

## Islamic Religious Identity in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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### Abstract

This paper assesses the state of Islam in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. It examines the challenges Islam faces due to the diversity of ideologies bequeathed by the Soviet Union. Although Islam emerged as a dominant religious belief in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, due to the internal elements of secularism, Tengrism, and other indigenous ideologies, and the interpretation of Islamic lore coupled with the Soviet ideology of atheism, Islam remains syncretic with some loose extremism fuelled by home-grown socio-political factors and imported fundamentalism. It, therefore, concludes that the challenge to Islam and Islamic religious identity in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is a sort of 'Muslimo-phobia' rather than 'Islamophobia' because the challenge to Islam is clearly unleashed by the Muslims themselves and not the minority non-Muslim population.

Keywords: Islam, Kyrgyzstan, Soviet Union, Ideological differences, Tengrism.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyzstan is an independent, secular and democratic state in Central Asia (Yusuf & Boletbekova, 2022). The strategic position of the Central Asian region and the collapse of its controlling sovereignty, the USSR, exposed it to a diversity of cultural identity. Central Asia is located at the crossroad to different civilizations which accounts for its cultural diversity. It combines the civilizations of Turkey (the Turks), Arabia, Europe, China and Persia. Thus, it forms an intersection between the West (Europe) and the East (Asia, particularly, the Muslim world) (Botoiarova, 2005). Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union (Bennigsen & Broxup, 2011). Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet power in 1991 granted the country independence after almost seven decades of Soviet rule. The democratic reforms in the post-independence period guarantee basic human rights, including the freedom of religious association (Ashymov, 2003). This afforded Kyrgyz the opportunity to search for diverse religious identities. Although Islam had been peripheral to the Soviet operations in the country, independence in Kyrgyzstan marked the beginning of Islamic revival. Nonetheless, the 2010 edition of the country's Constitution maintains that religion should be separated from state affairs. Therefore, this Constitution only re-affirmed the liberal religious laws implemented in the post-Soviet era (Pelkmans, 2014). The new Constitution was intended to facilitate communal tolerance for the different ethnic groups and the variety of religious traditions in the country while simultaneously guaranteeing interfaith

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harmony and discourse and keeping religious extremism in check. It was also meant to promote peaceful coexistence among the citizens in line with the cherished native maxim: *Kyrgyzstan-nash obshchi dom* (which means: "Kyrgyzstan - our common home") (Ashymov, 2003, p.133).

Notwithstanding the above, Islam remains at the core of the contemporary Kyrgyz identity (Mcglinchey, 2009). Some of the people were confident of religion and its sociocultural role, particularly, education (Ashymov, 2003), and therefore, the Islamic tradition and its moral values were vigorously revived to foster good relationship in the cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism created by the Soviet Union albeit 'unofficially.' Therefore, since the government chose the democratic way and separated religion from the state, the role of different Islamic organizations became crucial in the development of Islam in the country. Unfortunately, it appears the Islamic revival clashed with the indigenous cultural reawakening. Thus, despite being a Muslim majority country, the expression of Islamic religious identity in the country encounters some setbacks. With the objective to shedding light on the above phenomenon, this paper examines the dynamics of the cultural reawakening and its impact on the Islamic religious identity in the country during the period of self-rule. The methodology used was basically archival and simple and brief qualitative interview of a cross-section of the Kyrgyz youth about the religious experience.

### **Introduction of Islam to Kyrgyzstan**

According to some scholars, Islam reached Central Asia, in general, around the 10<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. (Ashymov, 2003). It is argued that the Kyrgyz were the last tribe in that area to accept Islam (Ashymov, 2003). Urmanov is, however, of the opinion that Islam was introduced to Kyrgyzstan in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. (Urmanov, 2001). According to oral sources, the introduction of Islam to Kyrgyzstan is connected to certain Arab armies from Baghdad, Iraq, during the Abbassid period (Karagiannis, 2005). Karagiannis further suggests that some Kyrgyz tribes that initially occupied the Upper regions of the Yenissei Basin in Siberia migrated southwards to the present-day Kyrgyzstan between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It appears that these migrant tribes had been converted to Islam by the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Karagiannis, 2005). The Islamization of Kyrgyzstan, however, appears to have occurred in three stages. The first has to do with the entire central Asian region and is linked with the decisive Battle of Talas which occurred in 751 C.E., a military engagement between the Abbassid authorities, with their Tibetan allies, on the one hand, and the Tang Dynasty of China under Emperor Xuanzong (712-756), on the other, at this site on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border (Stein, 1922; Hoberman, 1982). This battle was a decisive factor in the spread of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and, generally, in the whole of Central Asia because it determined which of the two civilizations of the Muslims (the Arabs) and the Chinese would direct the course of political affairs in the region. The aftermath of this battle created the opportunity for Islamic expansion in the region and it is alleged that Islam came to Kyrgyzstan within this period (Urmanov, 2001). However, it appears that although the Central Asians supported the Arab Muslim army against the Chinese, they initially did not massively convert to Islam. This supports the earlier theory that the indigenous Kyrgyz probably converted later. The Japanese Anthropologist, Setsuko Yoshida, also confirmed this hypothesis in the 1990s in her field research in a village in northern Kyrgyzstan where, she alleges that, the people converted as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Yoshida, 2008; Haruka, 2011). Despite the above, Islam was able to take roots among the people of North Tyan Shan where some Kyrgyz settled.

The second stage of Islamization occurred during the reign of the Karakhanids who ruled Western and Eastern Turkestan between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the split of Khorasan and Transoxiana from the Abbassid Caliphate, a new dynasty was formed in these territories which continued to spread Islam. Around the mid-tenth Century, Satuq, the founder of the Karakhanid dynasty, accepted Islam. In 960 C.E., his son, Bograhan Harun Musa, declared Islam as state religion (Urmanov, 2001). This stage of Islamization is very

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important for the Kyrgyz because, according to some scholars, by this time, the indigenous Kyrgyz tribes had already settled on the territory of the present-day Kyrgyzstan, which was then part of the Karakhanid State (Asanov, n.d., Moldobaev, n.d.). Way back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, during the time of the Jujan Khaganate, some Kyrgyz people were alleged to have migrated from eastern Tyan Shan to the Yenisei region. These series of migrations eventually resulted in the establishment of the Kyrgyz state which later extended towards Eastern-Turkestan. However, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, they were defeated by Kara-China who, not only forced some of them to migrate to the Karakhanid States where another wave of the Islamization took place. This state of affairs continued to affect the progress of Islam among the Kyrgyz until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century during which the Mongols overthrew Kara-China and declared the freedom of religion for all citizens. Thus, despite the obstacles, Islam remained among the Kyrgyz during and after the Mongol occupation. Islam had another opportunity to become an official religion during the reign of Kutlugh Timur (1330-1361), the Khan of Moghulistan ((i.e. Semirechye and Eastern Turkestan combined (Ashrafyan, 1999)). Timur converted to Islam at the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Islam in Moghulistan was mainly practised among the sedentary population while some nomadic tribes of the land of the Jety Suu (Seven Rivers) and Tyan Shan still stuck to their pre-Islamic traditional beliefs. This reliance on their traditional beliefs was probably because it was difficult for the nomads to have access to Islamic *da'wah* facilities such as mosques and *Madrassahs*. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz tribes did not have any strong central authority as they were mainly administered by their tribal heads.

The third stage of the Islamization process which appears to be the most significant occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the time of the Kokand Khanate (Urmanov, 2001). The Kokand Khanate, which ruled the modern states of Kyrgyzstan (Mitchell, 2015; Dubovitskii & Bababekov, 2015), eastern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and southeastern Kazakhstan, flourished between 1709 and 1876. It was defeated by the Russian authorities (Dubovitskii & Bababekov, 2015). All the states that were under the Kokand Khanate, therefore, came under the control of the Russian Empire despite the resistance of some of the tribes, including the Kyrgyz, who initially refused to acknowledge the Russian authorities.

From the beginning, in order to win the sympathy of the Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, the Russians feigned some friendliness to Islam. Thus, conceivably, Islam would have the opportunity to grow. The Tatar people of Russia shared some common characteristics with the Kyrgyz. These characteristics included religion (Islam) and language (khalidov, 1994). The Tatar and Kyrgyz languages are of the Turkic family. Therefore, they are mutually intelligible. Chotaeva (2004) even classifies the Tatars as Kyrgyz-speaking people. For this reason, the Russian authorities realized that the Tatar people could easily interact with the Kyrgyz and make them friendlier to the Russian interests; and this is noteworthy because this was their primary motive for using the Tatar Muslims as a facility for their colonizing mission. Therefore, once these people failed to act up to their expectation, Islam was 'doomed'; and that is exactly what happened. To execute their scheme, the Russian authorities brought many Tatar people to Kyrgyzstan. These immigrants began new methods of *da'wah* in the country. The Tatar *Mullahs* dispensed Islamic knowledge to the natives along the trade routes on the Steppe of Kazakhstan and the new military camps of the Russian war lords (Frank, 2001; Kemper, Motika & Reichmuth, 2010). The Tatar *Mullahs* also initiated an educational reform which Islamized the vernacular subjects (i.e. integrated scientific knowledge into the Islamic ones) (Abduvakhitov, 1994). In the subsequent years when Islam was strengthened in Central Asia and began to bring the ideas of national liberation and political consciousness, the Russian authorities felt threatened. Therefore, they placed Islam under strict state control. This move eventually stifled the role of the Tatar *Mullahs* because all mosques were closed down while the Islamic schools, the *Madrassahs*, were transformed into Russian model schools with the Russian language as the medium of instruction and communication. This move led to the secularization of even the Islamic subjects which were taught under the auspices of the learned Tatar religious authorities.

Thus, once again, the role of Islam began to shift. These sporadic interferences consistently made Islam to sometimes become stronger in terms of its grip on the state while other times it lost this control. Therefore, even though, it continued to spread among the various tribes, it mostly remained peripheral to the interest of the state and it often clashed with the socio-political ideologies of the state managers, the Russian authorities, who controlled the state. Another important issue was that the social way of life of the Kyrgyz people themselves further weakened the process of Islamic *da'wah* in the land. They were mainly nomadic people; therefore, it was difficult to build the Islamic religious facilities like *Madrasah* and mosque that would facilitate the spread of the religion. Moreover, the same nomadic lifestyle resulted in the people having a weak relationship with the central government. They proffered obedience to the leaders of their groups instead of the central political authority; and this further weakened their sentiment of solidarity nationally in the practice of Islam even in the early stages of the Islamization process. It is, therefore, certain that, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of the indigenous population of the country was Muslim (Karagiannis, 2005). Nonetheless, after independence, Kyrgyzstan became a secular democratic state with the parliamentary form of government in which the people elect their representatives to the legislature.

The state is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and is recognized internationally as “part of the Muslim world” (Borbieva, 2009, p.1). In 2014, the capital, Bishkek, was declared as the ‘Capital of Islamic Culture’ by this organization (Fedorenko, 2015). Although, Islam appears marginal in the management of the state political affairs, the above is understandable because the majority of the people are Muslims (Karagiannis, 2005) even though, since no statistical study has been done, it is difficult to give an exact number of Muslims in the country. The 2020 estimates by the government and population experts quoted more between 90% and 86.3%, respectively (2020 Report on International Religious Freedom) and a negligible percentage of people of the Jewish and Bahai faiths (USCIRF, 199).

It must, however, be emphasized that, in Kyrgyzstan, Islam is deeply blended with the indigenous ‘un-Islamic’ or tribal customs (Karagiannis, 2005). Nonetheless, religious affiliations in the country are mainly distributed along ethnicity. Historically, it was held that the indigenous Kyrgyz, as well as the Uzbeks, the Turks, the Dungans, the Tatars, and other people of Central Asia, who migrated to this land, were mainly Muslims. On the other hand, the European immigrants from Russia, Germany and other European countries have been traditionally considered as Christians. The question is: what is the nature of Islamic religious identity in the country? What is meant by “identity” by the way?

### **Concept of Identity: A Definition**

Identity is a little problematic concept (Gleason, 1983; Yusuf & Dumbe, 2023). Hall (1990) argues that the definition of identity is not transparent. According to him, identity is a continuous process which occurs within. Defining cultural identity, Hull (1990, p.223), avers that it has to do with shared values that define “one’s true self”. For him, cultural identity concerns shared past experiences and values, which provide the context for appreciating others’ values beneath varying cultural past (Hall, 1990; Yusuf & Dumbe, 2023). Vignoles (2018, p.1) simplifies the notion of identity by arguing that “identity refers to how people answer the question, ‘Who are you?’”. Scholars concerned with the concept of identity place emphasis on “either personal or social contents and either personal or social processes” (Vignoles, 2018, p.1). Vignoles (2018), however, stresses that identity could be both at personal and social levels and both in terms of content and processes. Thus, it could be individual or social or both. This makes it clear that every individual or social (ethnic or cultural) group has an identity or a distinctive feature that is expected to answer the question: “who are you” (whether culturally or ethnically) (Yusuf & Appiah, 2021).

There has so far not been a unified theory of religious identity (Jackson & Hogg, 2010). However, the variety of the conceptualization efforts has been psychological, sociological, and political, as well as philosophical, theological, and tradition-based. Therefore, we define religious identity in the context of how an individual or a group understands, shapes (and is shaped by) or experiences the socio-cultural, political, as well as the devotional facets of religious affiliation. Identity is, therefore, understood as a social construct, which describes a dynamic but gradual process that could be private or public and is shaped by past experiences and present circumstances. Islamic religious identity therefore delineates the manifestation of the above indices in the Islamic context. Namely, how socio-cultural, political, and devotional experiences manifest in the life of the Muslims and interact with both the internal and external environments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Islamic Religious Identity in Soviet Kyrgyzstan

After the collapse of the Russian Empire, the whole of the Soviet Union, which took over, entered the threshold of atheism. In 1924, a new organization, the Union of Militant Atheists of the USSR, was formed (Esenamanova, 2004). With this, anti-religious activities became the official norm of the state. This organization engaged in high-profile propaganda about religion and promoted the atheistic worldview in the countries of Central Asia that were part of the USSR. All leaders were also instructed by the Soviet authorities to take measures to halt religious activities and, more importantly, portray Islam as a religion that promotes class belonging and slavery (Esenamanova, 2004). Thus, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party instructed all party organizations to persevere in their attempt to reach the target of completely rejecting religion and eliminating traditional prejudices (Esenamanova, 2004).

To facilitate this anti-religious transition, in 1931, the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets were introduced instead to replace the Arabic alphabet which was hitherto in use. The anti-religious propaganda was then intensified through an educational curriculum as the early formal religious education was abolished. Galina Yemelianova describes this as follows:

“Muslim children, like all Soviet children were taught within the compulsory unified Soviet educational system, a central element of which was atheistic Communist Indoctrination. They were taught a new version of their history defined by class struggle [a direct opposite of what Islam espoused]. National and religious identities were depicted as insignificant and rudimentary. Those national historic figures who did not fit the class criteria were erased from the school curriculum and textbooks. The names of many pre-revolutionary Muslim intellectuals, who rejected the Bolshevik revolution, were not mentioned. On the other hand, those who agreed to cooperate with the Bolshevik regime, were glorified and turned into great national heroes (Yemelianova, 2002, p.116)”.

Furthermore, mosques and other Islamic religious facilities and institutions were confiscated and pulled down or destroyed; while Muslim leaders were arrested, persecuted and, sometimes, executed. For instance, one report indicates that, in a year, 73 *Imâms* from the Gorkov region were persecuted and of these, 56 were put to death (Yemelianova, 2002). Across the countries of the Soviet Union, only two *Madrasahs*, namely: *Madrasah of Mir-i-Arab* in Bukhara and *Madrasah of Imâm Ismail Al-Bukhârî* in Tashkent out of thousands were maintained (Yemelianova, 2002). Beyond that, Russia also vetoed the immigration of Muslim scholars outside the USSR into Kyrgyzstan and not only banned the importation of Islamic literature but also frustrated the people’s access to Muslim communities beyond the USSR (Haberman, 1989; McGlinchey, 2009).

At the beginning of World War II, Germany also attempted to take advantage of Central Asia, possibly to gain advantage over Russia. However, this time, the minds of the Central Asians were already given to the

Soviet propaganda. Thus, the Muslim leaders rejected this new overture but, instead, urged the Muslims to protect their land and fight against them. For instance, the *Imâms* of Tashkent and Samarkand used to rain curses at the German fascists in their *Khuṭbah*. This instigated thousands of the Muslims to voluntarily join the Red Army, the official armed forces of the USSR. This made the Soviet government realize the significant role of Islam, and for that matter, religion, in mobilizing the people for the fight against the enemy and, therefore, relaxed its anti-Islamic policy. In 1943, three new *muftiyats* (An administrative territory placed under a *Muftî* to be superintended by a Grand *Muftî*), in addition to the one in Ufa, were formed. Among the new *muftiyats* was the *Muftiyat* of the North Caucasus in Dagestan which administered the affairs of the Sunni Muslims of the Caucasus. Another one was based in Baku and was in charge of the affairs of Shi'ah Muslims of the Caucasus while the third one was the Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Directorate, known locally as *Sredne Aziatskoe Duhovnoe Upravlenie Musulman* (SADUM) in Tashkent (Yemelianova, 2002).

Kyrgyzstan was placed under the SADUM. Since this directorate was loyal to the Soviet policy, it was charged with the responsibility of uniting the Muslims under the Soviet umbrella and engendering or engineering an interpretation of Islamic principles which would make the control of the Muslims easy for the Soviet overlords. As a rule, for example, the public display of religion or piety was forbidden by the Soviet Union; and, therefore, the Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Directorate used the works of *Wahhâbî* scholars to discredit *Ṣūfi* gatherings (Khizrieva, n.d). The directorate also tried to enhance Soviet patriotism among the Muslims of the USSR in order to promote a positive image of the Soviet Union in the Muslim world (Yemelianova, 2002).

Despite its severe anti-religious paradigm, however, the Soviet authorities were unable to stifle Islam although they did not succeed in suppressing the religious consciousness of the people. Thus, religious practices mostly depended on ethnicity while the people's attachment to a particular religion depended mainly on their nationality. Moreover, the prohibition to disseminate and receive religious literature, the abolition of formal religious education, and the restrictions on the public practice of religion eventually forced the people to withdraw from Islamic prayers, fasting, wearing of *Hijâb* and, among the men, wearing the beard mainly after retirement. During this period of knowledge vacuum, the ordinary Muslim youth began to solicit information from their parents and grandparents, which was usually misinformed. This scenario ultimately contributed to a knowledge-gap in terms of understanding the essence of Islam. Thus, although communities that were historically dominated by Islam continued to consider themselves as Muslims, they often knew very little about Islam and its practices and often displayed their Islamic religious identity only in religious ceremonies such as celebration of *Îd-ul-fiṭr* (*Orozo ait*), *Îd-ul-'adhâ* (*Kurban ait*), *Nikâḥ* (*Nikeh*: marriage), and *Janâzah* (funeral prayers). The above historical moments have resulted in the perpetual struggle of Islam with different ideologies in Kyrgyzstan, which were mainly orchestrated by the outcome of the Russo-European influences.

### **Islamic Religious Identity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan**

Nowadays, it appears that the communist phobia of the faith (i.e. Islamo-phobia) is no more an opposing factor for Islam's woes although, coming out from the shackles of Soviet imperialism, that cannot be completely divorced from reality. However, the main challenge presently is rather a sort of paradox of the 'traditional Muslims' going against Islam. The term, 'traditional Muslims' refers to those who inherited the Soviet understanding and interpretation of Islam. These people consider themselves as Muslims from the perspective that it is their historical and traditional religion. In other words, they call themselves Muslims in-as-much as they were born into Muslim families, and probably, not because it is their choice to be Muslims. They, therefore, know very little about Islam and avoid practising it publicly. This cluster of the Muslim community

that forms the youth (i.e. the 25-59 age group) usually reserves the public practice of Islamic religiosity to the old-age (i.e. beyond age 60) as the grandparents used to do.

As we indicated, this perspective about the practice of Islam was the outcome of the suppressive prejudiced political interferences of their Soviet overlords during their operations in the country. Due primarily to the same Soviet understanding of Islam bequeathed to the people in the post-Soviet period, those Muslims given to this understanding often perceive those who try to adhere to the basic practices of Islam such as wearing *Hijâb* and wearing the beard as agents of fanaticism. They, therefore, flatly classify Muslims who observe the above as radical Muslims. It is not uncommon for Muslim girls in Kyrgyzstan who practise Islam through covering to be accused of being radical. This was confirmed during our interaction with a cross-section of the young female population who observe *Hijâb*. Of the 14 females interviewed, 3 girls shared their experiences about discrimination in schools and in their work places. One was asked to remove her *Hijâb* while studying at a secondary school, and she was refused attendance to certain classes because of her scarf. This forced her to change her school. Another one was forced to choose between giving-up the wearing of her scarf or resigning from her job to which she had to opt for the latter. Another alleged that she was refused a job even after satisfying the requirement for employment and performing creditably well during the job interview all because of her scarf. The others who intimated that they have never been directly accused of being radical themselves revealed circumstances which gave silent suspicion as some still encountered people who gave them unkind looks. Eight of them indicated that they had been accused of radicalism either due to their verbal or physical expressions especially during their border-crossing checks. One of them said: "Once I was checked while crossing the Kyrgyz-China border. They checked me up to my pants; my luggage, including all the folders on my laptop" (Anonymous Interviewee)

The above conception of Islamic religious radicalization subsumed in Western secular thought as "extremism" (Liebman, 1983, pp.75-86). is the prejudice due to lack of awareness entrenched by the Russo-European inherited norms bequeathed by the Soviet masters to the previous generations and which is transmitted in-toto to the present generation. Many of the "traditional Muslims", in spite of being Muslim themselves, still perceive the wearing of *Hijâb*, the Islamic covering, as a symbol of lost indigenous Kyrgyz cultural identity. This thinking is because, during the Soviet regime, Central Asian Islam was "...stripped of much of its religious content" in order to make it conform to the established Soviet political culture of secularism (Hintzen, n.d.). Therefore, the typical Islamic way of dress and behaviour have inadvertently become quite foreign to the imagination of the typical post-Soviet Kyrgyz Muslim. For this reason, the Islamic *Hijâb* and the culture of reserving the beard are imagined as vestiges of religious extremism and so the patrons, normally known to have high religious commitment, are rather outwardly perceived as characters of radicalization. The question, however, is what led to this situation?

### Challenge of Ideology

Contemporary Kyrgyz Islam, no doubt, faces the devastation of the modern ideologies of liberalism and secularism. Many of the urban dwellers consider any manifestation of Islam as a confrontation to secularism. Explaining this phenomenon, Dinara Suymalieva, a journalist, argues that owing to the distorted conception of the ideals of secularism, the not-so-religious Kyrgyz Muslims are becoming intolerant of the behaviour of their more religious country folks and brothers and sisters in faith. The conspicuous over-dramatization informed by the fear of and limited knowledge about religious extremism in its true sense, has inaugurated another human intemperance, this time, "secular" extremism. According to Suymalieva:

We still operate within the Soviet communist concept of "secularism" as a denial of faith, ignoring religion as such. The watershed of our tolerance does not lie between Muslims and Christians, but

rather between atheists [i.e. not so religious Muslims] and believers [the committed Muslims]. And we stand for this distorted concept of secularism with the same determination as [the] communists did. Thus, we apply bigotry, imposition, aggression, and in the case of state-repression (Suimaliyeva, n.d., para. 8).

In short, therefore, the Kyrgyz could be considered as people who are living in a secular state where people could criticize virtually all the activities of the Muslims. For example, when the Muslims requested for the prohibition of a television series titled: "I am gay and Muslim" and the TV programme "Psychic challenge", the liberal part of society accused the Muslims of violating the freedom of action.

The first occurred in 2012. On 28<sup>th</sup> September 2012, a documentary titled "I Am Gay and Muslim," was scheduled to be televised during the Sixth Annual film festival, Bir Duino ("One World"), a human rights documentary, in Bishkek. However, two days before the programme, the main organizer of the festival, Tolokan Ismailova, allegedly received a warning from the State Committee of National Security ordering her to remove the movie from the programme. The State Committee of National Security took this action after receiving complaints from the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims and other individuals (Suimaliyeva, n.d.). Nonetheless, the organizers vowed to disregard the warning and intended to carry their decision through because they considered the warning as illegal until few hours before the show when they received a court injunction which totally banned the documentary from being shown in Kyrgyzstan. The decision of the court was based on the recommendations of the State Commission on Religious Affairs which concluded that the movie was extreme and could provoke the Muslims. Indeed, the documentary and its title had the potential of inciting religious tension and possibly destabilizing the peace of the country. Nonetheless, later on, in an interaction with the media, the patrons of the movie argued that the decision of the court was repressive and indicted the basis of secular state in which the right of freedom of action ought to be upheld. On the other hand, contributing to this incident, Tolokan Ismailova wrote: "Radical Islamic groups dictate how our government should work. In our constitution, Kyrgyzstan is a secular state" (Trilling, 2012, para. 1).

On imbibing the freedom of secularism and secular ideas, the Kyrgyz secularist patrons seem to lose sight of the fact that even in the so-called secular world, morality is also a core issue (Modood, 2010; Clark, 2014; Hurd, 2004). However, for Abdykarim Ashirov, an expert on human rights issues,

Kyrgyzstan is a secular state. The appeal of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims to the State Agency casts doubt on the principle of separation of religion from the state. They (the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan - editors note) had to talk to the organizers of the festival. This film definitely can cause a negative perception on the moral level, but our constitution guarantees that you have a right to freedom of action and people should not be subjected to some restrictions (Sultanbekova, 2012).

A spectator also argued that the ban of the movie is an apparent loss of secularism in the state and if the people kept quiet, the clerics might push further and soon, Kyrgyz would be forced to live under *Shari'ah* criminal codes (Sultanbekova, 2012).

On the other hand, the "Psychic challenge" occurred in October 2012. In 2012, the Muslims and the Christian population of Kyrgyzstan jointly requested for the ban of this programme from being broadcast on a Public channel, OTRK. This also caused mixed reactions among the public. Although the majority of those who opposed the ban did not really support the airing of the programme, they were also opposed to the perceived affront to the freedom of action and the secular roots of the society. In a web forum, one of them remarked:

It is so cool that we are living in the secular state. These types of programmes are really disgusting, but I do not support the ban, especially if the ban is initiated by the religious organizations (Sultanbekova, 2012).

Another blogger remarked:

I am definitely against the interference of religious authorities in the media. I am definitely for the freedom of the mass media. But damn, all these ... psychics, nasty charlatans, foolish astrologers freak me out (Kazybekov, 2012).

In spite of the above individual protests, the petition of the religious community did not cause any open opposition except group discussion in the society. Nonetheless, the petition of the religious community never yielded the desired effect and the programme continued to be broadcast on the public channel until February 2014 when the programme was closed due to the loss of public trust. This occurred after a telephone scandal in which one of the organizers and a participant in the programme were heard negotiating a bribe of \$20,000 if the participant in question were to win the final contest. The recorded version of this conversation was later leaked online which caused an outrage which culminated in the removal of the programme (Dzhumasheva, 2014). The outcome of the Muslim phobia of Islam is the promotion of the Tengrist ideology.

### The Tengrist Ideology

Perhaps, the ideology that unleashes the greatest challenge to Islam in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is *Tengrism*. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*:

*Tengrism* replaced an earlier polytheistic Turkic religion; it was also the religion of the Huns, Eurasian Avars, and early Hungarians. In the ancient Turkish world, as it is now, the word for god was 'Tengri.' Tengri, identified with a 'celestial sky', timeless and infinite, was the chief deity responsible for the creation of the universe. Subordinate to Tengri were a number of lesser deities, including Yer-sub, goddess of the homeland, and Earth, whose marriage to Tengri resulted in the appearance of human beings on the earth. The other deities were Umai (a life-giving deity), Erlik (god of the underground world), Water, Fire, Sun, Moon, Star, Air, Clouds, Wind, Storm, Thunder and Lightning, and Rain and Rainbow. Prosperity and well-being of the individual and the nation depended on maintaining reverence and respect for these deities and living in harmony with the universe (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.).

*Tengri*, a state god of the Göktürks, also known as the 'god of the Turks' (*Türük Tängri*), became the chief deity of the traditional ruling class in the Central Asian steppe, principally among the Turkic people, the Hungarians and the Mongols, during the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. The repression of Islam by the Soviet authorities seemingly directed attention to *Tengrism*. Thus, after the elimination of foreign dominions from the region, *Tengrism* became an indelible innovation that supplanted the indigenous culture of the indigenes in post-Soviet Central Asia (Laruelle, 2006; Hohmann, 2010). Therefore, its current manifestation is traceable to the Soviet relic of atheism (Laruelle, 2006). It involved the pacification of ancestral spirits and animism together with the pre-Islamic beliefs of Shamanism, known in Kyrgyz as *Bakshy*, and totemism (Laruelle, 2006). Due to the influence of Islam, some of their cultic practices were fused with the Islamized cult of the Saints (Kirmse, 2013). Kyrgyzstan is a home to the tombs of some biblical prophets and legends. For example, it is asserted that the biblical and Qur'anic sage, Prophet Sulaymân (Solomon), was buried beneath a mountain at Osh (Tabyshalieva, 2000). It is alleged that during the Soviet period, some Muslims made three visits to Sulaymân's throne equivalent to *Hajj* (Poliakov, 1992; Kirmse, 2013). These places of ancestral veneration are known as *Mazars*. They are venerated together with springs, waterfalls, and trees (Ashymov, 2003). At these sites, the pilgrims, who travel long distances to seek the blessings of their dead holy men and heroes and seek cure for various ailments, usually tie different colours of cloths on the relevant trees and sticks to symbolize their visits and as "reminders of their prayers" (Ashymov, 2003, p. 134). The adherents have tried to worm

their way into government institutions to position themselves to struggle for space (Laruelle, 2006). It has been a great challenge to Islam as some Muslims who find it difficult to observe Islamic daily rituals have taken it as an alternative. According to Laruelle,

a portion of the intellectual elite looking for a strictly national [i.e. indigenous] faith have difficulties committing to a Muslim or a Christian message, and are more easily able to make sense of a so-called religion that demands neither regular ritual observance, nor a theological background, and which is limited in fact to extolling the nation and the Mother Earth (Laruelle, 2006, p. 3).

Yet, it appears many of the advocates have only taken the responsibility of promoting indigenous worship in its name but do not really know what it is. The followers of this ideology or movement not only view Islam as a foreign religion but are also reproachful of any element that portrays the true Islamic identity and see their committed Muslims colleagues as traitors to their indigenous culture (Laruelle, 2006). Its radical followers in Kyrgyzstan are becoming intolerant of what they might see as foreign religious influences. Laruelle expresses the above in the following words:

in Kyrgyzstan they favor a 'purification' of the country from all foreign influences, whether they come from Russia or the Middle East. Some strains even openly express anti-Semitic ideas (since Islam, disparaged, is considered as a Semitic religion in the same way as Judaism) (Laruelle, 2006, p. 4).

The above implies that in Kyrgyzstan, the movement has assumed a nationalist dimension. In this context, *Tengrism* describes an ideology that calls for the protection of the indigenous Kyrgyz traditions, language, and culture. Thus, the Tengrist advocacy for indigenization of culture might not be totally evil, perhaps in its own setting because, in one breath, it seeks to protect the home-grown Kyrgyz cultural identity. However, in another breath, its blend with the pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices creates problems from the Islamic perspective. For example, Askarbek Toigonbaev, one of the followers of *Tengrism* remarks:

People ask us about our holy book. Our holy book is incorporated in our blood. The tenets of our religion is based on the tradition of our nation, culture, ancient epics, national games (Kyrgyzstan, n.d.).

They are, therefore, opposed to the wearing of beard and *Burqah* by Muslim men and women, respectively.

We Kyrgyz must not wear beards and burkas.... Tengrism, not Islam, is the ancient religion of our Kyrgyz ancestors.... We urge the Kyrgyz to develop their traditions, customs, culture, language, and national [i.e. indigenous] games. This is where the basis of our faith is (Bakyt Ibraimov, May 2014, para. 14).

A return to the traditional cult, the ideology of *Tengrism*, has eaten so deeply into the minds of the Muslim youth because they perceive it as a tool for protecting their indigenous identity as Kyrgyz. For example, a Muslim youth, Kubanychbek Tezekbaev, refers to himself as a "half-Muslim." For him, his indigenous identity supersedes his identity as a Muslim and, therefore, he obeys Islamic rules only to the extent that they do not contradict his indigenous traditions: "I am an *Uzulman* [or "half-Muslim"]... I don't fully follow Islam, I just partially follow some Muslim rituals. I am a pure Kyrgyz" (Gulaiym Ashakeeva & Farangis Najibullah, January 2012, para. 7).

The above Tengrist influences on the Muslims render Kyrgyz Islam into deep-seated syncretism as we have already indicated. Syncretism is the fusion of different religious beliefs and practices (Yusuf & Appiah, 2021). It is a union of religious practices (Levinskaya, 1993). In his *Phenomenology of Religion* (i.e. *Phänomenologie der Religion*, published in an English translation as: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*), the well-known Dutch historian and religious philosopher, Van der Leeuw, explained syncretism as "the process leading repeatedly from Polydemonism to Polytheism" (Van Der Leeuw, 1963). This definition implies that syncretism spells a religious practice of inclusion to reduce the dissonance of exclusivism. Hence, Kamstra

(1967) defines syncretism as a mixture of two religions in order to avert a confrontation. It, therefore, implies a fusion of religious practices or beliefs which are foreign to an existing religious orientation (Pye, 1971). The hallmark of syncretism is, therefore, coexistence or harmony, which is "... coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern" (Pye, 1971, p. 93). As it was mentioned earlier, the Kyrgyz people lived a nomadic life. For this reason, they developed such a strong attachment to the objects of nature to the extent that the belief in totemism, Shamanism and animism became part and parcel of their religious life (Bayalieva, 1972). Totemism is the belief that mankind has a mystical relationship with nature. The *Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* explains *totemism* as the belief that:

Natural objects and creatures are imbued with a soul and supernatural powers. A totem is an object which serves to represent a particular society or a person, and from which all members of that society are thought to descend. Thus this unites the group while also providing it with a 'guardian spirit' (Goring, 1994, p. 534).

The early Kyrgyz believed in totems which manifested in their reverence for certain animals including birds. Some indigenous Kyrgyz possess names that expose their totemic beliefs and the people who bear these names usually adore their representative animals (Ashymov, 2003). Gardizi, the author of the 11<sup>th</sup> century collection, *Zayn al-Akbar*, mentions of many Kyrgyz revering the cow, the Porcupine, the Magpie, and the Falcon (Bartol'd, 1973). Shamanism, on the other hand, is a belief in the practice of corresponding with the spirit world. A Shaman can commune with spirits for assistance in healing a person or revealing one's fortunes. Animism is also defined as the belief that objects of nature such as sticks, trees, stones, mountains, etc., have spirits or souls dwelling in them and are therefore thought to be capable of influencing worldly events (George, 1971; Stuart-Glennie, 1992; Goring, 1994; Yusuf, 2015).

These beliefs existed before Islam was introduced to the people. However, the lack of sound Islamic education and, particularly, the repressive religious policy of the Soviet authorities aggravated the process of combining these practices and beliefs with Islam. The Soviet repression of Islamic practices eventually influenced the Muslims to seek solace in ancestral worship. Haruka, depending on Setsuko Yoshida, clarifies this:

When the Soviet regime forcibly promoted sedentarization and collective cattle-breeding and farming in the 1930s, these mullahs were forced to abandon their practices, and most Islamic practices, such as holding services daily, public fasting, and recitation of the Qur'an, were banned. However, people continued to hold rituals to soothe the *ruh* [human soul] in the form of funerals, memorial services for the deceased, .... In spite of the prohibitions of the ruling regime, a significant number of livestock were slaughtered during these rituals 'to show their respects' to God and the *ruh*, and also to guests (Haruka, 2011, p. 65).

Thus in the post-Soviet period, it became difficult for the indigenes to distinguish them from the Islamic norms. The Tengrist objective is perhaps promoting a truly national form of this cultural life. It is this version that we hinted earlier of an attempt by the moderate Tengrists to seek an Islamic definition for by fusing it with the Islamized cult of the saints. Thus, till today, in some practices of the Kyrgyz Muslims, one observes a fusion of the elements of these pre-Islamic beliefs with the Islamic way of life. For instance, Bayalieva writes that while putting a baby in the cradle, the Kyrgyz Muslim would to say: "*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim, ot enekesi koldosun*", which means: "In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful, may the Mother of Fire [a Tengrist deity] protect you" (Bayalieva, 1972, p. 34). Ashimov summarizes the impact of Tengristism on modern Kyrgyz in the following extract:

Even now at difficult times in their lives the Kyrgyz recite the incantation '*Tenir koldoi ker*' (Support me, sky'). When blessing or thanking someone, they would say '*Tenir zhalgasyn*' ('May the sky bless you').

When they were not getting on with each other they would invoke the sun: '*Tenir ursun*' ('May the sky punish you'). The deity of the ancient Turks and Mongolians Zher-Suu (earth-water) was just as important in the religious beliefs of the Kyrgyz, and supplicants made sacrifices to this deity during times of drought (Ashimov, 2003, p.134).

Perhaps, the deepest mixture of all possible customs and beliefs could be seen in the funeral ceremony. It is believed that when *Sûrah al-Yâsîn* is recited in the presence of a dying person, it eases the pain of death. After the death, the body of the deceased would be washed and wrapped in *Kafân*, after which people would perform *Janâzah* prayer for him or her following the normal Islamic funeral rules. However, in other aspects of the funeral ceremony, the elements of indigenous beliefs become manifest. In the first place, normally, the corpse would be stored for three days. It is a custom that all the family members of the deceased have to be present at his or her funeral ceremony and since the existing family members might be scattered, they need time to convey the information about the death and wait for their arrival. Moreover, a candle would be light and placed near the body believing that "... for forty days the spirit of the deceased will be visiting his house to see his or her family members" (Bayalieva, 1972, p. 73). Further, wailing coupled with loud recitation of the words of praise in honour of the deceased is an unbreakable norm. The widow is made to engage in a deep expression of grief for her diseased husband; they have to sit at one place in black clothes to mourn for forty days (Bayalieva, 1972, p. 115). Some of these cultural practices are unbendably fused with the Islamic ones.

The Soviet policy of atheism, which culminated in the abolition of Islamic religious education, made syncretism even more complicated. Nowadays, there is such a deep fusion that many seemingly confuse some indigenous rituals of the pre-Islamic period with the Islamic ideals. For example, some Kyrgyz Muslims believe that wearing amulet is not prohibited for a Muslim. Furthermore, *Nooruz* is perceived as an Islamic festival. *Nooruz* refers to 21<sup>st</sup> March which marks the Vernal Equinox. This event is widely celebrated in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Each of these countries has her own explanation for granting it as a holiday, but more often, this date is connected with the religious tradition of Zoroastrianism. In Kyrgyz traditional beliefs, the day marks the start of spring which is understood as the revival of nature. This day is a big occasion for native fortune-tellers (the Shaman Muslims). In some newspapers, it is not uncommon to find advertisement directing people, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, to patronize the services of Muslim women whose services include subduing evil-eyes and predicting the future.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined the state of Islam in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan placing emphasis on the issue of religious identity. It was argued that the interaction between different cultures, ideologies, and traditions, on the one hand, and the lack of sound information about religion and religious values, on the other, create conditions for syncretic Islam in Kyrgyzstan. This paves the way for misunderstanding and disagreements among the Muslims and tension between Islam and the other ideologies. It was also found that because the government does not promote any religion and assumes a neutral role in the course of Islamic religious interaction, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims and other religious organizations have absorbed the responsibility of disseminating the message of Islam and promoting the interests of the Muslims. Nonetheless, Islam remains in perpetual clash with Tengrism and Tengrist tendencies fused with certain Islamic practices, while a cross-section of the indigenous Kyrgyz perceives Islam as an ideological opponent to the indigenous heritage and hence advocates a revert to a so-called 'national religion', that is truly indigenous. For this reason and some Muslim opposition to the post-Soviet atheistic secularist worldview, Islam also faces the challenges of Islamic movements, which promote ideologies that are gradually metamorphosing into dangerous

politically conscious social process of reunifying the citizens against westernization bequeathed by the Soviet ideologues. This implies that, as a dominant religious entity, Kyrgyzstan's Muslims face a serious threat of extremism fuelled by home-grown socio-political factors and imported fundamentalism. This phenomenon, together with the lack of proper information about "fundamentalism" and "extremism", makes some Muslims associate every vestige of Islamic identity in public spaces with extremism and fundamentalism. This makes Islamic religious expression in the country either a private or home affair or a reserve for older Muslims as outward religious practices like wearing Hijab and beard by the young often receive the tag of radicalism. Consequently, we conclude that the challenge to Islam and Islamic religious identity in contemporary Kyrgyzstan emanates from the perceptions of the Muslims themselves and not the non-Muslims as it might be the case in some other places.

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