Making Halal Business in Southern Kazakhstan

Combining the Soviet and Sufi Legacies?

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Abstract

Through the transformation of solidarity groups in Kazakhstan, and their confessionalization, we will try to see whether 'Islamic economy' offers a new framework of socio-economic organization and redistribution of wealth through the mobilization and valuation of private initiative and solidarity. Based on fieldwork in Southern Kazakhstan in 2014–16, this article uses qualitative interviews with Sufi entrepreneurs; it shows them driven not only by market demands and economic opportunities, but also by religious thinking and contest, which lead to the gradual emergence of new forms of socio-economic organization nourished by a specific admixture of Islamic values and Soviet-made norms of morality.

Keywords

Central Asia – Kazakhstan – Sufism – Naqshbandiyya – Süleymançı – sociability – Islamic economy – Muslim entrepreneurs – halal market – post-Soviet Islam

Introduction

As the principles of Islamic economy have been put into practice and the Islamic market is growing at global and local levels, a wide array of actors, including Muslims and non-Muslims, appears and participates in the development of a halal market. These professional activities follow the conventional practices of the secular context, but at the same time, actors do their business in what they claim is a 'Sharia-compliant' way, creating their Islamic way of life.

The Islamic economy is meant to cover all socio-economic actions. It is perceived as an application of precepts stated in divine law, and it is said to generate a strong connective bond among those who participate in it. Divine law regulates the sociability of men by addressing their reason (in Arabic *'aql* is the regulating principle of *nafs*, the carnal soul) (e.g. Mayeur-Jaouen 2019). Significantly, the Arabic equivalent of the word 'economy' is *iqtisad*, which designates aspiration, purpose, and goal, but also the golden middle way, moderation. What should be sought, ideally, is 'sufficiency' (*kifaya*), the right balance of wealth to satisfy basic needs, and for alms to rehabilitate the least wealthy. This is how a believer can find his insertion and commitment to the world order of equity – 'the profit and loss sharing method that [is] supposed to embody the "spirit of Islam"' (Coste 2017: 269). In this intimate union of the spiritual and the temporal, faith appears to be the foundation of economic life, where religious sets of values condition economic performance (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999; Zelizer 1994).

Beyond these engaging generalities, however, it may be necessary to ask whether a specificity of Islamic capitalism, as it unfolds nowadays, does not lie in the diversity – notably geographical – of its economic visions of the world. According to Timur Kuran (2011, 1995), Islamic legal institutions did not have an impact on the development of corporate structures and financial credit practices in the medieval age. Recent research shows that in the context of contemporary economic life, the relation between Islam and economy has changed. Globalization and neoliberal capitalism play a decisive role in the development of Islamic economy, which has become an essential area of analysis for researchers studying modern Islam (Rudnyckyj 2010; Bergeaud-Blackler, Fischer and Lever 2016; Tobin 2016; Green 2015; Warde 2010; Bergeaud-Blackler 2017; Sloane-White 2017).

Taking into account studies of the capitalist experience of Muslims (Tripp 2006; Rehman 2010; Nagaoka 2012; Njoto-Feillard 2012; Yankaya 2013; Coste 2017), the present sociological case study contemplates how globalized capitalism transforms and extends the socio-economic organization of Sufi brotherhoods that were impacted previously by kolkhoz engineering (i.e. collective economy) during the communist era. It also sheds light on how the halal market offers a new field of Islamic expression. The focus is on the present-day development of the Süleymancı branch of the Naqshbandiyya, as an economic actor on the Islamic market in Kazakhstan. How, I ask, does it combine both Soviet and Sufi legacies? In what respects should we think of the brotherhood's economic organization as global in-form, and in what respects – local (i.e. regional)? Through Sufi sociability and economic solidarity, the community offers its members daily life opportunities to become 'true Muslims' and

successful businessman: socialization, religious and business training, work, loans and other funding, commercial export/import partnerships, and philanthropic projects. All of these may lead an individual to religious achievement.

I ask these questions in a context where the imagination (today more or less significant) of the global *umma* demonstrates nostalgia for the Golden Age's Caliphate (Mouline 2016). Expressed in the most diverse social circles, this nostalgia does not hide the current disputes of the various Islamic worlds and their varied readings of the Qu'ran. More than ever, fine contextualization, regional and local case studies, are important to comprehend many processes, and in particular, those related to the transfer and transformation of Islam in specific places and over longer and shorter durations. The post-Soviet context, for example, has been affected and is characterized by a frantic competition between ethnic-religious teachings of various origins since 1989. This competition has continued even after the adoption in the 2010s of legislation banishing denominational proselytism.

Through a historical overview of Soviet Islam in Central Asia, the following chapter aims to assess whether the current model of Muslim network-based entrepreneurship among Sufis in Central Asia is a new social phenomenon or whether it was born from collectivization and has only been transformed and readapted to new economic realities. The paper is based on two years of intense fieldwork in Kazakhstan in 2014–16, combining observation, discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews with economic and religious actors. The following sections examine the ways in which they put into practice the Sufi Path's vision of Islamic economy and re-adapt their socio-economic organization based on spiritual sociability and community solidarity according to new economic realities and opportunities associated with the halal market.

Network of Sufi Entrepreneurs: the 'Golden Legend' of the Süleymançıs

Sufi movements played an important role in the pre-modern era in articulating 'Islam's capacity to weave dense long-distance ties and turn them into a versatile source of civility' (Salvatore 2016: 75). They relied on self-steered local, regional and transnational networks to unfold their full potential charismatically and organizationally. Today, the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya Süleymançı Sufi Path is characterized (as in the past) by strict compliance with the precepts of the Sharia and the permanent consolidation of the brotherhood's structure (cf. Trimingham 1998; (Zarcone 2004) Gaborieau, Popovic and Zarcone 1990). This path follows the teachings of its founder Abu'l-Faruq Süleyman Hilmi

Tunahan Silistervî (1888–1959), who was originally from Silistra on the lower reaches of the Danube River (the present border of Romania and Bulgaria). It also follows, through him, the teachings of Ahmad Sirhindi, the creator of the Mujaddidiyya in the seventeenth century. Sirhindi developed the idea of Millennial Reform (Ar. *tajdid al-alf*) as an intellectual basis for the brotherhood. He asserted that on the Day of Judgment, people would be asked about their adherence to Sharia (Buehler 2003, 2011; Weismann 2007). Despite their long history in Turkey (where they originated and where their headquarters are still located), as well as in Europe, Africa, and Central Asia, the Süleymançıs' activities were restricted by Atatürk and his immediate successor. From the 1970s onwards, they gradually re-emerged, offering their religious teachings through preparatory classes and tutoring, and offering shelter in their dormitories to students and followers who were flocking to Turkey's metropolis from the campaigns of Anatolia and Thrace (Friedmann 2000, Aydın 2004).

Economic and political opportunities further shaped the evolution of the Süleymancı movement. Sufi brotherhoods do not reject the search for profit, especially if it serves religion and wellbeing of members. Since 1985, with the support of the Naqshbandis and Nurus, a new generation of businessmen has emerged. The legalization of charitable donations in 1983 in Turkey provided the grounds for developing social and cultural activities and funding opportunities within the framework of *waqfs*. Through the development of religious education and solidarity networks, the Süleymancı invest into the public space, and extend their influence on the local and transnational levels (Gökalp 1990; Jonker 2006a & 2006b; Dressler et al 2009; Landman & Sunier 2015).

Unlike other initiatory, transnational, or, more specifically, Central Asian forms of sociability, the Süleymancı movement practices a form of self-isolation from global society. It publishes few doctrinal texts or commentaries. The anthropologist Altan Gökalp wrote in 1990, on the eve of the expansion of the movement towards Central Asia, 'it has no attributed written work of reflection, and it seems that most of its activity has manifested itself through the establishment of Qur'an courses and the careful organization of these teachings' (Gökalp 1990: 423). The lack of a literary tradition makes it difficult to research the history of the movement and its gradual transplantation from the lower Danube to the foothills of the Tian Shan Mountains.

Between Sufi Sociability and Economic Solidarity

My first observations, combined with studies of social history and sociology conducted in other regions of the majority Muslim population of the former

USSR, suggest that since the 1980s, 'entrepreneurs' in Kazakhstan have shown themselves oriented to an 'Islamic' economy. For the Süleymancı, communal solidarity is based on the concept of the initiatory pact (Ar. *tawajjuh*), coupled with attendance to the same teachings. The spiritual leaders of the *tariqa* willingly say, to justify the importance given to religious magisterium: "The fruit of a tree, [should one] seek it in the branches or in the roots?" (Gökalp 1990: 428). What matters to them is the product obtained from action (i.e. the formation and multiplication of philanthropic structures) rather than documenting their roots. They are relatively uninterested in articulating the doctrinal aspects that link them to historical Naqshbandiyya and its reformed branch, the Mujaddidiyya, of an old settlement in Central Asia. Their priority is to supervise the young generation and to provide ideological support for the developing network of entrepreneurs based on Sufism.

In Kazakhstan, there were 60 Süleymancı madrasas endowed with madrasa-college status as of 2017. They are dispersed in all regions of the country, which gives them a much broader reach than the 30 Turkish high schools managed by the Fethullacı movement that are, moreover, concentrated in a small number of urban centers. Initially designed to fill the ideological 'vacuum' of the end of the Soviet period, these centers for religious teaching also sought to ameliorate the socio-economic upheavals of the 1990s and 2000s by promoting the social mobility of Kazakhs from the periphery (Balci 2003). At the same time, the Süleymancı *jama'at* was part of a broader movement characterized by the concomitant emergence of small and medium-sized business interests and religious associations offering places of prayer, Qur'anic teaching and socio-economic sociability.

For the youngest, madrasas and their dormitories are not only a place of religious education and sociability but also an institution for social redistribution. The entrepreneurs of the Süleymancı *jama'at*, pay *zakat* and offer other help to families who face hardships. Senior members consider that *suhbat* (Ar. *suhba*, a mystical meeting) refers almost indifferently to Sufi sociability and to economic solidarity. A ritualized *suhbat* follows Friday's community prayer. It is held at private residences according to a rotating principle, as it was during the *gap* or *jura* of yesterday. Socialization into the brotherhood proceeds through a master-disciple relationship, which is of central importance in the Naqshbandi tradition, and through regular participation in Qur'anic commentary courses and workshops. As in the traditional Gnostic ways, the recipients also participate in intense pilgrimage activity to the holy places of Central Asia (e.g. the Mausoleum of Khwaja Ahmad Yasawi in Turkestan and ancient Yasi) and of Turkey, and aspire to participate in the Hajj. These pilgrimages are organized through service companies owned by members of the *jama'at*.

Members of a local branch meet to discuss economic and philanthropic projects. It is not rare for the youngest specialists to find their first job or loans within a fellow Süleymançı's company. 'When I wanted to open my first halal restaurant, I did not have the means to pay the rent for a commercial space,' told me a Süleymançı member in 2016, continuing: 'a brother (i.e. fellow member) of mine, he kindly offered a commercial location on the ground floor of his hotel. Thanks to this support, to his reliance, I could realize this project.' This co-location of a halal business within another commercial enterprise is not unique. There are many entrepreneurs among the Süleymançı offering services of the 'halal business'. These include initiatives in the food trade and catering, but also in travel agencies, fashion, security, and building construction. Religious scholars of the *jama'at* give monthly classes on economic ethics to these entrepreneurs at the madrasas. These courses are designed to answer questions about the legitimacy of a business, according to the Sharia, and the application of Islamic ethics to business management.

There is a strong sense of belonging within the *jama'at*, it is expressed primarily through socio-economic activism, which is at the forefront of the inclusion of young people in a defined world of work in ethno-confessional terms (as it already was in the bazaars of the Ferghana Valley at the time of the Akramiyya and, more generally, in the 'Allah's kolkhozes'). 'The sharing of common values and standards facilitates commercial relations: Islam is the only religion that focuses on the interest-free economy, simplicity in life and the prevention of greed,' I was told in Almaty. Süleymançı entrepreneurs tend to modernize their representation and organization with a spiritual connection to economic and political realities in Kazakhstan: they dress in elegant suits, with a preference for dark blue, and are always clean-shaven to project the image of a modern, prosperous and reliable businessman.

On the political side, Sufism was the guardian of Islam under communism. Today it is an agent for compromise with the authorities who are themselves descended from the old communist elites. The politicization of Islam following the dissolution of the USSR bases its legitimacy on ethnic nationalism and sees Sufi brotherhoods as guarantors of an authentic, national and moderate Islam (Papas 2005; Olcott 2007; Roy 2010; DeWeese and Gross 2018; Muminov 2018). In this sense, Sufi brotherhoods are considered fundamentally hostile to the 'innovations' of Islamism.

Post-Soviet Islam: an Exception to Global Evolutions?

Even though the USSR has disappeared, its heritage still stands in Central Asia. Here, the interrelations between religions and states remain framed by religious

administrations (Alniyazov 2005). The DUMK (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan) is heir to the Central Asian *muftiyyat* created during the Second World War to support the conscription of Muslim citizens for the Union's war against Nazi Germany. Another Soviet legacy is found in the 'substitute religious communities' formed by collective farm brigades in the wake of the massive population resettlements in the years and decades after the Second World War. These resettlements were connected in many cases with the development of cotton monoculture. Collective farm brigades were formed, in many cases, from the inhabitants (already closely related) of a single village or valley, where groups and networks of solidarity emerged (Ar., Pers., Turk., Kz. *jama'at*; Rus. *obshchina*) of various dimensions and contours, and new contents. Although it is difficult to clearly detect in Soviet archives it seems that these kolkhozes were the site for 'informal' religiously connoted networks that began to emerge in the last decades of the Soviet period.

During the decades after the Second World War, oscillations and contradictions within the general anti-religious policy of the Soviet Union, sometimes favored the emergence and development of non-accredited Islam in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, if only for short periods of time (Dudoignon & Noack 2014). While varied kolkhoz institutions were gradually but steadily invested with religious functions (from the 'rest zones' of cotton plantations to cultural clubs), the number of non-accredited (Ru. *nezaregistrirrovannye*) mosques oscillated, sometimes very strongly. In Central Asia, there were up to 1,800 such mosques with 230 officials (Tasar 2017). There were also numerous sanctuaries that were allowed to exist; these were guarded by dynasties of wardens granted with sacred ascendance from Prophet Muhammad (for the *sadat*) or from the Arab conquerors of Central Asia (for the *khwajas*). This 'informal' religious staff (a term that, in the 1970s, referred to a whole group of communities and movements not sanctioned by the party-state) of mosque officials and sanctuary wardens was in charge of the main rites of passage in a Muslim life-cycle: circumcision, marriage, and funerals.

In parallel, private houses were used to host rich, variously ritualized forms of sociability (Babadjanov 1998, 2014; Dudoignon and Zevaco 2009; Ducloux et al. 2011; e.g. Vicini 2014). In the Soviet ethnography of Persian-language regions of sedentary agricultural tradition, two terms designate regular male assemblies (cf. Kislyakov 1973; Bushkov 2002; Ruffier et al 2002; Bobokhonov 2012) which could in some instances bring together an entire brigade, village, or even district. One is *jura* (a Tajik and Uzbek word referring to a friend or group of friends), the other is *gashtak* or *gap* (both meaning *discussion* or *conversation*) (Mills and Rahmoni 2015). One of the derivations of the second is the *juma gap* that used to take place on Friday (Ar. *jum'a*), after the community prayer. In pre-Soviet cities, these weekly circles used to bring together

prominent members of the community, representatives of the wealthy social group of the *bays* (landowners), and other local elite members who could pay the membership fee or *tuqma* (Rakhimov 1990; Bushkov 2002; Dudoignon 1994). Belonging to a *gap* could bring (as it still does) social prestige and protection, especially when the *gap* took the form of literary *majlises* or *mahfils* (lit. *get-together*), in which members' verses were debated. More generally, the *gap* remained an essential instrument for socialization of the youngest members of the community. It was the place where the problems of daily life in a neighborhood unit (*mahalla*) could be discussed, and where social and religious norms were diffused. Local peer-to-peer networks expanded based on one or more *gaps*, and *juras* prospered thanks to the active socio-economic cooperation of its members (Kislyakov 1952; Polyakov 1980; Kandiyoti 1998; Schmoller 2014; Humphrey 2002).

Of course, even in the late 1980s, these ritualized sociabilities remained under police control. Nevertheless, many served as relays for a local congregation, whose imam was sometimes called *jurabashi* (lit. chief of a *jura*). Over time, some of these *juras* gained popularity and trust, which further granted the latter status and influence in socio-economic and political life. In the 1980s–90s, one *jura*, the Akramiyya (Akramis), was inspired by an Islamized ideology of redistribution in the context of the late-Soviet chronic scarcity in consumer goods. The Akramiyya's membership came from a network of agriculture and bazaar workers that extended across the entire north-east of the Ferghana Valley. After the May 2005 demonstrations and counterinsurgency in Andidjan, the Akramiyya became internationally known as 'radical' and was officially eliminated. The Akramiyya has since been re-read, in a less exclusively security-minded manner, as an indigenous response to the domination of the post-Soviet economy by the ruling oligarchy in Tashkent (Ilkhamov 2006).

Despite their dismantling in 2005, the Akramis continue to be seen in Central Asia as a possible model for economic organization and redistribution based on a discourse of social justice largely inherited from the Soviet period albeit in the trappings of an Islamic discourse that values private initiative and solidarity and denounces the excess concentration of wealth and power induced by privatization. More than a decade after its elimination, the Akramiyya has a recurrent popularity, fueled by the confiscatory policies of the oligarchies in power. Like other contemporary movements, as diverse as Turkey's AKP and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the appeal and political fortune of the Akramiyya is built on the network's economic initiatives and local-level redistribution.

Islam never disappeared in the Soviet Union. To the contrary, anti-religious politics favored the dynamic practices and sustainability of Islam in Kazakhstan

(Dudoignon & Noack 2014; Frank 2019; Tasar 2017), as well as the emergence of new forms of solidarity groups with a significant socio-economic impact on the Muslim population in the post-Soviet area. In this respect, the Akramiyya network could be seen as a prototype of modern socio-economic organization of Muslim entrepreneurs' networks.

Dynamic Development of a halal Market

In 1995, Kazakhstan was registered as a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). According to the 2009 national census, the country has a 70% Sunni Hanafi Muslim population. A decade later, in the light of growing economic interest in developing halal markets, the Kazakhstan Halal Industry Association (AHIK) was established in 2006, following the Malaysian model of development and regulation of the halal market. In 2006, the Ministry of Industry and Trade established a Halal Standards Committee to issue certificates and, within 'a short period, many dietary products produced in Kazakhstan started to carry halal labels to appeal to a wider population ... this development help substantiate the extent of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan' (Achilov 2015: 87).

Regarding the dynamic development of the Sharia-compliant market, Kazakhstan strives to become the international hub for the halal economy in the post-Soviet region (Botoeva 2017). According to Thomson Reuters and Dinar Standard (2018), Kazakhstan is a leader in the Islamic financial sector and was ranked at the second place within the Eurasian region in terms of its degree of development of Islamic economy. Halal media and recreation, halal food and pharmaceuticals and cosmetics also contributed to Kazakhstan's second place in the region in the Islamic economic ecosystem ranking. The legislative environment and economic prerequisites have allowed the establishment of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), which is now considered a modern financial hub for the countries of Central Asia, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Caucasus and the western China region. Situated between Europe and Asia, the country has already built necessary international road and rail links for the transfer of goods, opening access to the vast market of the former USSR, especially to the free-trade market of the Eurasian Economic Union (Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan) which has a population of some 86 million Muslims (Nurgaliyeva 2018).

Following the current state of an emerging halal market, what makes the Islamic economy flourishing in the twenty-first century? In the context of the financial globalization of modern capitalism which is, according to Keynes,

'absolutely irreligious' and 'without much civic spirit', one might wonder if the so-called Islamic economy could be imagined as even compatible with the principle of the free market? The answer in Kazakhstan is yes. Muslims are said to be merchants in their soul, like the Arabs of Hejaz in the first century of the Hegira, and the believer is invited to rely on a particular social and symbolic capital and on a recognizable associability to develop an economic praxis on a large-scale that has been confined for a long time to a strictly framed cultural arena.

How, though, to do it? To answer this question, many observers have turned to Max Weber and his explanatory model based on a causal relationship between religiously-based ethics and a type of organization of the economic activity. Islamic economy, theorized by thinkers close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Jama'at-i Islami, were deeply influenced by the holistic ideologies of the early twentieth century. These oppose Western capitalism by aiming to put an end to debt (Coste 2017). For Mawdudi (1903–79), the most influential of these thinkers, Islam must permeate all of society, including economic activity—the latter through the prohibition of interest (Ar. *riba*) and the exercise of legal alms (*zakat*) as an instrument of redistribution. Prohibition of *riba* and practice of *zakat* are conceived as archetypal elements of Islamic activity against both capitalist and communist ideologies. The logic of debt was to be overcome by resorting to the opposite of interest – that is, it foregrounded equity as a method for sharing profits and losses as embodying the 'spirit of Islam'.

According to the Süleymançı brotherhood's tradition, Qur'anic guidelines for doing business as a good Muslim include 'the best man is he who is useful to mankind' and one should 'give more to have more in the afterlife'. According to the respondents of the Süleymançı brotherhood, their businesses represent about 20% of the halal market in Kazakhstan. They have this level of success because Sufi sociability and shared normativities create and seal trust among businessmen as members of the *jama'at*. This enhances economic solidarity under the roof of the religious community, and members find a way to realize their business projects within the *jama'at*, following not only self-interested but also community-interested initiatives.

Conclusion

Today in Kazakhstan, a growing number of businesses are creating economic halal opportunities. So-called halal markets offer not only food, but also cosmetics, Islamic fashion, tourism, healthcare, pharmaceutical products,

Islamic education, banking, and insurance services. Various *jama'at* participate in the development of this market and occupy specific niches within it. In post-Soviet Central Asia, which we have tackled here in the particular case of Southern Kazakhstan, religious entrepreneurs from the 1990s to the present day are actors in globalization through modern preaching at the heart of economic decision-making. Invisible certainly, in the case of the Süleymançıs, but having many relays in local society, both rural and urban, they have participated since perestroika in 1987 in the re-elaboration of local and regional proto-citizenships. Working to combine religious knowledge and economic management, they embody today what they perceive as a transhistorical tradition of Central Asian origin, updating the Persian formula '*dast be kar, del be yar*' (hands to work, heart to God) found in Naqshbandi Gnosticism.

Ethical and religious teachings sprang out of the Soviet rural world from the middle of the 1980s. This was the case of the emergence of Akramiyya, an alternative merchant bourgeoisie that was active in the bazaars of the Ferghana Valley until its repression in 2005. The specificity of the Süleymançı way is certainly the transnational anchorage that the Turkish connection offers to its members, combined with a precious political independence.

Although widely documented elsewhere in the worlds of Islam for the contemporary period, such a level of interpenetration between socio-economic norms and religious law can only challenge the sociologist. This has led the present author to deal with this interrelation in terms of a certain re-enchantment of the commercial relations in the context of current globalization, on the particular substratum of the sometimes paradoxical legacies of Soviet collectivism, the kolkhoz in particular, or brigade, and their particular community consciousness.

This case study of the Naqshbandi Mujadiddiya Süleymançı tradition emphasizes the socio-economic transformation and adaptation of cross-border Sufi orders to a regional local context and culture, shaped by an emerging global halal market. These orders serve as reciprocal references, through the relation between master-disciple, to evaluate their socio-economic actions in accord with discourses of religious legitimation. Also, the doctrine of Sufi masters offers a set of values (shared common interpretation of economic actions and coordination) passing through Sufi mystical sociability to economic solidarity, as frameworks that allow overcoming uncertainty. Members of a *jama'at* have reasonable confidence that others will follow the same guidelines and community-based norms.

Against supposedly secular capitalist societies that are dedicated to producing profits, Muslim entrepreneurs produce religious narratives that explain

their activities as a site of Islamic expression, expansion, and modernization. Power, relationships, actors, and financial resources are mobilized in the name of Islam by structuring a new form of social organization, economic coordination and the processes of production and redistribution.

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