and sought religious legitimization, Qunanbay recognized the limitations of his position as a commoner occupying a key political role previously reserved exclusively for Chinggisids. Supporting charitable causes and funding religious institutions became a means for him to preserve and expand his broad communal support as a guardian of the community’s welfare.

Finally, we must recognize Qunanbay’s sincere efforts to fulfill his religious obligations. In Islamic tradition, the act of sharing wealth is considered a fundamental religious duty, believed to bring divine rewards (Ross 2017, p. 93). A testament to Qunanbay’s religious devoutness is his pilgrimage to the holy Islamic sites of Mecca and Medina in 1875–1876, undertaken long after his departure from tsarist service, after which he attained the esteemed status of *hajji*. In Mecca, he financed the construction of a *tekke*, or lodge, intended to accommodate pilgrims from the Kazakh steppe and Central Asia (Khudaiberdi-ughli 1911; Kasymbaev 2004, p. 64).¹¹ Many contemporary Russian observers similarly acknowledged Qunanbay’s piety and evident religious fervor, further attesting to his commitment to his faith (Kasymbaev 2004, pp. 29–30, 83).

The mosque built by Qunanbay continues to stand proudly at the heart of Qarqarali. Now known as the “Qunanbay Mosque”, it is the town’s most iconic architectural landmark and a popular sightseeing destination. As one of the oldest structures in Qarqarali, the mosque serves as a poignant reminder of the town’s historical importance as both a major tsarist administrative hub and a prominent religious center in Central Kazakhstan.

5. Muslim Patrons on the Service of the Russian State

Qunanbay’s religious patronage was far from an isolated phenomenon among politically influential Kazakhs of his era. Many individuals, regardless of their background, who held positions within the tsarist administration also embraced the role of Islamic patrons. For instance, Sherghazi Aishuaq-ughli,¹² ruler of the Kazakh Junior Horde from 1812 to 1824, personally funded the construction of five mosques and madrasas. He also championed the cause of religious scholars, advocating for the Russian government to recognize and reward their service as teachers and imams among the Kazakhs. Additionally, Sherghazi also acted as a defender of Islamic institutions, shielding them from adverse actions by the tsarist administration.

In 1820, Sherghazi wrote a letter to Karl Nesselrode, the Russian foreign minister (1816–1856), criticizing the new military governor of the Orenburg province, Petr Essen, for

demolishing a local madrasa and planning the destruction of a tsarist-sponsored mosque. In his letter, Sherghazi requested the reconstruction of the demolished educational facility and repairs for the mosque, which had begun to deteriorate.¹³ The Russian government ultimately agreed with Sherghazi's arguments, promising to investigate his complaint thoroughly and take appropriate action.

Religious patronage on the Kazakh steppe was also a hallmark of other prominent tribal leaders who became high-ranking tsarist bureaucrats, including figures such as Musa Shorman-ughli. Like Qunanbay, Shorman-ughli rose through the ranks of the tsarist bureaucracy, becoming the head of Kulik-Qarjas volost in 1833 and, eventually, the senior sultan of the Bayan-Awil district in the northeastern Kazakh steppe in 1854. In the 1830s, he spearheaded a campaign to collect funds for the construction of a new mosque, which opened in Bayan-Awil in 1844. He also brought renowned religious scholars to Bayan-Awil, such as Fayzolla Ishan and Qamaraddin Hazrat, to staff the local mosques, maktabas, and madrasas (A. J. Frank 2013, p. 219). Moreover, Shorman-ughli financially supported local Muslim scholars undertaking pilgrimage journeys to Mecca and Medina in the Ottoman Hijaz (A. J. Frank 2013, p. 220).

Religious patronage by Kazakh noblemen often extended to protecting scholars from persecution by the tsarist administration. In July 1831, while surveying the Kazakhs of the Aqmola (Akmolinsk) region, Russian authorities discovered several non-Kazakh Muslim clergymen who either had expired passports or lacked the required documentation to legally reside on the steppe. Among them was a Tatar mullah, Idris Islamov, who had been living at the encampment of the prominent Chinggisid nobleman, Qongir-khoja Khudaymendi-ughli. At the time, Khudaymendi-ughli was preparing to assume his role as the inaugural senior sultan of the Aqmola diwan (served from 1832 to 1842 and again from 1845 to 1849).

Leveraging his political authority and reputation as a loyal and influential Russian subject, Khudaymendi-ughli engaged in extensive correspondence with the Russian government to overturn the decision to deport Islamov. He emphasized that Islamov had resided in his encampment for twelve years, fulfilling dual roles both as his secretary and as a teacher to his children.¹⁴ While it remains unclear whether Khudaymendi-ughli's efforts ultimately succeeded, his intervention underscores the active role Kazakh patrons played in negotiating with the tsarist administration. Some Russian officials, under pressure from Kazakh nobleman, appeared inclined to issue an official passport for Islamov, potentially allowing him to remain on the Kazakh steppe.

Many other influential Kazakhs holding positions within the Russian administrative structure similarly served as patrons of local Islamic institutions. They funded new facilities, invited esteemed Muslim scholars, secured privileges for them from the state, and protected them from possible state persecution.¹⁵

6. Muslim Patrons Beyond the Russian Bureaucracy

Islamic patronage on the steppe was not limited to political figures like Qunanbay Oskenbay-ughli or Qongir-khoja Khudaymendi-ughli, who transitioned from community leaders to successful tsarist bureaucrats. Wealthy merchants directly unaffiliated with the tsarist administration also played a critical role in supporting Muslim religious institutions. Among these patrons were two prominent merchants from Semey: Tinibay Kauken-ughli and Jolaman Jandarbek-ughli.

Tinibay Kauken-ughli, born around 1789 in what later became the Ayagoz district of the Semey oblast, came from a family of livestock breeders. As a young man, he moved to Semey, beginning his career as a commercial clerk (*prikazchik*) for local Muslim merchants before establishing his own independent business. By the 1820s, Tinibay had become

a successful merchant engaged in caravan trade across the eastern Kazakh steppe and beyond. He settled in Zarechnaia Slobodka, a suburb located on the left bank of the Irtysh River opposite Semey proper.

Less is known about the early life of Jolaman Jandarbek-ughli. He initially worked as a sales representative for a Semey merchant named Ishimov, leading caravans to both nearby and distant commercial centers, such as Chawchek (Chuguchak) in Eastern Turkistan (Kashliak 2004, p. 466). Eventually, Jolaman started his own prosperous business, achieving recognition as a successful merchant by the 1820s. Like Tinibay, he based his operations in Zarechnaia Slobodka.

The commercial success of both Tinibay and Jolaman was closely tied to Semey's status as a major trade hub in the imperial borderlands. Recognizing its strategic location along caravan routes linking Russia, Central Asia, and China, the Russian government established a customs service in Semey as early as 1754. Trade in the region expanded steadily over the late eighteenth century. By the first half of the nineteenth century, merchants from Semey and its province had established lucrative commercial ties with Inner Russian provinces, importing manufactured Russian goods for Kazakh consumers while exporting leather, wool, and meat from the steppe to Russia. The merchant class also prospered through international trade with western China, regularly organizing caravans to and from Qulja and Chawchek.

Another key factor in Jolaman's and Tinibay's commercial success was their strategic decision to base their operations in Zarechnaia Slobodka. Situated outside Semey's formal boundaries and beyond the reach of tsarist customs authorities, this district functioned as a de facto free trade zone. The absence of state regulation allowed merchants to trade goods from China, Tashkent, and Bukhara without the burden of obligatory customs fees (Abramov 1861, p. 121). As a result, Zarechnaia Slobodka rapidly expanded in both size and population, attracting traders from across the Kazakh steppe and beyond. By the 1840s, however, the Russian government began tightening its control over the suburb, imposing restrictions on building permits, residency, and commercial activity. Officials suspected that many goods traded in the Slobodka were being smuggled into Semey and further into Inner Russia, an explanation they offered for the growing wealth of its merchants (Kashliak 2004).

In 1846, most of Zarechnaia Slobodka was placed under the jurisdiction of the Semey customs authority, and by 1855, the Russian government had banned all commercial activities in the suburb. These measures led to its economic decline and eventual impoverishment. Prior to these restrictions, however, Zarechnaia Slobodka had maintained a vibrant economy, supported by successful merchants like Tinibay and Jolaman.

In addition to being successful businessmen, Tinibay and Jolaman were known as dedicated patrons of Islamic religious institutions. Tinibay used his personal wealth to fund the construction of a large wooden mosque (Figure 2). Muslim sources indicate that the mosque was completed as early as 1829 (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, p. 25). It was likely built without official permits from the tsarist state, which had limited oversight in Zarechnaya Slobodka at the time. This may explain why Russian-language sources record the mosque's opening only in 1834, supposedly marking the year it was formally sanctioned by the tsarist administration (Kashliak 2004, p. 536). Adjacent to the mosque, Tinibay also built a school, transforming the area into a private religious and commercial complex that included his home, a bathhouse, and warehouses.

The first imam of Tinibay's mosque was a Kazakh scholar named Babajan (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, p. 25; Khālid ūghli 2005, p. 22). After Babajan, the mosque was led by imam Ni'matjan, a Bashkir scholar from the Ufa district. Ni'matjan was later suc-

ceeded by Ahmadjan Altay-Bay-ughli, an ethnic Kazakh scholar educated in the madrasas of Semey.¹⁶



Figure 2. The Tinibay Mosque, Semey, Abay Province, Kazakhstan (2016) © Nurlan Kabdylkhak.

Similarly to Tinibay Kauken-ughli, Jolaman Jandarbek-ughli used his personal funds to finance the construction of another mosque in Zarechnaia Slobodka. Its wooden structure was completed in 1827 (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, pp. 23, 79). Like Tinibay, Jolaman did not initially seek official permission to build or open a religious facility. As in the case of Tinibay's mosque, Jolaman's mosque became the centerpiece of a larger ensemble of buildings within the merchant's neighborhood in Zarechnaia Slobodka. This ensemble included a large house with a separate kitchen building, a warehouse, a bathhouse, a stable, a spacious barn, and an additional wing, reflecting the mosque's integration into the daily life of the local community.

Jolaman's mosque remained unnoticed by Russian authorities until 1841, more than a decade after it had opened its doors to the local Muslim community (Kashliak 2004, p. 466). Jolaman, however, managed to convince tsarist administrators that the mosque was a recent construction, likely downplaying its long-established presence. When Russian officials became aware of the "illegally" constructed mosque, they deliberated on the appropriate response. Jolaman's defense appears to have been persuasive: he claimed that he had not intended to violate the law and was simply unaware of any restrictions on religious buildings, explaining that he was "constantly engaged in trade and rarely spent time at home" (Kashliak 2004, p. 466).

This explanation seemingly satisfied the tsarist authorities, and in 1841, the mosque was officially recognized and included in the registry of sanctioned mosques in Semey (Kashliak 2004, p. 534). The recognition of Jolaman's mosque, despite its prior unregistered status, reflects not only the resourcefulness of its Kazakh patron but also the pragmatic approach of the Russian administration in accommodating unsanctioned religious institutions to maintain local order. Later, a prominent Kazakh named Tileubay Abdan-ughli expanded the religious infrastructure by constructing a three-room wooden madrasa adjacent to Jolaman's mosque, further enhancing the mosque's role as a local center of religious and educational activity (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, pp. 24, 79).

The first imam of the Jolaman mosque was Abdalkarim Abubakr-ughli. Despite his position, Abdalkarim did not possess a formal license (*ukaz*) from the Orenburg Muftiate to serve as a Muslim clergyman. This lack of official authorization was not a major issue, as the mosque itself operated without proper registration within the tsarist administration during its early years. Abdalkarim brought with him a distinguished scholarly background, having studied Islamic sciences at the renowned madrasas of Bukhara and Samarqand, institutions celebrated for their rigorous intellectual traditions. However, his impressive credentials did not translate into harmonious relations with the mosque's congregation.

Local Kazakhs removed Abdalkarim from his post just a year after his appointment. The precise reasons for his dismissal remain unclear, though Muslim authors from the period suggest only that Abdalkarim's personality or conduct failed to meet the expectations of the community.

Abdalkarim was succeeded by Muhammad-Amin Mansurov, a native of Nizhny Novgorod, who had received his education at one of the esteemed Machkara madrasas in the Volga-Urals region. Affectionately known among the local Kazakh community as Sari Mullah ("The Yellow Mullah"), Mansurov proved to be a much more enduring figure. He served as the imam of the Jolaman mosque for over fifty years, earning the respect and trust of the congregation (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, p. 79).

The mosques of Jolaman and Tinibay followed markedly different trajectories after the deaths of their respective patrons. By the 1870s, Jolaman's mosque had fallen into disrepair due to inadequate maintenance. Its wooden structure, aging and rotting, became dilapidated and unsafe. In 1876, the original mosque was demolished, and a new wooden structure was erected on the same site (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, p. 24). Unfortunately, this replacement mosque met a tragic end in the early Soviet era when a fire consumed it entirely. Despite the physical loss of Jolaman's mosque, the area of Semey where it once stood remains known as the "Jolaman" neighborhood, preserving the memory of its patron.

The Tinibay mosque, in contrast, enjoyed a far more enduring legacy. Before his death, while still in good health, Tinibay took the decisive step of converting several adjacent buildings and lots into a waqf to support the mosque and its staff. This decision was both bold and strategic, as it directly contravened tsarist legislation, which neither recognized nor permitted the creation of waqf properties. By establishing a waqf, Tinibay ensured that the mosque's endowment remained intact and protected from mismanagement, unlike the rest of his wealth, which was squandered by his son-in-law (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, pp. 25–26).

Thanks to Tinibay's foresight and commitment, the Tinibay mosque still stands in the city of Semey. Of the four historical mosques that have survived in the city, it is the oldest, a testament to the enduring impact of its patron's vision and dedication.

7. Conclusions

The examples discussed above illustrate how influential Muslim figures skillfully leveraged their knowledge and personal resources to establish and sustain religious institutions. Muslim patronage and direct religious charity played a pivotal role in the proliferation of educational facilities and mosques across the Kazakh steppe during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, it is equally important to recognize the non-monetary dimensions of Muslim patronage, which were integral to the Islamic revival on the steppe. Muslim patrons did not limit their efforts to financial contributions; they actively engaged with the tsarist state on behalf of their communities, advocating for the establishment of new Islamic institutions and the preservation of existing ones. These patrons sought to secure the appointment of qualified *ʿulama*, validate their positions, improve their working conditions, and shield them from potential state interference or persecution. This comprehensive and multifaceted approach underscores the critical role played by Muslim figures in safeguarding and promoting religious institutions on the nineteenth-century Kazakh steppe.

While this article primarily focuses on Muslim religious institutions in urban centers, the spread of such institutions on the Kazakh steppe was by no means confined to towns and cities. Although urban mosques and maktab-madrasas are better documented, sources reveal that Islamic institutions also flourished in rural areas, often beyond the immediate scrutiny of Russian observers. Unlike urban centers, which featured prominent mosques

and relatively formalized educational establishments, rural settlements typically lacked large-scale infrastructure. Yet it was precisely in these remote villages and pastoralist encampments that the majority of religious institutions emerged and operated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Amanshin 1914).

The cases associated with notable figures such as Qunanbay Oskenbay-ughli, Musa Shorman-ughli, Tinibay Kauken-ughli, and Jolaman Jandarbek-ughli underscore the central role played by local Muslim patrons in establishing and sustaining local mosques and maktab-madrasas. Contrary to tsarist and Soviet-era narratives that emphasized state-led religious initiatives, it was these locally embedded Muslim elites who were instrumental in promoting the development and proliferation of Muslim religious institutions during the first half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, this article highlights the complex role of the Russian imperial state in shaping the conditions that made such patronage possible. The tsarist administrative presence and evolving policies created new opportunities for Kazakh elites to accumulate wealth, status, and political influence. In this sense, the Russian empire indirectly facilitated the emergence of influential Muslim patrons whose activities would come to define the religious landscape of the steppe during this period. Though unintended, this indirect imperial impact was nevertheless crucial.

The nascent Russian bureaucracy on the steppe relied on recruiting influential Kazakhs to serve as tsarist administrators, appointing them to positions such as senior sultans and volost sultans. Many of these Kazakh administrators effectively utilized their bureaucratic roles to mobilize their communities, garnering support for the establishment of religious institutions and the recruitment of qualified Islamic scholars. Simultaneously, they wielded their influence as respected community leaders and loyal tsarist subjects to negotiate permits for religious institutions and to protect them from state persecution.

Concurrently, the expansion of Russian imperial control into the Kazakh steppe brought significant changes to economic activity, fostering the rise of a new class of wealthy merchants. These merchants played a critical role in the development of Muslim religious institutions by serving as patrons and personally funding their construction. Through their patronage, they ensured the continuity of these institutions, even after their deaths, as exemplified by Tinibay's strategic use of waqf to secure the future of his mosque.

These developments reveal a complex interplay between local agency and imperial structures, highlighting the nuanced ways in which Kazakh patrons navigated their dual roles. As community leaders, they championed their religious and cultural traditions, while as intermediaries with the Russian state, they negotiated the terms of their engagement with imperial authorities. This delicate balancing act underscores the adaptability and resourcefulness of Kazakh leaders and merchants in preserving and promoting Islamic institutions within the shifting socio-political landscape of the nineteenth-century Kazakh steppe.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Waqf deeds (waqfnamas) and other waqf-related documents constitute important sources on the history of Muslim societies and their institutions.

- ² In the early nineteenth century, a Khivan governor, Qutlugh Murad Inaq, financed the construction of one of the largest madrasas in Khorezm and endowed it with his private lands that he turned into a waqf. The madrasa's waqf lands, located across the Khorezmian oasis, comprised more than 24,634 tanabs of land, or around 9300 hectares. Its waqf-nama stipulated the maintenance of the madrasa building and the payments reserved for the madrasa's trustees, its teachers, imam, muezzin, barber, chamberlain, and librarian (Sartori 2016, pp. 115–16).
- ³ On the complexity of delineating shari'a and 'adat in the tsarist-governed Kazakh steppe, see Sartori and Shablei's Eksperimenty Imperii (Sartori and Shablei 2019).
- ⁴ In 1828, for his "diligence and commitment to the Russian government", Qunanbay's father received a kaftan (long robe with tight sleeves) from the Omsk oblast governor (Sydykov 2019, p. 34).
- ⁵ See also Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, Kazakhstan (hereafter TsGA) f. 374, op. 1, del. 4387.
- ⁶ In the aftermath of the Mongol empire, many powerful Central Asian rulers of non-Chinggisid origin strictly adhered to this tradition despite their political and military achievements. Among these rulers was the all-powerful Amir Timur or Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405), the founder of the vast Timurid empire. Preserving the tradition of Chinggisid monopoly on supreme political power, Amir Timur kept a puppet Chinggisid khan, though in reality, he ruled unopposed in his realm. To boost his political legitimacy, Amir Timur married a Chinggisid princess and officially adopted the title of "Kurakan" (or Gurkan), denoting "son-in-law" in Mongol language. After the Uzbeks managed to restore the rule of the Chinggisids in southern Central Asia, the new rulers casted the Timurids away from the region. One such Timurid prince, Muhammad Babur, later invaded and conquered northern India, where he established the state known in historiography as the Mughal empire (1526–1857). Remarkably, for hundreds of years, the Mughal rulers in India preserved and proudly used the title of "Gurkani" as one of the official names of their family.
- ⁷ In the Bukharan Khanate (1506–1868, after 1873 a Russian protectorate), the rulers from the Manghit dynasty (1720s–1920) initially used the title of "Ataliq", denoting a high official who ruled the realm in the name of a young or incapable dynast, and only later adopted and adhered to the title of "Amirs", never claiming to be "khans". In the Khivan Khanate (1511–1873, after 1873 as a Russian protectorate), after all male members of the ruling house of the Chinggisid-Shibanids died without leaving male descendants, power in Khiva shifted to the representative of the Qunghrat tribe (r. 1747–1920). Initially, they preferred adopting the titles of "Inaq" (high officials) and "biys" (traditional tribal leaders), while simultaneously inviting Kazakh Chinggisids who were formally proclaimed as Khivan khans. In 1804, the Qunghrats strengthened their ruling position enough to cease inviting Kazakh Chinggisids and officially bestow upon themselves the title of "khans". In the Khoqand khanate (r. 1709–1876), the ruling Ming dynasty initially lacking Chinggisid legitimacy used only the title of "biys". Only starting with Alim-khan (r. 1798–1809), who expanded the territory of the Khoqand khanate by conquering major urban centers of Tashkent and Turkistan, did the Mings formally adopt the title of "khans".
- ⁸ The only reason we know the details about the dowry of Qunanbay's sister, Anil, is because of Qunanbay's letter to the tsarist administration. Anil passed away already in the spring of 1838, less than a year after her marriage. Qunanbay, as he stressed in his letter, requested his brother-in-law to return half of the dowry in accordance with 'adat and shari'a. However, his brother-in-law rejected the request, prompting Qunanbay to escalate the matter to the Russian administration, which instructed the widower to comply with Qunanbay's plea. See also TsGA f. 374, op. 1, del. 421.
- ⁹ See also TsGA f. 374, op. 1, del. 3104.
- ¹⁰ Among his children who initially studied with an awil mullah were Khaliulla and Ibrahim (Abay). The first would go on to study in the Omsk and Moscow military schools and become an officer in the Russian army. The second one is today recognized as one of the most famous Kazakh poets and literary personalities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- ¹¹ By the late nineteenth century, Mecca and Medina housed at least three lodges for Central Asian pilgrims built by Kazakh patrons (Alimbay 2009, p. 78).
- ¹² Sher-Ghazi Ayshuaq-ughli khan is known in Russian-language sources as "Shirgazi Aichuvakov".
- ¹³ Russian State Historical Archive, Saint Petersburg, Russia (hereafter RGIA) f. 1291, op. 81, del. 52.
- ¹⁴ TsGA f. 338, op. 1, del. 717.
- ¹⁵ Other striking examples of powerful Kazakhs on the service of the Russian state include Jahangir (Jangir), khan of the Inner Horde, east of Orenburg. During his tenure from 1824 until his passing in 1845, Jahangir Khan initiated the construction and funding of large number of mosques and madrasas throughout his domain (Zhanaev 2002, pp. 291, 296; Ross 2017, p. 91). For other cases involving Kazakh patronage of Islamic institutions, see RGIA f. 1291, op. 81, del. 56, RGIA f. 1291, op. 81, del. 61, RGIA f. 1291, op. 81, del. 66, f. 1291, op. 81, del. 114; TsGA f. 338, op. 1, del. 767, TsGA f. 338, op. 1, del. 899.
- ¹⁶ Among his instructors was the famous scholar and historian Ahmad-Wali al-Simipulati (1833–1901) (al-Simipulati and Khalidi 2001, p. 25; Khalid 2005, pp. 16, 81).

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