

Article

The Role of Religion in the Identity of Kazakhstan's Cossacks: History and Narratives

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Abstract

The Republic of Kazakhstan is characterized by a highly diverse confessional composition. Historical factors contributed to this. The earliest mentions of Cossacks in the territory of present Kazakhstan date to the second half of the 16th century. They included border military groups, free Cossacks, fugitives, and harvesters. Organized migration of Cossacks began in the 17th and 18th centuries. Later, the Ural, Orenburg, Semirechye, and Siberian Cossack Hosts were formed. Fortifications and outposts were built. Cossacks were used as a military border force and an instrument of control over residents. All these processes impacted the centuries-old way of life of the indigenous Kazakh population. At present, a wide range of Cossack organizations operate in our country. The Cossacks as an ethnic group of people, are active actors in public life. Cossack organizations in Kazakhstan represent significant diversity. Their ethnographic origins are heterogeneous. Scholars have various approaches to defining their identity. As this study has shown, existing Cossack communities lack internal cohesion, despite ongoing efforts toward their consolidation. Some Cossack associations are active members of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, while others operate outside the Assembly. Moreover, religious identity is a key factor in the Cossack national identity. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to consider the Cossack organizations of Kazakhstan, their identity, and contemporary narratives.

Keywords: Cossacks; Cossack clergy; migration; Cossack organizations; confessional palette; religious traditions.

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Қазақстандағы казактардың бірегейлігіндегі діннің рөлі: тарихы мен нарративтері

Аңдатпа

Қазақстан Республикасының конфессиялық құрамы айрықша алуандылығымен ерекшеленеді. Бұған тарихи факторлар ықпал етті. Қазіргі Қазақстан аумағында казактардың пайда болуы туралы алғашқы ескертулер XVI ғасырдың екінші жартысына жатады. Оларға шекаралық әскери топтар, еркін казактар, қашқындар және кәсіпшілер кірді. Казактардың ұйымдасқан көші-қоны XVII және XVIII ғасырларда басталды. Кейігі кезеңде Орал, Орынбор, Жетісу және Сібір казак әскерлері құрылды. Бекіністер мен бекеттері салынды. Казактар әскери шекара күші және жергілікті тұрғындарды бақылау құралы ретінде пайдаланылды. Осы процестері қазақ халқының ғасырлар бойы қалыптасқан өмір салтына әсер етті. Біздің елімізде казак ұйымдарының түрлі құрылымдары қызмет атқарады. Казактардың этноәлеуметтік тобы қоғамдық өмірдің белсенді акторларының бірі болып табылады. Қазақстандағы казак ұйымдары алуан түрлілігімен сипатталады. Олардың этнографиялық шығу тегі біркелкі емес. Ғылыми ортада олардың бірегейлігін айқындауға қатысты әртүрлі тәсілдер қалыптасқан. Зерттеу нәтижелерге сәйкес, қазіргі казак қауымдастықтардың ішінде тұтастық қалыптаспаған, дегенмен оларды интеграциялауға бағытталған талпыныстар байқалады. Казак бірлестіктерінің бір бөлігі Қазақстан халқы Ассамблеясы құрамында белсенді қызмет атқарса, ал басқалары Ассамблеядан тыс әрекет етеді. Сонымен қатар, діни бірегейлік казак ұлттық кодының негізгі факторларының бірі болып табылады. Осыған байланысты, бұл мақаланың мақсаты – Қазақстан казак ұйымдарын, олардың бірегейлігін және қазіргі кезеңнің нарративтерін зерттеу.

Түйін сөздер: казактар; казак дін қызметкерлері; көші-қон; казак ұйымдары; конфессиялық палитра; діни дәстүрлері.

Роль религии в идентичности казаков Казахстана: история и нарративы

Аннотация

Конфессиональная палитра Республики Казахстана очень разнообразна. Этому способствовали исторические предпосылки. Самые ранние упоминания появления казаков на современной территории Казахстана относятся ко второй половине XVI в. В их составе были пограничные военные группы, вольные казаки, беглые и промысловики. Организованное переселение казаков началось в XVII–XVIII вв. Позже сформировались Уральское, Оренбургское, Семиреченское, Сибирское казачьи войска. Строились укрепления, форпосты. Казаки использовались как военная пограничная сила, инструмент контроля местных жителей. Все эти процессы сказывались на многовековом укладе жизни коренного казахского населения. В современности в нашей стране действует широкий спектр казачьих организаций. Этносословная группа казаков являются активными акторами общественной жизни. Казачьи организации Казахстана представляют собой значительное многообразие. Этнографическое происхождение неоднородно. В науке существуют различные подходы к определению их идентификации. Как показало настоящее исследование, внутри существующих казачьих сообществ нет единства, хотя предпринимаются попытки их объединения. Часть казачьих объединений являются активными членами Ассамблеи народа Казахстан, другая часть действует вне Ассамблеи. Более того, религиозная идентичность является ключевым фактором национального кода казаков. В этой связи, целью настоящей статьи является рассмотрение казачьих организаций Казахстана, их идентичности и современных нарративов.

Ключевые слова: казаки; казачье духовенство; миграция; казачьи организации; конфессиональная палитра; религиозные традиции.

Introduction

The earliest mentions of the word “Cossack” date back to the 14th century, to the Codex Cumanicus, written in the Old Kipchak language. In this document, the word “Cossack” appears with the meaning of guard (Bartold, 1925, p. 112). Scholars disagree on the etymology of this word. An analysis of the existing meanings allows us to distinguish several meanings: (1) a free man, an adventurer, a vagabond (Dahl, 2001); (2) a warrior, a military man who serves the state; (3) the historical community of the Cossacks. These meanings reflect the historical, social, military, and ethnocultural significance. The Cossacks included Belarusians, Poles, Czechs, Greeks, Moldovans, Ossetians, and Turks.

The Russian Cossack community in Kazakhstan developed over several centuries and consisted of several territorial groups, each representing a distinct Cossack host and differing in a number of organizational, economic, and everyday characteristics. The Ural, Orenburg, Siberian, and Semirechye Cossack hosts formed one of the foundations of Russia’s political, military, economic, and sociocultural presence in Central Asia in general and Kazakhstan in particular.

The Ural, Orenburg, Siberian, and Semirechye Cossacks interacted directly with the local Kazakh population, forming a complex system of relationships with them. These relationships were sometimes peaceful and mutually beneficial, characterized by trade, exchange, and the adoption of technologies, cultural, and economic skills. At other times, they were strained and hostile, accompanied by struggles for land resources, military clashes, and robberies (Suleimenov, 2017).

The Republic of Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic state where more than 120 ethnic groups and nationalities live in peace and harmony (Kurmanalyieva & Kogabayeva, 2026). The country creates conditions for the preservation and development of each ethnic group (Kamarova, 2026, p. 40). In 1995, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan was organized (Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2023). This organization also included Cossack ethnocultural centers. The primary goals of these centers are the preservation of culture, traditions, language, and identity.

The key organization is the Association of Russian, Slavic, and Cossack Organizations of Kazakhstan. This organization operates a network of subordinate branches throughout the country. Each branch has its own director, board, audit committee, youth wing, councils of Cossack women, veterans, Sunday schools, volunteers, and creative groups.

The relevance of the article is determined by the multi-confessional nature of Kazakhstan, the creation of conditions for the preservation and development of traditions by ethnic minorities, as well as the consideration of the historical aspects of the presence of Cossacks in Kazakhstan, the peculiarities of identity, and modern strategies of activity.

Materials and Methods

A study of Cossack identity was conducted from 2015 to 2025 in Cossack organizations in Astana, Almaty, and Uralsk. Qualitative research methods were used:

- interviews with representatives of Cossack organizations in Kazakhstan;
- participant observation in these organizations and Cossack houses.

The interviews were conducted in Russian. Participants were informed in advance about the topic and objectives of the study. Participation was voluntary. All data was encrypted. International research ethics standards were observed.

The theoretical framework for the study was based on E. Smith’s ethno-symbolic approach, which emphasizes the socio-cultural markers of ethnic community: myths about common origins and ancestors, symbols, including religious ones, a shared historical past, and the idea of the Motherland (Smith, 1986, p. 28). The scholar emphasized the significance of ethnic past and the stability of

cultural codes that are preserved and reproduced in the collective consciousness. This approach places particular emphasis on symbolic resources: historical narratives in the form of images of a heroic past, rituals, traditions, and collective memory. Through all of this, a community maintains its identity and sense of continuity.

Results and Discussion

The question of the Cossacks' identity is controversial. As researcher S.K. Sagnaeva points out, in the ethnic typology of Soviet ethnologists Yu. Bromley, T. Zhdanko, and others, Cossacks were characterized as an ethnic or ethnographic group of the Russian people. In her work on the historical aspects of the formation of the Ural Cossacks, S.K. Sagnaeva substantiates the view that the Cossacks constitute an ethnic-class group, which is determined by the peculiarities of their origins, their long historical existence as a military class in the Russian Empire, the specific social, economic, and military-legal institutions of the Cossacks, and their way of life, which ultimately determined the characteristics of their culture, everyday life, traditions, and, at times, religious beliefs (Sagnaeva, 1998, p. 50). Researchers G.M. Derluguian (1997, p. 1485), A. Popov (2012, p. 1739), focusing in their works on the processes of the "revival" of the Cossacks in the post-Soviet space, they point to the acceptability of defining the Cossacks as a sub-ethnos of the Russian ethnic group. In the scientific series "Research in Applied and Urgent Ethnology", published by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in 2016, researchers E.A. Ageeva and E.S. Danilko published a brochure dedicated to the Ural Cossacks, in which the Cossacks are understood as an ethno-local group of Russians with their own characteristics in culture, everyday life, traditions, and beliefs (Danilko & Ageeva, 2016, p. 28).

As noted by scientists S. Markedonov (2003, p. 163), A. Popov (2012, p. 1742), G.M. Derluguian (1997, p. 1487), A.A. Ozerov (2006, pp. 8–9) the modern processes of the "revival" of the Cossacks are more appropriately viewed through the prism of a constructivist approach, which allows us to understand them not simply as a revival of the distant past, but as the construction of identity in new, changed economic, socio-political, historical and cultural conditions, when the former functions of the Cossacks have become a thing of the past. In connection with this process of construction, the term "neo-Cossacks" is increasingly used in academic literature by the above-mentioned authors.

The study focused on the role of religion in Cossack self-identification within Cossack organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Regarding Cossack self-identification, on the one hand, they identify as Russians, but on the other, they see themselves as a distinct people, with distinctive features related to their special calling as warrior defenders. During in-depth interviews, respondents described themselves as a people. A representative of the Union of Cossacks of Semirechye, when asked what unites Cossacks despite all their differences, responded:

"Inner identity... something awakens within a person, they say, 'I have Cossacks in my family'. It doesn't matter whether it's on the female or male side. It's impossible to physically tangibly identify; from a religious perspective, it's not as strongly manifested as from an ethnic perspective. It's something spiritual, internal" (Respondent L1/1M).

In addition, during the interview, this respondent gave an example:

"It was really all very guarded, everything was hidden. All sorts of people come to us. I just see that he's a Cossack. A classic example is Sasha from Taldykorgan. He came, having seen a lot of movies. Cossacks hacking people to pieces with sabers, going to the White Guards, and all that. I tell him, 'Calm down, go see your mother, find out about your ancestors.' He's from Panfilov himself. He went and asked his mother. She says, 'Yes, we're Cossacks'. Behind the cardboard in my older sister's dresser, there are photographs, and in them are grandfathers with sabers, aunts – real Cossacks.

Yes, of Cossack descent. He came to us and apologized. There are many different ways people identify as Cossacks” (Respondent L1/1M).

An analysis of interview data shows that the process of “becoming” a Cossack is associated with the discovery of old photographs, old things, archival records, graves, and stories of great-grandmothers – that is, with the process of actualizing memory.

The representative of the Cossack organization also notes that the Cossacks were originally a service people under the Moscow Tsar and were different from the rest of the people:

“In the Russian Empire, they divided people into peasants and Cossacks. Peasants had to plow the land. Cossacks were taught to fight, win, and sometimes die with dignity... Cossacks have their own unique martial art – Cossack Spas, which they are now trying to revive... The main thing was that the Cossacks had a different purpose from the start” (Respondent L1/1M).

The above statement correlates with the fact that Cossacks believe their mission is to be warrior-protectors. This awareness of their uniqueness is also expressed visually. For example, at the entrance to the Republican Cossack Cultural Center, which houses the “Union of Semirechye Cossacks” in Almaty, there is a large sign visible from afar: “Thank God I am a Cossack”.

Respondents noted that the language has distinctive features. There is a four-volume book on the Ural Cossack dialect, which, according to Respondent L1/1M, retains many words from the ancient language that are no longer found in modern Russian.

Moreover, there are specific features in everyday cultural practices, such as Cossack cuisine. This characteristic likely developed because of the Cossacks’ life on the march.

Religious identification of the Cossacks

Cossacks’ religious identities also vary. In interviews and informal conversations, when asked about the importance of religion, Cossacks often responded:

“A Cossack without faith is not a Cossack”!

This statement correlates with an analysis of Cossack printed publications. Thus, newspapers of public Cossack organizations contain the following mottos: “For Faith and Fatherland”! (the “Stepnoy Kazak” newspaper, a member of the “Cossacks of the Steppe Region” public organization), “For Faith, Freedom, and Fatherland” (the “Kazachiy Kurier” newspaper of the “Union of Cossacks of Semirechye”), and “For Faith, Peace, and Harmony in the Fatherland” (the “Kazakh News” newspaper of the Ural Cossacks). Thus, faith and Fatherland are significant in the discursive field of Cossack organizations.

It’s important to note that joining a Cossack organization requires taking an oath. Minors may join youth cadet corps, and upon reaching adulthood, an oath-taking ceremony (the enrollment of Cossacks) is held. This ceremony is always performed in the presence and with the blessing of a priest. As part of this study, participant observation was conducted during such a ceremony at the Seraphim-Sarov Church of the Steppe Region Cossacks in Astana. The main theme was the identification of Cossacks as warriors of Christ. During the blessing, the priest explained that a warrior of Christ must be understood, first and foremost, in a spiritual sense: as someone who struggles with their own shortcomings and follows Christian commandments.

As the study showed, each Cossack organization has a priest who oversees it, attends all events, and blesses the Cossacks in their affairs.

The museum of the Cossack Cultural Center of the Union of Cossacks of Semirechye in Almaty houses a large poster containing the “Regulations on the Priest of the Union of Cossack Associations of Kazakhstan”, according to which the main function of priests is to remind Cossacks of Christian morality and values, but clergy have no real say in decision-making. We quote from this “Regulation”:

“The primary task of a Cossack priest is the Christian education of the Cossacks and the Orthodox guidance of their daily lives. He is obligated and has the right to remind the Ataman or any speaker of Christian moral standards. If the priest stands, everyone is required to remain silent. The Circle, although it may continue the debate, is at an end. Once silence and order have been established within the Circle, the Yesauls invite the priest back with the words, “Father, forgive the Cossacks”! The returning priest is greeted with a standing ovation. The priest has the right to remind the Cossacks of the Christian commandments. However, the priest is not granted the right to vote at the Circle, does not vote, and has no right to interfere with the specific decisions of the Ataman, atamans, or the Circle. The priest has no right to leave the Circle until its conclusion and is obligated to conclude with prayer. Anyone speaking at the Circle, upon entering the center or the podium, bows to the Lectern and the priest, the elders, the ataman, and the entire assembly. In the event of a priest violating his duties, the Supreme Ataman and atamans have the right to appeal to the higher-ranking clergy to request the replacement of the clergyman. If a priest has discredited himself in the eyes of the Supreme Ataman, atamans, or Cossacks through immoral or malicious behavior, he is immediately removed from office, and his duties as a prayer-reader until a new priest arrives are temporarily performed by the Chairman of the Council of Elders. If Cossacks of other faiths are present at the Circle or Council of Atamans and it is not possible to invite a mullah or lama, the prayer is read by the senior Cossack by rank or age” (Field materials of the authors).

Religious themes are omnipresent at the Cossack Cultural Center of the Union of Cossacks of Semirechye. Icons hang in every room. The museum contains numerous photographs and various exhibits, including icons. Here you can see Cossack military attributes: sabers, kliks, other types of bladed weapons, nagaikas, insignia, awards, household and recreational items, and numerous photographs reflecting important events for the Cossacks. Photographs are also visible epiphenomena, preserving traces of collective memory. Among the photographs are several pre-revolutionary ones. The collection is primarily modern, capturing the visit of the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, N.A. Nazarbayev, to the Cossacks. A photograph of Gabbas Zhumatov, who fought in the Great Patriotic War and is an honorary member of the Council of Elders, also attracted attention. There are numerous photographs of Cossacks from various regions participating in religious processions during major Orthodox holidays, such as Easter and Epiphany. There is also a photograph of the Metropolitan of Astana and Kazakhstan blessing the activities of the Cossacks of Semirechye. Also on display is a portrait of Valery Zakharov, the priest who ministers to all the Cossacks of Semirechye and the rector of St. Nicholas Church in Almaty.

For Cossacks in the modern social sphere, the term “warrior of Christ” has evolved into a specific function, fulfilled by Cossack organizations in Kazakhstan. This includes ensuring security and order during church holidays in the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan, participating in religious processions, and holding educational events jointly with clergy. For example, each Cossack organization in Almaty is assigned a specific church, where they ensure order. Cossack organizations have church days. During major Orthodox holidays or the arrival of famous icons and holy relics, Cossacks stand guard all day, ensuring order.

During field research at the “Union of Cossacks of Semirechye” and “Cossacks of the Steppe Region”, it was discovered that modern Cossacks distinguish between faith and religion as an organization. According to respondents, God must be in the heart, and faith must be alive:

“In general, the Cossacks have a religious component – Orthodoxy – and a Cossack without faith is not a Cossack, although in fact there are Muslims among the Cossacks. Faith, not religion, is what’s important. Every third Sunday is a church day. They gather for a service, then a general gathering; faith is present” (Respondent P/1E).

When asked whether they observe Orthodox fasts, the answer was that some do, but there is no strict requirement to observe the rituals.

In addition to the “Union of Semirechye Cossacks”, the “Semirechye Plastun Cossack Community” operates in Almaty. It is part of the “Union of Orthodox Citizens” public association. Plastuns, as organization representatives explained, were Cossacks who scouted ahead of the rest of the army, often on foot. The “Semirechye Plastun Cossack Community” includes many young people. This Cossack community also has a religious component. They assist at the Church of Christ the Savior in Almaty. One of the community’s leading representatives described himself primarily as a devout Orthodox Christian who not only has God in his heart but also strives to observe fasts and celebrate Orthodox holidays. He described himself as:

“I’ve been going to church since childhood. My grandfathers were from Kuban and executed by the Soviets, one in Krasnoyarsk, the other in Semipalatinsk. My grandmothers were believers, and there were always icons in the house. One grandmother was Orthodox, the other an Old Believer. They took me to church with them. Then, during Soviet times, I somehow didn’t have time for it, and at 50, I returned to faith. I began making icon frames, which I’m good at. I approached Father Alexy about becoming an icon painter, but he didn’t say yes or no. But he said I was good at icon frames, and that it was also an important job, so I should do it. People keep coming back and asking” (Respondent L1/2R).

Cossack organizations in Kazakhstan engage in various activities. The Semirechensk Plastun Cossack community has been involved in charitable work, providing financial assistance to the Solnyshko orphanage for several years. The Union of Orthodox Citizens of Kazakhstan offers legal assistance. At the time of the study, a medical center was planned. There is also a sewing workshop that makes Cossack clothing and a dance and music group.

Respondent L1/2R also cited maintaining discipline and order in churches as one of the most important activities. As a result of their work, there are no drunk people on the church grounds, which even surprises the police. The community also works to prevent people from becoming involved in destructive religious organizations. During the conversation, he referred to them as sects. The community distributes leaflets and educates the public about the dangers of destructive organizations and the risk of losing family and property. This is a typical activity for the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan. The Union of Orthodox Citizens of Kazakhstan, which includes the Semirechensk Plastun Cossack Community, collaborates with the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan (Kenzhegulov, 2025).

In religious terms, the case of the Ural Cossacks is of great interest. Situated on the outskirts of the Russian Empire, the Ural Cossacks enjoyed considerable autonomy from the tsarist regime, often accepting into their ranks those fleeing persecution from the authorities, including those persecuted for religious reasons (Karpov, 1911, p. 50).

Religiously, the Ural Cossacks were Old Believers, and most of them long resisted Nikon’s reforms of 1653 (Viteevskii, 2010, p. 118). Old Believers from all over Russia also fled to the territory of the Ural Cossack Host, as Old Believers were tolerated there. The more educated Old Believers possessed books and knowledge, and sometimes even priesthood, while the other, less educated Old Believers had elected elders, both male and female, who performed rituals according to their own rules, often

completely deviating from Orthodox canons. On this basis, the Old Believers are divided into two large groups: the Popovshchina (or Runaway Priests) (since they lacked a bishop who could ordain priests, their only recruits were priests who defected from the official church) and the Bezpopovshchina (or Priestless), where the role of priest was fulfilled by the heads of communities and families. While the Popovshchina eventually gave rise to an independent church, little different from the official church, the Bezpopovshchina (or Priestless) gave rise to numerous closed groups of Old Believers. The Old Believers of Uralsk were predominantly priests, but there were also priestless groups, represented by the Dukhobors and Molokans. The logic of the Ural Cossacks' history, linked in its religious aspect to the church "schism" and adherence to the Old Believers, as well as the policy of unified faith on the part of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, led to the fact that today, the majority of Ural Cossacks adhere to the Orthodoxy reformed by Patriarch Nikon, i.e., they identify with the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). However, as the study showed, a small number of Cossacks retained their adherence to the Old Believers.

Several Ural Cossack organizations operate in the city of Uralsk in western Kazakhstan. However, only one, the largest, is registered as a member of the Assembly: The Regional Association of Ural-Yaik Cossacks. This organization was registered in 2000. Of all the Cossack associations in Uralsk, this organization is the only one to publish its own newspaper, "Kazachye Vedomosti". As the research revealed, faith and religion are not synonymous for the Ural Cossacks:

"Faith is in the soul, in the heart!" (Respondent L1/3A).

By religion, the Ural Cossacks understand what the people themselves have already organized to manifest this very faith. Religious holidays, rituals, and services are just some of the ways this faith is expressed. But faith is ultimately the most important thing (Respondent L1/3A). Historically, Cossacks were not known for religious fanaticism or the desire to strictly and blindly follow all the external dictates of their religion. And when speaking about the struggle for their religious beliefs, they always used the word "faith", not "religion" or "doctrine". The Cossacks protected the faith passed down from their ancestors, a way of life, and a way of thinking based precisely on faith, on its inner component.

A distinctive feature of the Ural Cossack Host throughout its history was its multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature. Its ranks included Russians, Ukrainians, Kalmyks, Tatars, and Kazakhs. Consequently, the Ural Cossacks included not only Orthodox Christians but also a significant number of Muslims. This tradition has persisted to this day.

Currently, there are many Muslims among the Ural Cossacks: both Tatars and Kazakhs. A similar tradition has developed not only among the Ural Cossacks, but also among other Cossacks in Kazakhstan. As a representative of the Ural-Yaik Cossacks recalls, once, during a local Cossack formation, a mullah and a priest appeared, and at the beginning of the prayer at the monument, part of the detachment bowed to the ground in the Muslim tradition.

The enlistment (swearing allegiance) of Kazakhs into the Cossack ranks is currently a definite innovation in Cossack tradition, as historically, Kazakhs rarely converted to the Cossack ranks. Typically, they served as scouts and guides, and only recently have they begun to become Cossacks.

Although Christian and Muslim Cossacks lead separate religious lives, they share everything outside of religious events, including holidays, weddings, and construction. Taking the oath does not necessarily imply a change of faith, although cases of religious conversion do occur today. The main thing, according to a representative of the Ural-Yaik Cossacks, is faith, and how one prays is less important.

Oath of allegiance to Cossack organizations

The process of joining a Cossack organization is an important stage in the life of a Cossack. The

oath contains all the most important information a sworn Cossack must know. Below is a passage from the modern oath:

“Before Almighty God, before the Holy Gospel, and the Precious Cross, I take this oath and solemnly swear:

I will never lose the honor of a Ural Cossack.

I will be faithful and devoted to the Orthodox faith and the Cossacks...

In all cases where duty demands, I pledge to be honest, conscientious, and not to break my promises out of self-interest, friendship, or kinship.

At the end of this oath, I cross myself”.

The content of the oath reveals the Cossacks’ attitude toward the concepts of faith and religion. Significantly, the very beginning of the oath begins with the word “God”, indicating the importance of a higher power to the Cossack. An analysis of the oath reveals that faith is important to the Cossacks; the mention of Orthodoxy in the text points not so much to a specific religion itself, but to the traditional faith of their forefathers.

For non-Christian believers, there is a different version of the oath, in which the name of their religion carries the same meaning, emphasizing the individual’s faith and belonging to the ancestral tradition. The oath makes no mention of the church, priesthood, or anything similar that might suggest the Cossack’s subordination to any religious authority, but only of faith, the Lord, the Gospel, and the Cross.

A Cossack also swears not only to be faithful to his faith, but also to the purely human laws of brotherhood. Such facts demonstrate that for Cossacks, the individual and their life are important. For a Cossack, the individual is more important than purely religious principles. This is further evidenced by the fact that, despite some Ural Cossacks remaining Old Believers, and the overwhelming majority adopting Orthodoxy after Nikon’s reforms, they nonetheless maintain friendly relations and provide each other with assistance.

Orthodox Cossacks assist at the Old Believer church. Research has shown that they all pray and make the sign of the cross in their own unique ways, but they share common holidays and celebrate them together. One of the representatives, a priest at the Old Believer Church of the Intercession of the Holy Mother of God, reported that few Old Believers remain. He also noted that a distinctive feature of the Belokrinsky Old Believers in modern times is the high level of churchgoing and religious commitment among their believers. This is evident in strict adherence to fasts, observing a home prayer rule, and much more, which most consider a sign of high piety. Becoming an Old Believer is also more difficult than becoming an Orthodox New Believer. As the priest noted, before a neophyte is baptized, they undergo a probationary period, which varies depending on the specific priest. In one case, the condition for baptism may be consistent attendance at services with all the attendant consequences: adopting a corresponding lifestyle, namely, living according to the commandments, regularly performing the prayer rule, wearing a beard with a belt for men, and wearing headscarves for women. In another case, baptism is only possible after all the above and passing the ordeal of Great Lent.

An analysis of the data obtained shows that, both historically and today, Old Believers are characterized by conservatism and a reluctance to simplify or liberalize their foundations. Consequently, accusations such as “clinging to ritual” and “losing their meaning” can be heard against them – that is, their faith has become mere ritualism, devoid of any true content. In an interview, an Old Believer priest stated:

“Before this, I considered myself a Christian, wore a cross, believed in God, but the priest told me that this would not save me, that I should live as a Christian” (Respondent C1/1c).

For Old Believers, both the external and internal components of faith are truly important. While they claim to “seize upon the ritual”, they follow not so much the action itself, but also the inner content of that action – that is, what reflects the spiritual in the material. For them, the folding of the fingers during baptism is not just an act but is full of profound meaning. The two fingers (middle and index) with which they touch the body when making the sign of the cross represent the two natures of Christ, with which they crucify their vices at baptism (Molitvoslov, 2006, p. 7). The addition of a thumb to these two is considered heresy for them, since this is already a whole Trinity that was not crucified.

Overall, the Ural Old Believers are few, most of them priestless, whose fate, as elsewhere in Kazakhstan, is leading them to slow extinction. The priestless, adherents of the Belokrinitsky Consent, are doing their best to restore the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin, maintaining a stable but low membership. Despite the community’s small size, a significant event recently occurred for the Ural Old Believers, serving as a link between both the Old Believers and the New Believers of Uralsk. This event was the recovery of the incorrupt relics of the Old Believer Bishop Arseny, who was buried in a dugout near the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin at the beginning of the last century. This procedure took place at the beginning of this century and was attended by senior hierarchs of the Old Believers in Russia, including Metropolitan Korniliy, the current supreme hierarch of the Russian Old Believer Orthodox Church. Interestingly, despite the body’s prolonged stay in a damp dugout without embalming, the body, as well as all the bishop’s posthumous clothing, remained incorrupt, unlike the zinc coffin, which had almost completely rotted. These relics are kept in the church and are a sacred relic for both Old Believers and New Believers.

Like all Cossacks, the Ural Cossacks, although not legally an army, nevertheless have their own chaplain. The current chaplain is a hereditary Cossack who became a Cossack chaplain by his own choice, and his son also became a priest. The chaplain’s duties, like those of the mullahs who minister to the Cossacks, include administering the oath, regardless of where it is administered.

“The final oath-taking ceremony took place at the Ural Cossacks’ headquarters, with all the necessary paraphernalia: a cross, a Gospel for Christians, a Koran for Muslims, and military banners for all of them. They read prayers, performed the appropriate rituals, and guided the newly converted Cossacks on their journey” (Respondent, C1/2sB).

In addition to the oath, Orthodox priests bless various events, both spiritual and secular. The priests’ primary task is to explain to the Cossacks what faith in Christ requires of each person who has accepted His cross. For Cossacks who consider themselves the army of Christ, this aspect is crucial, as misunderstandings among young people can lead to misunderstandings. The first mention of the army of Christ evokes associations of war and the use of arms in God’s name. The primary meaning, as respondents noted, is faith in Christ’s protection, which helps protect homes with fire and sword. In modern times, the Cossacks’ function as protectors has faded over time; such a meaning is no longer relevant. It is this second component of the concept of the army of Christ that the priests emphasize. That being a warrior of Christ means embarking on the path of deep internal spiritual struggle with one’s passions, with one’s weaknesses, with one’s inability to restrain oneself from evil.

The chaplain is quite critical of the fragmentation among the Ural Cossacks. Although they meet in church on holidays and greet each other, there is nonetheless a lack of unity and harmony among them. The task of integrating the Cossacks is also one of the specific functions of the army chaplains. As the study results showed, some clergy attempted integration by uniting everyone and electing a common ataman at the Circle, but these attempts were unsuccessful (Respondent L1/3A).

A respondent, S1/2sV, noted that there is an unprecedented surge in religiosity among Cossack youth. The initiative to engage in church life no longer comes from parents bringing their children to church, but rather from children who, having become churchgoers, begin to “drag their parents by the hand” to church. This correlates with the fact that young people are agents of creative activity, possessing unique values in the context of the values of the new generation (Tumashbay & Tankish, 2025, p. 52).

Regarding the role of religion in the identity strategies of modern Cossacks, we would like to focus on the process of reconstructing religious consciousness using the example of the Ural Cossacks. Reconstruction implies an attempt to recreate the “ancestral faith” before the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent policy of suppressing both religious and, more generally, Cossack consciousness. Reconstruction is a highly complex process, given that the continuity of generations was largely lost due to the “decossackization” process during the Soviet era, when people concealed their true origins and the “ancestral faith” from their children and grandchildren. Therefore, in the process of reestablishing oneself in traditional belief, which is associated with the restoration of ancestral memory, the challenge lies not simply in following external prescriptions and possessing a certain amount of knowledge about the ancestral faith, but in tapping into the living feelings and experiences of one’s ancestors.

The process of reconstruction involves assembling certain components and constructs, taking into account that modern Cossacks in Kazakhstan lack their former historical attributes, particularly the right to autonomous land ownership. The land belongs to all Kazakhstanis. They are also deprived of the former historical influence and monopolies on privileges enjoyed by their ancestors. The primary function of the Cossacks was war and land protection. Their entire way of life was adapted to military needs. In the present era, this function has also been lost. In short, today’s Cossacks are deprived of almost all the actual attributes of the former Cossacks. The remaining elements for reconstruction include: personal items of the Cossacks, such as uniforms, banners, and other external insignia; certain elements of internal governance within the organization; the system of relationships within the organization; certain customs and traditions that have been revived in modern times; as well as monuments associated with their ancestors; and, of course, the myths, legends, and history that modern Cossacks are attempting to recreate. Lacking most of the actual attributes of the Cossack army, they are forced to appeal to the nominal reality of symbols: stories, memories, the symbols themselves, which are reflected in everyday life and on the map of the city.

As for the Ural Cossacks themselves and the process of reconstructing their religious views, let’s turn to history to determine whether we’re dealing with a complete loss of the chain of transmission of tradition. We already know from history that historically, the main source of transmitting beliefs were the Cossacks’ wives and mothers. According to contemporary veterans, even though people were widely punished for expressing their religious views during the Soviet era, many women nevertheless continued to pray in secret and observe their customs, although to a significantly reduced degree, they nonetheless observed them.

If, as a result of government policy, the urban Ural Cossacks sometimes experienced a complete forgetting of their ancestral faith in the families of those who truly shared the government’s policy toward religion, and sometimes simply a modification of traditional beliefs for security reasons, often without passing them on to children, in order to protect them from persecution, since children, unlike adults, could not hide well what their parents taught them, then in those very same Old Believer “backwoods” traditional beliefs underwent virtually no change.

In both East Kazakhstan and Uralsk, the fate of these closed communities is similar in that today, only a very small number of Old Believer renunciates remain. But in addition to the priestless renunciates, there are also Old Believers belonging to the Old Believer Orthodox Church, who have

recently acquired their own priest to provide for their spiritual needs:

“The entire community numbers approximately one hundred people. Despite their small numbers, the Old Believer Cossacks, just as their ancestors did for centuries, continue to bear their cross to this day. However, even they are characterized by a partial abandonment of tradition, as the last Old Believer priest was executed in the early years of Soviet power” (Respondent C1/3cK).

With the Republic of Kazakhstan gaining independence, Old Believers and New Believers began to openly remember and show active interest in their origins, especially turning to Orthodoxy as an important component of their identity.

After the official organization and election of the first ataman, the first actions of the Cossacks and the church began: joint religious processions, services, and more.

An analysis of the study’s results shows that the processes of reconstructing ancestral religious memory can be traced through the following elements: the city’s appearance (churches, monuments, etc.), books written by contemporaries about the Ural Cossacks and their faith, printed and online resources, and religious legends, which, although still common during the Soviet era, are popular today. Also important in reconstructing religious consciousness are actions and events that facilitate the acquisition of knowledge about the faith of our forefathers, such as spiritual conversations with a chaplain or the performance of religious rites together with elders. The appearance of the Ural Cossack and his way of life are also significant factors in memory practices.

Participant observation revealed that there are markers of memory that can be found and seen on the streets of Uralsk during a first visit. Elements of the urban landscape that contribute to the reconstruction of religious consciousness are primarily the city’s churches. Churches in Uralsk are not only places of prayer for all Orthodox Christians but also the site of special Cossack services: commemorations of comrades, holidays, oath-taking, and other activities that arose among the local Cossacks.

Today, churches and their histories are among the most important and reliable components in reconstructing the religious consciousness of the Cossacks. By passing and visiting churches, Cossacks tap into the memories and experiences of their ancestors who performed their duties there. The history of these churches is also replete with various chapters connected with the Cossacks and their faith. All military campaigns of the Ural Cossacks began here with a chaplain’s blessing, and here they ended with thanksgiving services for the survivors and memorial services for the fallen. Victories were celebrated here, and tears were shed over defeats. The oldest church still standing is the Church of the Archangel Michael, built before the Pugachev Rebellion. This church preserves the most significant events in the history of the Ural Cossacks. During the rebellion itself, the church served as a fortification for the tsar’s troops, who held out to the end and did not surrender to the rebels. Today, the church stands as a monument to courage and resilience, fortitude and strength. This temple is special to the Cossacks because it is named after the Archangel Michael, the patron saint of Christ’s army for the Ural Cossacks. The Ural Cossacks gather in this temple on holidays, just as their ancestors did centuries ago. The most important holiday for a Cossack, after Easter and Christmas, is the feast day of the Archangel Michael. By attending services in this temple, the Cossacks remember that the one they consider their patron was also the patron of their ancestors.

This church is also notable for another independent historical memorial, not directly related to Orthodoxy but connected to the army of Christ. It is in this church that a memorial stone plaque is located, dedicated to the Ural Cossacks who perished in the Battle of Ikan. In 1864, a hundred Cossacks led by Captain Serov fought a 10,000-strong Kokand army near the settlement of Ikan. The Cossacks, completely outnumbered, resisted for several days, after which reinforcements arrived. Of the entire

hundred, only a dozen Cossacks survived and returned home. In honor of the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Ikan, a service was held in Orthodox churches in Uralsk and Turkestan, and two memorial plaques were unveiled, one in Turkestan and the other in the Orthodox church in Uralsk. Seeing this memorial plaque dedicated to the heroism of their ancestors in the church of their patron saint, Cossacks commemorate their ancestors, recalling the heroism of the fallen Cossacks. The story of the Battle of Ikan and this plaque are directly linked to the history of another church in the city. After the surviving Cossacks received money in gratitude from the rescued residents of Tashkent, they returned home and donated it to the construction of the church. The church was named after St. Nicholas the Wonderworker and became the second Cossack church like the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael; Cossack rituals could be performed.

Also memorable for the Cossacks is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, built for the tercentenary of the Cossack army. At the entrance to this church stand two low columns inscribed with dates commemorating those events.

Of the Old Believer monuments, the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin has survived. Like many churches during the Soviet era, it was used for various purposes. This church also served as a dance club. Now, Old Believers have partially restored the church. In places, old icons have been “unearthed” from beneath layers of plaster, and the church’s iconostasis leaves much to be desired. One lower tier contains several icons donated by local Old Believers. One icon was also donated by a New Believer priest. Besides the building itself and its icons, this Old Believer church is notable for the burial of Bishop Arseny on its grounds. His relics were exhumed recently, and they are a landmark of this church and the city. No historical Muslim religious architecture remains. The only remains are the masonry of the Ak-Mosque. The fate of the khuruls (the Kalmyks in the Ural Cossack army were Buddhists) is also unknown.

Various household items, specific elements of clothing, and Cossack attributes themselves also contribute to the reconstruction of Cossack religious consciousness. During our fieldwork, we encountered the living spaces of several Ural Cossack families. In the home of a long-time resident, a New Believers Cossack– Respondent P1/sV– we found a Cossack wall calendar at the entrance. This calendar featured a contemporary photograph of Ural Cossacks against the backdrop of the Cathedral of their patron, Archangel Michael, with a caption beginning with the words “For Faith, Tsar, and Fatherland”! This calendar, as we discovered, has been published annually since the founding of the local Cossack organization. Only the most honored Ural Cossacks have the right to appear in this photo. We did not find many purely religious symbols in this long-time resident’s home, with the exception of a few icons on a shelf. But, as befits a historical Cossack, a whip and a sabre, presented by the ataman for his anniversary, hung on the wall. There was also a personal memento photo album containing photographs of Cossack gatherings, among which we discovered many religious gatherings, such as religious processions and religious holidays.

Another house belonging to an Old Believer Cossack, Respondent P1/sUD, also provides interesting fieldwork material for research. We previously noted that Old Believer Cossacks, both historical and modern, are characterized by a heightened level of religious involvement. Overall, we observed differences in the appearance of a modern Old Believer Cossack and a New Believer. One wears a military uniform, with shaved cheeks. The other has a long gray beard and simple clothing. Respondent P1/sUD’s interior also characterizes him as an Old Believer. This includes icons in the “red” corner near the dining table, and a prayer corner in the back of the house with a lamp burning near the icons. Not only is the old man’s daily life rich in symbols of his ancestral faith, but his life and its activities are also full of religious elements. For example, we witnessed a daily lunchtime prayer, where, regardless of age or Old or New Rite beliefs, all Christians stood and recited the prayer, crossed themselves, and sat down to eat. A similar ritual was repeated at the end of the meal. As Respondent

P1/sUd's wife asserts, they pass on these traditions to their children and grandchildren, instilling a Christian way of life and thought.

Despite such differences in their way of life, these old people are an example of camaraderie, mutual understanding and mutual assistance, which have become rare in our days.

Material embodiments of Cossack symbols and faith are also characteristic of the headquarters, where purely Cossack symbols are displayed: the banner, the mace, elements of the charter, the oath, paintings depicting Cossacks, and so on. Among the indirect symbols alluding to the Ural faith, we see, as in the house of the first long-time resident, photographs. A huge collage at the entrance to the headquarters is replete with photographs, including many with religious elements: religious processions, the raising of crosses, and so on.

A significant place in the reconstruction of religious consciousness is occupied by images and concepts that abound in all kinds of printed and virtual resources, as well as legends, stories, and traditions of elders that exist among modern Ural Cossacks to this day.

When examining such constructs, it's worth starting with those that first influence the formation of religious consciousness in childhood, even before people begin reading and independently using any information resources. These are, first and foremost, stories, legends, and direct statements about who a Cossack is and what faith means to them.

Relying again on eyewitness accounts, we learn that the chain of transmission of tradition was uneven in its integrity. In some families, such as that of Respondent P1/sUd, traditional worldviews were more fully transmitted, with religious practices fully or partially preserved. In others, such as the family of Respondent P1/sV, where the father's brother was imprisoned for the mere act of publicizing Cossack ideas, and the father himself hid in the south, there was very little mention of faith and Cossackism. As this elder himself recalls, like many of the Cossacks interviewed, his parents continued to observe rituals in secret.

During the interviews, legends related to religion were recorded. One tells of a Cossack priest who refused to marry Yemelyan Pugachev a second time to a local Cossack woman, for which he was thrown from the bell tower. The church associated with this event no longer exists, and the priest's grave will never be found, but the legend surrounding it lives on and, as befits the genre, grows with various details. One legend, more relatable to us, was recounted by the previously mentioned chaplain of the Ural Cossacks. The events of this urban legend are connected with the aforementioned Nikolsky Cathedral (the Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker). Another legend tells of otherworldly forces and the church associated with them, which naturally influence the development of human religious consciousness. Near the Nikolsky Cathedral there was once a cemetery, which was abandoned during the Soviet era. The dug-up and re-filled cemetery was leveled and converted into a playground, and in winter, a skating rink. According to folk legend, a girl fainted while skating and saw people emerge from the skating area and walk toward the church, which had been converted into a hospital at the time. And they enter not from the hospital entrance, but through a bricked-up wall. One of the men told her that they were sleeping here, and it would be better if no one played there. Afterwards, the girl told her grandmother, who explained that there used to be a church there, and that the entrance to the church was where the brickwork had been, and underneath the platform was a cemetery. Another interesting story connected with this church, which we heard from priests in the Urals, also tells us. During the Great Patriotic War, when St. Nicholas Cathedral was converted into a hospital, wounded from the front were brought there. Legend has it that the sick, walking out of the hospital in the winter, felt the warmth of one of the walls, where the altar had once been, and pressed themselves against it. Many of them even left their initials. Living priests themselves witnessed these records. Such legends, being elements of the Cossack worldview, exert a certain influence on the human

consciousness, often forcing belief in higher powers, sometimes even more so than religious services and liturgies. Belief in miracles has always been inherent in humans, and it is precisely to miracles that many people are drawn, turning to the otherworldly.

In our age of globalization and the widespread availability of information resources online, it is important to examine the virtual space constructed by Cossacks online. Three Kazakhstani Cossack websites were analyzed. One of the websites is a division of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan ([Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, 2023](#)). This website provides information on the activities of the Union of Legal Entities “Association of Russian, Slavic, and Cossack Organizations of Kazakhstan”, its structure, and board. Contact information for branches of Cossack organizations across the country is also provided. Furthermore, since 2017, the ARSK Bulletin periodical has been published, providing information on the activities of branches across the country and their participation in various state and local events. Cossack organizations also operate Russian centers, choirs, vocal and dance ensembles, and other groups.

Another website, run by the public association “Cossack National Cultural Center of East Kazakhstan”, features information on the history of the Cossacks in Kazakhstan, literature about the Cossacks (the Cossack Dictionary and Reference Book from 1966-1970, the Cossack Passport from 1974), and posters depicting Cossacks in various countries ([Kazachii Natsional’no-Kul’turnyi Tsentr VKO, n.d.](#)). Furthermore, the website provides information on the ethno-territorial groups of Cossacks in Kazakhstan and links to publications on the Cossacks.

The third information and analytical website, the Union of Orthodox Citizens of Kazakhstan, has a section titled “Cossacks of Semirechye” ([Soyuz pravoslavnykh grazhdan Kazakhstana, n.d.](#)). This section contains information on historical events related to the Cossacks, with some articles writing about the genocide of Cossacks during the Soviet era.

Overall, information from official sources shows that Cossack organizations are represented in the media and are actively involved in the life of Kazakhstani society.

Conclusion

The Cossacks in Kazakhstan are represented by a wide range of organizations, from large associations of legal entities with branches throughout the country to public associations and unregistered, isolated groups. They have their own governing bodies, boards, ethnocultural communities, and leaders. Cossacks in Kazakhstan actively preserve and develop their traditions, customs, and religion. Most of them are representatives of the Slavic population. The study revealed that the Cossacks have a close connection with religion. However, the religious identity of the Cossacks is diverse and not always based on Christianity. Historically, Cossacks included representatives of various faiths, including Islam, Buddhism, and others. Within Christianity, they include Old Believers and Orthodox Christians.

As the study results showed, religion is a key factor in the Cossacks’ identity and cultural code. This is expressed not only in church attendance and their decoration, but also in the daily lives of some Cossacks (everyday life, home improvement, home prayers, the rhetoric of a warrior of Christ, etc.). Furthermore, as is well known, Cossack troops are organized combat units. Even today, many of them continue this tradition, for example, by guarding Orthodox churches during the arrival of relics from other countries.

Thus, the subethnic and cultural group of Kazakhstan’s Cossacks is in the process of reconstructing, and sometimes re-constructing, their Cossack religious consciousness, and this is one of the important identification strategies of modern Cossacks ([Tutinova et al., 2025, p. 81](#)). A religious component is significantly present in the activities of Cossack associations to strengthen culture, maintain, and

reconstruct the traditions of the Cossacks as a distinct people, as they consider themselves, but deep personal involvement in doctrine and religious practices is rare. The religious factor in Cossack identity is present as the “faith of fathers and ancestors”, a “living tradition” that they attempt to revive and reconstruct through the recreation of history, as well as the actualization of myths, legends, symbols, and images. During Soviet times, Cossacks were subjected to repression, and everything reminiscent of Cossackism was eliminated, and many Cossack traditions were lost. Overall, modern Cossack organizations in Kazakhstan preserve and develop their own traditions and customs. The country has created all the conditions for supporting cultural diversity and religious freedom. Along with other ethnic groups, they form their own associations and are active players in Kazakhstan’s multi-ethnic landscape.

Authors’ contributions

First author – writing the article text, literature review, and analysis of survey results.

Second author – defining the research framework and sample, text editing, correspondence, submission of the article.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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