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FIGURE OF OTEBAI AULIE AS A COMPONENT OF KAZAKH SACRED TRADITION AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

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Abstract. Introduction. In Kazakh spiritual culture, the cult of auliye (saints), whose deeds and graves are considered sacred, occupies a special place. Situated within this sacred framework, the figure of Otebai auliye, revered in southern Kazakhstan, plays the central role in the regional landscape of veneration. His cult was formed as a result of complex processes of sacralization, the family continuity of ishanism, and popular memory. The study of the figure of Otebai auliye shows how collective historical memory is formed through images of saints and how traditional religious values are transmitted. *Aims and Objectives.* The aim of the article is to identify the religious and cultural significance of the figure of Otebai auliye within the context of Kazakh sacred tradition and historical memory. The objectives include tracing the genealogy and origins of the cult, analyzing narratives related to the saint's name, and exploring the impact of his figure on local identity and the sacred geography of the region. *Materials and Methods.* The research is based on data from field expeditions conducted in the Suzak district of the Turkestan region. Eleven informants from the villages of Qumkent, Sozak, Sholakqorgan were interviewed. The study utilized oral history methods, narrative analysis, and concepts of sacred geography and socio-cultural memory. *Results.* The study reveals that the figure of Otebai auliye is an integral part of a religious tradition passed down through generations. His mausoleum serves as a place of worship and symbolizes the center of local spiritual identity. Oral traditions concerning the saint emphasize his role in protecting the community, offering healing, and providing spiritual guidance. Within the framework of post-Soviet religious revival, the veneration of Otebai Auliye is reasserted as a vital marker of collective historical consciousness. *Conclusion.* Otebai Auliye occupies a prominent place in Kazakh sacred tradition, serving as a reflection of religious transformations, historical ruptures, and the persistence of collective memory. His cult illustrates how spiritual practices and local narratives shape sacred spaces and the historical identity of the people.

Keywords: Otebai auliye, sacred tradition, historical memory, cult of saints, oral history, local identity, Islam in Kazakhstan.

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ҚАЗАҚТЫҢ КИЕЛІ ДӘСТҮРІ МЕН ТАРИХИ ЖАДЫНДАҒЫ ӨТЕБАЙ ӘУЛИЕ ТҮЛҒАСЫ

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Аңдатпа. *Kipicne.* Қазақ рухани мәдениетінде әулиелерге деген құрмет, олардың өмір жолы мен жерленген орындарының киелі саналуы ерекше орын алады. Осы сакралды жүйеде Қазақстанның оңтүстігінде құрметтелетін Өтебай әулие тұлғасы айрықша маңызға ие. Оның культінің сакралды болуы күрделі, себебі ишандық дәстүрдің отбасылық сабақтастығы және халық жадымен тығыз байланысты қалыптасты. Өтебай әулие тұлғасын зерттеу арқылы әулиелер бейнесі арқылы ұжымдық тарихи жадтың қалай қалыптасатынын және дәстүрлі діни құндылықтардың қалай берілетінін саралауға мүмкіндік береді. *Мақсаты мен міндеттер.* Мақаланың мақсаты – Өтебай әулие тұлғасының қазақтың киелі дәстүрі мен тарихи жадындағы діни-мәдени маңызын анықтау. Міндеттеріне оның культінің шежіресі мен шығу тегін саралау, әулие туралы нарративті мәліметтерді талдау, сонымен қатар оның тұлғалық қасиетінің өңірлік сәйкестік пен сакралды географияға ықпалын қарастыру жатады. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Зерттеудің негізін Түркістан мен Жамбыл облыстары, соның ішінде Созақ ауданына жүргізілген далалық экспедиция материалдары құрайды. Құмкент, Созақ, Шолаққорған және басқа ауылдардың 11 тұрғынынан интервью алынды. Зерттеу барысында ауызша тарих, нарративтік талдау әдістері, сондай-ақ сакралды география мен әлеуметтік-мәдени тұжырымдамалары қолданылды. *Нәтижелер.* Өтебай әулие тұлғасы сабақтастыққа негізделген діни дәстүрдің бір бөлігі екені анықталды. Оның кесенесі зиярат орны ретінде қызмет етіп, жергілікті рухани сәйкестіктің рәміздік орталығына айналған. Әулие туралы ауызша аңыздар халықты қорғау, шипагерлік пен рухани жетекшілік мазмұнын қамтиды. Кеңестік биліктен кейінгі діни жаңғыру жағдайында Өтебай әулиенің киелілігі тарихи өзін-өзі танудың маңызды элементі ретінде қайта мойындалуда. *Қорытынды.* Өтебай әулие тұлғасы қазақтың сакралды дәстүрінің маңызды компоненті болып табылады, әрі ол діни өзгерістерді, тарихи ақтандақтарды және ұжымдық жадтың тұрақтылығын бейнелейді. Оның культі рухани тәжірибе мен жергілікті нарративтердің киелі кеңістік пен халықтың тарихи сәйкестігін қалай құрайтынын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Өтебай әулие, киелі дәстүр, тарихи жад, әулиелер культы, ауызша тарих, өңірлік сәйкестік, Қазақстандағы ислам.

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ФИГУРА ОТЕБАЙ АУЛИЕ КАК КОМПОНЕНТ КАЗАХСКОЙ САКРАЛЬНОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ И ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПАМЯТИ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В казахской духовной культуре особое место занимает культ святых (аулие), праведников чья деятельность и захоронения считаются сакральными. В этой системе сакральных координат фигура Отебай аулие (святого Отебая), почитаемого на юге Казахстана, занимает особое положение. Его культ сформировался в результате сложных процессов сакрализации, семейной преемственности ишанства, а также народной памяти. Исследование фигуры Отебай аулие позволяет проанализировать, как через образы святых формируется коллективная историческая память и транслируются традиционные религиозные ценности. *Цель и задачи.* Целью статьи является выявление религиозно-культурного значения фигуры Отебай аулие в контексте казахской сакральной традиции и исторической памяти. Задачи включают: проследить генеалогию и происхождение культа, проанализировать нарративы, связанные с именем святого, а также рассмотреть влияние его фигуры на локальную идентичность и сакральную географию региона. *Материалы и методы.* Основу исследования составили данные полевых экспедиций, проведенных в Сузакском районе Туркестанской области. Были опрошены 11 информантов, проживающих в селах Кумкент, Созак, Шолаккорган и др. Использовались методы устной истории, нарративного анализа, а также концепции сакральной географии и социокультурной памяти. *Результаты.* Установлено, что фигура Отебай аулие является частью преемственной религиозной традиции. Его мавзолей выполняет функцию места поклонения, и служит символическим центром локальной духовной идентичности. Устные предания о святом связаны с защитой народа, исцелением и наставничеством. В рамках постсоветского религиозного возрождения сакральность Отебай аулие вновь утверждается как важный элемент исторического самосознания. *Заключение.* Фигура Отебай аулие выступает значимым компонентом казахской сакральной традиции, одновременно отражая религиозные трансформации, исторические травмы и устойчивость коллективной памяти. Его культ демонстрирует, как духовные практики и локальные нарративы формируют сакральное пространство и историческую идентичность народа.

Ключевые слова: Отебай аулие, сакральная традиция, историческая память, культ святых, устная история, локальная идентичность, ислам в Казахстане.

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Introduction. Contemporary historical and cultural scholarship in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Kazakhstan, is undergoing a profound reexamination of national heritage, including its spiritual and religious aspects. In the context of globalization, secularization, and the diminishing presence of authentic traditional worldviews, there is a growing interest in recovering and studying elements of sacred geography and local religious practices. Within this framework, increasing scholarly attention is devoted to the phenomenon of aulie, revered individuals who are recognized in popular consciousness as embodiments of

sanctity. Researchers focus especially on those figures who have remained in regional memory as mediators between the sacred and the earthly, fulfilling cultural, ethical, and religious roles within traditional society. Among such figures is Otebai Aulie, whose name remains deeply embedded in the cultural landscape of the Kazakh people, despite the limited representation of his legacy in academic literature.

The relevance of addressing this topic is determined by the need for a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of transmission and preservation of the spiritual experience of Kazakh society, which is based not only on the institution of religious schools or official forms of theology but also on the network of sacred authorities that arose in specific historical and cultural conditions. These figures were not part of formalized religious governance, but their influence on everyday religiosity, the system of ethical coordinates, and the collective identity of Kazakh communities was significant. A focused analysis of the figure of Otebai Aulie contributes to closing existing gaps in the academic understanding of Kazakh religious heritage, while simultaneously foregrounding key issues such as the construction of sacred memory, regionally embedded practices of saint veneration, and the evolving relationship between spiritual traditions and historical processes.

Scholarly engagement with this topic remains limited and lacks comprehensive synthesis. In domestic historical-ethnographic and religious studies literature, the phenomenon of aulie is receiving increasing attention, especially in the context of studying saints as elements of sacred geography [Muminov, 1996: 14-21]. However, specific figures who did not enter the canonized corpus still remain on the periphery of academic interest. Foreign authors researching the phenomenon of folk Islam and local cults in Central Asia (Malikov, 2010: 116-124) emphasize the multi-level structure of sacredness and its close connection with local socio-cultural identity, which opens perspectives for including Kazakh material in a broader comparative context. However, the figure of Otebai Aulie has received little to no attention in peer-reviewed academic literature, which highlights the significance of the proposed study in expanding understanding of local forms of sainthood and sacred geography in Kazakhstan.

This study provides a detailed analysis of the figure of Otebai Aulie as a representative of traditional Kazakh sacred culture, emphasizing his role as a carrier of local religious memory and a link between the collective spiritual tradition and ethnic identity. The research involved the collection, classification, and critical examination of oral testimonies, archival materials, and ethnographic data associated with Otebai Aulie. His veneration was explored in the context of everyday religious practices and the cultural logic of sacred geography. The figure of the aulie is interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of the core values and worldview of traditional Kazakh society. The study also identifies the function of sacred memory in preserving key aspects of cultural identity during periods of socio-cultural transformation.

The theoretical foundation of the study is based on the concepts of sacred space and memory, developed within the framework of socio-cultural anthropology and phenomenology of religion. Approaches by S. Abashin [Abashin, 2001: 62-81] on collective memory, the concept of the sacred as interpreted by N.D. Nurtazina is connected to the study of the traditional spiritual culture of the Kazakh people and the role of the sacred in shaping religious consciousness and collective memory [Nurtazina, Isakhan, 2022: 910-934], as well as domestic research on the study of traditional Kazakh worldview and its connection with Islam [Mákimbai, 2021: 117-122] are used. Special attention is paid to works dedicated to the role of oral tradition in the transmission of spiritual values and the preservation of sacred toponymy. The methodological framework of the study is based on the principles of interdisciplinarity and combines elements of comparative-historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and a structural-semiotic approach to the analysis of symbolic figures.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the introduction of the figure of Otebai aulie into scientific discourse, a figure that has previously been scarcely considered in academic discussions. Based on field materials and oral tradition, the structure of the local cult is examined, and the mechanisms of transmitting sacred authority in the absence of a written canon are revealed. The work contributes to the development of ideas about the regional variability of Kazakh spiritual tradition and its connection with ethnic self-identification.

The hypothesis of the research is as follows: the figures of local saints, such as Otebai aulie, performed an integrative function in the community, providing not only spiritual support but also serving as moral guides, symbolically consolidating communal identity. They were an integral part of the spiritual ecosystem of the Kazakh world, where the sacred is inseparably connected with the everyday, and religious veneration represents a complex form of interaction between memory, ritual, and spatial symbolism.

In conditions of social instability and external pressure, such figures performed a compensatory role, contributing to the preservation of cultural continuity and resistance to assimilation processes.

Therefore, the figure of Otebai aulie is viewed not only as an object of religious veneration but also as a bearer of the deep structures of Kazakh spirituality, reflecting a special model of the relationship between humans and the sacred, the community and space, and traditions and memory. The study of this topic contributes not only to the reconstruction of elements of spiritual culture but also to the expansion of the scientific tools necessary for analyzing similar phenomena within the framework of Islamic civilization in Central Asia.

Materials and Methods. The investigation of Otebai Aulie as a sacred element of Kazakh cultural memory employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates ethnographic observation, religious studies, social anthropology, and comparative-historical analysis. The methodological framework is informed by both contemporary international and local scholarship on sacred geography and the phenomenology of sanctity, including the foundational work of R. Pillsbury [Pillsbury 1971: 130-134] and H.J. Klimeit's contributions to the study of local memory cultures [Klimeit 1975: 266-281]. The analysis is situated at the intersection of sacred space phenomenology and a postcolonial critique of vernacular religious practices that were marginalized or suppressed during the Soviet era.

The fieldwork phase of the study was carried out from 2022 to 2024 in the Sozak district of the Turkestan region of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The main empirical methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and photographic documentation of sacred topographic sites associated with the name of Otebai aulie. A total of 17 informants were interviewed – elders, genealogists (*shezhireshiler*), shrine keepers (*shyrakshy*), and descendants of the lineage connected to the cultic tradition of Otebai aulie. These informants were: Sarybaev Kalmukhanbet (born 1950, Karatau village), Shorabekov Amir (born 1943, Sholakkorghon village), Nurtai Zhaksylyk (born 1965, Sozak village), Tokenov Januzak (born 1955, Kumkent village), Abilmazhinov Seitkhan (born 1952, Jartytope village), Mustafaev Rakhym (born 1948, Shapak village), Bidauletov Kystaubai (born 1949, Tangatar village), Aljanova Ryszhon (born 1958, Tasty village), Begimbetova Mahabbat (born 1962, Karagur village), Suleimenov Bakhtjan (born 1960, Sozak village), Sarsenbai Beisenbai (born 1956, Juantobe village), Yesengeldi Aydarkhan (born 1968, Kumkent village), Dosymbekov Kurman (born 1947, Sholakkorghon village), Amirtaev Erkin (born 1959, Juantobe village), Ualiev Tolen (born 1961, Karabura village), Imangali Zhenis (born 1966, Akkoltyk village), Kuttibaev Asset (born 1953, Kumkent village).

Qualitative data collection involved audio recordings of interviews, written notes with synchronous observation of rituals at the Otebai aulie mausoleum. Particular attention was paid to the transmission of sacred knowledge in oral form – through genealogy (*shezhire*), *hikaayat* (stories), and local legends. Methodologically, this part of the work draws on M. Buttner's studies on cultural memory [Buttner 1974: 163-196] and approaches to the study of oral history developed in the works of R. Allon-Smith, D. Crouch [Allon-Smith, Crouch 1979: 30]. The data were processed using thematic coding methodology, which allowed for the identification of stable representations of the role of Otebai aulie as a protector of the lineage, spiritual mentor, and intermediary between the worlds.

Another method used was the mapping of the sacred landscape of the Sozak district, documenting pilgrimage routes and folk religious sites. Visual analysis of the architectural and natural features of the Otebai aulie mausoleum was conducted using sacred geography approaches based on the work of T. Omarbekov [Omarbekov 2021: 232-237].

A key aspect of the research involved conceptualizing the figure of the aulie within the broader context of the post-Soviet revival of Islamic practices and the restructuring of local religious traditions. A decolonial perspective, particularly the approaches of R.M. Mustafina (Mustafina 1992), allowed for the interpretation of popular notions of sanctity as a form of cultural resistance to the official religious doctrine imposed during the Soviet era. This is also confirmed by the works of Kazakh researchers [Kenishtaykyzy 2011: 160-162], who emphasize the need for an independent conceptualization of the «*aulie*» phenomenon outside the framework of Orientalist exoticization.

In the process of analyzing the texts of the Quran, hadiths, and Islamic encyclopedias, in which the phenomenon of «*aulie*» is mentioned, a hermeneutic approach was used, borrowed from the works of N.D. Nurtazina [Nurtazina 2017] and applied in Islamic studies works by D.Yu. Arapov [Arapov 2004]. This allowed for a deeper interpretation of the connection between Kazakh sacred tradition and universal Islamic categories such as «*wali*», «*rizik*», «*shafa'at*», etc., and for combining the local specificity of beliefs with the general Islamic doctrine of saints and martyrs (*shaheeds*).

Thus, the materials and methods used in the research allow for a comprehensive examination of the figure of Otebai aulie as an element of historical memory, a bearer of sacred knowledge, and a mediator between generations, drawing on both traditional forms of Kazakh spirituality and modern scientific reflection. The data obtained formed the basis for the concept of sacred subjectivity, specific to the steppe Islamic world, and highlighted the issue of the place of the aulie in the process of cultural self-identification of the Kazakhs in the contemporary context.

Discussion. Otebai aulie is a prominent figure in the religious and cultural life of the Kazakh people. His personality combines elements of spiritual mentorship and reflects the core aspects of Kazakh worldview and philosophy. In folk legends and teachings, the image of Otebai is associated with personal wisdom, profound spiritual strength, and a unique ability to establish peace and harmony within society. He serves as a symbol of traditional Kazakh values such as respect for nature, unity of the people, and preservation of cultural traditions. Numerous stories and legends are linked with his name, where he is depicted as a wise elder capable of resolving even the most difficult and complicated issues. Otebai aulie is an essential figure in the context of traditional Islam, embodying the idea of a spiritual mentor who helps people find their path and purpose in life. His influence extends beyond religious practice, with his teachings encompassing philosophical aspects that are equally important for spiritual life and social harmony.

As the informant Sarybaev Kalmukhambet states: *“The life and teachings of Otebai influenced not only his people but also the entire region. The words he spoke and the deeds he performed deeply penetrated the people’s consciousness, taking a special place in their hearts. His wisdom and justice gained authority not only in his native village but also in neighboring settlements. He called on people to adhere to religious and human values, such as unity and brotherhood”* [FMA: Informant 1]. This statement highlights the importance of the religious and moral aspect of Otebai aulie’s teachings, which had a profound impact on people’s consciousness, their relationships, and daily life. He was not just a religious leader but also a role model for social responsibility, humanity, and respect for traditions. In this way, he left an invaluable mark on the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Kazakh people.

To properly understand the role of Otebai in the context of Kazakh culture and history, it is necessary to consider the geographical and historical background in which he lived and acted. Otebai aulie is an important figure during a period of significant political and religious transformations in Kazakhstan. This time was marked by increasing internal and external political tensions, as well as the deepening of religious processes that became part of a broader cultural context. The location of Otebai’s homeland in Central Kazakhstan, particularly in the region of Ulytau, holds great significance for understanding his spiritual role. This region was an important cultural and trade center, situated at the crossroads of different ethnic and cultural traditions. It witnessed numerous conflicts between local tribes and external forces. As the informant Tokenov Januzak asserts, *“Otebai was not only a religious leader but also played an important role in the political life of his time. He maintained peace among the people, resolved various disputes, and contributed to the unity of the people”* [FMA: Informant 2]. This statement emphasizes Otebai’s religious and political importance. He held a central position in society as a spiritual mentor, yet his role was not limited to religious matters alone. He was an active participant in the political life of his time, where his wisdom and conflict-resolution skills contributed to strengthening social stability and national unity. Otebai used his authority to ensure peace and agreement among tribes, reinforcing traditional power structures based on spiritual principles and righteousness.

By birth, Otebai belonged to the Tamy tribe, which is part of the Middle Zhuz. His descendants are still widely settled in the Sozak district of the Turkestan region, as well as in the cities of Turkestan and Shymkent, which testifies to the deep-rooted legacy of his heritage in this region. According to one of the vivid folk legends recorded by us from the elder Dosjan Kenzhebaev [FMA: Informant 3], Otebai’s sacred authority became especially evident during his pre-death instruction. During the historical movement of the tribes, which began in the time of the tragedy “Aqtaban Shubyrindy, Alqakol Sulama” (the years of the Great Disaster), his descendants turned to him with the question: with whom should the few members of the Middle Zhuz live, and where should the saint himself be buried? Otebai’s response in the folk narrative appears as a deeply symbolic and geopolitical will: *“Below Akmeshit (Kyzylorda) live representatives of forty-four tribes of the Middle Zhuz, they did not know you in life and will not mourn you in death. However, the children of the Middle Zhuz grew on silky grass and drank water from transparent springs, stay with them, do not separate. As for me, bury me on the slope of the opposite hill, across the Sarysu River, let my body lie as the boundary between the Middle Zhuz. And pass my greetings to the two masters of Arka (Central Kazakhstan)”*. When asked who these “two masters” were, the saint replied in a metaphor,

referring to the rivers Yesil and Nura: *"Aren't they masters, Yesil and Nura? Their shores are green meadows, their waters are purity and coolness. If you cross, your clothes will not get dusty, and the heat will not scorch you"*. This figurative language reflects the poetics of Kazakh folklore and sacred geography, where rivers, steppes, and burial mounds acquire the status of living participants in historical existence. The transfer of the saint's body across Sarysu is also accompanied by a parable: in the absence of boats and modern means of transportation, his followers were confused, but Otebai instructed them to use what nature provided: *"The simplest is reed. Tie it in bundles, calling it 'Qarabuirolap' and make a collective crossing 'salburyn.' Even if you are few, unite, are you worse than reed?!"* This teaching expresses practical ingenuity and deep moral philosophy: the unity of the people is more valuable than the strength of one. This is confirmed by the informant Qystaubay Baydauletov [FMA: Informant 4], who noted in his account that *"Otebai was a man who helped solve any issues of the people. He was known for his justice and wisdom. His words concerned Islam and were directed at preserving unity between generations"*. These words emphasize the importance of the religious aspect and the social role of Otebai in strengthening moral and cultural values. His teachings on justice, wisdom, and unity remained relevant for his time and future generations. He became a symbol of how spiritual leaders can influence political and social processes, strengthening the foundations of traditional society and ensuring harmony among different layers of the population.

Thus, one of the key aspects of his teachings is attention to spiritual integrity and the importance of unity among the people. In one of his teachings, as conveyed by the informant Bakhytjan Suleimenov, Otebai says: *"Maintain unity, where there is unity, there is strength"* [FMA: Informant 5]. This expression became one of the fundamental principles for many Kazakhs, symbolizing the importance of spiritual and social harmony.

Many people who revere Otebai consider him a source of spiritual strength and moral guidance. The cult of Otebai is not limited to his time; it continues to influence the spiritual life of modern Kazakhstan. His teachings on respecting nature, family values, and the culture of folk traditions have remained relevant in the era of reforms and political changes. The words of the informant Qystaubay Baydauletov, who states: *"Otebai worked to preserve the unity and peace of the people in his time"* highlight the importance of his role in strengthening social harmony and unity [FMA: Informant 4].

The grave of the saint Otebai is one of the key sacred sites of Southern Kazakhstan, where pilgrimages have been made for decades. This place is regarded as a historical monument, a spiritual center connected with the inner experiences and hopes of the local population. The informant Seyitkhan Abilmazhinov, a respected elder and bearer of oral tradition, notes that the mausoleum of Otebai is considered by the locals as a place with special grace. People come here who find themselves in difficult life situations, who need support, healing, or spiritual balance. According to his testimony, in the popular memory, the saint continues to live as a protector and patron, to whom people turn with personal prayers and hopes [FMA: Informant 6]. The practice of pilgrimage to his grave maintains a connection between generations, strengthening the sense of belonging to a common spiritual heritage. This is especially evident in collective *ziyarat*, when entire families and even small communities organize trips to the mausoleum, leaving offerings, water, or ribbons as a sign of gratitude.

The saint's legacy continues to have a strong influence on the younger generation, despite the processes of globalization and secularization. The informant Aydarhan Esengeldi, who works as a teacher and educator in rural areas, points out that young people are increasingly interested in the life and teachings of spiritual figures like Otebai. He emphasizes that the biography of the saint serves as a kind of moral guide for teenagers and young adults, helping them find answers to complex spiritual and moral questions [FMA: Informant 7]. In the face of the uncertainties of modern life, many turn to the examples of the past to build their own value system. In this context, the figure of Otebai becomes a symbol of the unchanging moral ideals and the strength of inner conviction. Informant Qurban Dosymbekov, a veteran of labor and author of numerous memoirs on local spiritual culture, emphasizes that traditional values such as justice, loyalty, and honesty as reflected in the figure of Otebai continue to hold a meaningful place in the collective consciousness of the community. His words and actions are often quoted in everyday life, especially by the older generations, as a reminder of the high moral standards needed to preserve social harmony and spiritual continuity [FMA: Informant 8].

Results in the context of Kazakh oral tradition, the figure of the saint Otebai is presented as a vivid example of the fusion of spiritual charisma and the code of honor, which is characteristic of the Turkic epic worldview. According to a recorded account from a resident of the Saryagash region, Uzbek Duysenbaev, the events surrounding the Dzungar invasion reveal Otebai as a person who embodied the values of moral

integrity and fearless devotion to others. The episode narrates how, during a fierce battle, the Dzungar khan's horse was mortally wounded. Seeing that the enemy was in danger, Otebai offered him his horse, thereby ensuring his salvation (FMA: Informant 9). This act draws parallels with the archetypal motif of "self-sacrifice in the face of the enemy" known in Turkic heroic epics, particularly in tales like *"Alpamys"* where the superiority of the hero's moral strength over ordinary revenge is emphasized. Such narratives testify to the deep ethical foundations on which the cult of saints in Kazakh culture is based and the connection between the epic hero and the Islamic aulie as bearers of moral authority [Alpamys Batyr, 2019].

Following his capture by the Dzungars, the narrative highlights Otebai's spiritual maturity as the khan, struck by his composure and wisdom, poses a philosophical question concerning the "three joys of life". Otebai's response, which includes love for one's wife, the joy of fatherhood, and honorable recognition by the people, articulates a coherent moral credo rooted in familial devotion, social responsibility, and communal respect. These three answers symbolize the unity of personal, familial, and social identity, which play a key role in the traditional Kazakh worldview. This plot can be interpreted through the lens of folklore hermeneutics as a form of transmitting moral values, where the figure of the saint becomes a mediator between the past and present, linking the sacred and the mundane. This synthesis is also observed in tales about other Kazakh saints, such as the legends of Beket Ata or Ybyrayim Ishan, where the heroes' trials through questions and answers serve as a symbolic test of their spiritual rank [Túrlybek, 2010: 160].

The survival of the tale about Saint Otebai in oral form, transmitted by an elderly informant, attests to the resilience and adaptability of folk memory, which encodes moral principles within memorable narrative frameworks. This phenomenon illustrates a core mechanism of folkloric memory which is the capacity to transform historical experiences into mythologized narratives that preserve both factual content and ethical meaning. The legend of Otebai's integrity in the face of the enemy continues to serve a didactic function, providing a moral exemplar for both older and younger generations. Thus, in the figure of the saint Otebai, we observe the phenomenon of cultural continuity, where the figure of the hero-saint performs the role of guardian of the collective ethical consciousness, striving towards the ideal of harmony, justice, and dignity.

In the historical and cultural context of the migration of tribes to the Arka (Saryarka) region, the figure of Itemgen Bi (1756-1850), the son of the famous Sengirbek Batyr and the grandson of the Tama tribe, who led the people to the central Kazakh steppes, holds a special place. His name is closely associated with the strengthening of the social structure and the administrative integrity of the Tama tribe. As historians and writers emphasize, Itemgen Bi was one of the most respected and influential associates of Abilay Khan [Seidimbek, 2008: 17-21]. In historical memory, there is an episode about his decisive involvement in the capture of the Kyrgyz batyr Atek, which also highlights his political and military significance. In 1832, he became the first to receive the official seal of the newly established Taminskaya Volost, which brought together previously fragmented tribal groups. According to informant Qystaubai Baidauletov, the transfer of authority from elder to younger within tribal society was understood not as a rigid hierarchical structure but rather as the transmission of a spiritual legacy. Thus, after refusing to govern at the age of eighty, Itemgen Bi transferred the leadership of the tribe to his son Qylish, demonstrating the stability of power succession and the moral maturity of the clan. The informant emphasizes that in folk narratives, Itemgen is portrayed not only as a political figure but also as a bearer of sacred wisdom, whose decisions often had symbolic meaning [FMA: Informant 4].

This symbolism is most vividly manifested in the episode of Itemgen Bi's last days, described by Dulat Shalkarbaev in the book *«Omır Ozi Sayleidi» (Life told its own story)*. When the ailing bi feels the approach of death, he sends for his friend Otebai of the Alip tribe, who lived near Telikoly [Shalkarbaev, 2014: 124-128]. According to the informant Bakhytjan Suleimenov (born 1960, from Sozak), the story of the last farewell between the two elders is not merely a touching episode but a formula for spiritual inheritance: *«Itemgen could not speak, but by squeezing his friend's hand three times and striking it on the ground a fourth time, he left a symbolic message about the need for the final settlement of the Alip tribe in the lands of Arka»* [FMA: Informant 5]. The interpretation of this gesture, according to Otebai, was as follows: *«The descendants of Alip came to Arka three times and left three times; now it is time to settle here permanently»*. The informant Amirkhan Shorabekov emphasizes that such actions were perceived as the will of the ancestors, equivalent to a written testament. Thus, Itemgen Bi not only concludes his life journey but also directs the movement of the tribe into the future, authorizing the geographical and spiritual settlement of Saryarka [FMA: Informant 10].

Following this testament, as emphasized by Seithan Abilmazhinov, the entire Alip tribe left the banks of Telikoly and finally settled in the Tologai region. Here, at the foot of the mountain of the same name, near the Manadyr station, is the grave of Otebai Bi, which, according to local residents, is visited on memorial trips as a custodian of Itemgen's legacy [FMA: Informant 6]. Thus, the figure of Itemgen Bi appears in the folkloric and historical memory not merely as a bi or warrior but as a mediator between generations, passing on the sacred will of the ancestors to the descendants, forever securing the tribe in the heart of Kazakh land.

The figure of Otebai Bi, as part of the Kazakh sacred tradition, embodies a distinctive historical and cultural phenomenon in which spiritual leadership, tribal institutional memory, and the ethical and moral foundations of traditional society are seamlessly integrated. In the narrative structure of oral history, his image functions not as an abstract symbol but as a concrete mediator of sacred knowledge, capable of transmitting and embodying the will of the deceased in socially significant space. The case of the silent transfer of Itemgen Bi's testament in the final moments of his life and the precise interpretation of this message by Otebai Bi, as witnessed by several informants, including Suleimenov Bakhytjan and Amir Shorabekov, represents an example of deep cultural mechanisms that ensure the continuity of tribal and territorial identity.

The figure of Otebai occupies a special place in the complex system of sacred coordinates of the Kazakh world, as it combines the traits of a bi as a legal authority, a shesen as a bearer of rhetorical tradition, and an aulie as a mediator between sacred and profane spaces. His life path, especially the final episode of interaction with the dying Itemgen Bi, illustrates the archaic, yet until the end of the nineteenth century, still preserved mechanism of symbolic legitimation of tribal decisions. The interpretation of the fourfold gesture within the ritual and semantic framework of Kazakh culture reveals a high degree of ritualization in political decision-making and reflects a stable epistemological system in which knowledge is conveyed not through verbal expression but through gesture, physical contact and visual communication.

Following the death of Itemgen Bi and the sacred framing of his final testament, Otebai Bi assumed the responsibility of overseeing the territorial resettlement of the Alip tribe to the Arka region. In doing so, he facilitated not only a significant social migration but also the establishment of a renewed sacred order. This act was confirmed in oral memory as a spiritual testament, received and carried out with the appropriate ritual attention, as emphasized by the testimonies of informants Seithan Abilmazhinov and Qystaubai Baidauletov. The very fact that the figure of Otebai Bi has been preserved in oral memory as the initiator and guardian of the sacred geography of the tribe points to his significance in the formation of stable ethnocultural models and moral guidelines for future generations.

The location of Otebai Bi's grave at the foot of the Tologai mountain, which has functioned for decades as a pilgrimage and spiritual center, acquires particular significance. Informants such as Mustafaev Rakhym and Sarsenbay Beisenbay note that visiting this site is accompanied by ritual actions and the reading of surahs from the Quran, and the burial place itself is seen as a space of sacred connection with the ancestors. This makes the figure of Otebai Bi an object of historical reconstruction and an active element of modern sacred practice, consolidating representations of moral authority, nobility, and fidelity to the will of the ancestors.

Conclusion. Otebai Aulie holds a distinctive place within the spiritual and cultural matrix of the Kazakh people, functioning not only as a religious authority but also as a unifying figure who integrates the moral, ethical, and political dimensions of Kazakh social consciousness. His image in the collective memory of the people is formed not through abstract dogmas, but through his lively, active presence in key moments of socio-cultural history, where he embodies the ideal of a just, insightful, and spiritually mature mentor. His spiritual heritage appears as an integrative code, ensuring continuity between generations, clans, and regions, which is particularly important in the context of the historical dynamics of the Kazakh steppe. The aulie in the figure of Otebai embodies profound inner discipline and the ability to engage in sacred mediation. His actions and judgments, passed down through oral tradition and supported by the testimony of informants, stand as evidence of his exceptional influence on social structure. The principle of "*unity as a source of strength*" mentioned in folk sayings, is highlighted in the context of the ever-changing political and cultural environment. This approach reflects the philosophy of steppe worldview and creates a powerful ethical platform for overcoming socio-cultural and inter-clan divides.

The spiritual activity of Otebai, especially in times of historical upheavals associated with the settlement of tribes and the intensification of religious processes, demonstrates an organic combination of sacred mission and practical socio-political engagement. He acts as a kind of cultural mediator, capable of

transforming fragmented reality into a harmonious social space based on mutual understanding and justice. The symbolic placement of his tomb at the boundary of the zhuz is not merely an act of a deathbed will, but a metaphysical assertion of boundaries as places of connection rather than division. Referring to the symbolism of sacred geography in the narrative of crossing the Sarysu River, we encounter a phenomenon in which natural elements (rivers, grass, reeds) become expressions of philosophical concepts of purity, balance, and overcoming. These images carry deep archetypal meanings inherent in Tengrian and Islamic traditions, demonstrating how Kazakh folklore-religious poetics transforms everyday reality into a space for spiritual experience.

The Otebai's cult also manifests in the persistent practice of ziyarat (pilgrimages) to his mausoleum, which today is perceived as both a sacred and therapeutic space. This place becomes a center for the mobilization of memory, where individual fates are linked to collective history. Visits to the mausoleum, as noted by informants, are accompanied by religious ceremonies and rituals of rethinking one's life path, spiritual transformation, and the search for harmony. Otebai is not just a part of the religious history of the Kazakh people; he is an active component in constructing the moral architecture of society. The legacy of Otebai, as preserved in folk memory, embodies universal principles of spiritual resilience, cultural sovereignty, and ethical commitment. He is inseparable from tradition, yet capable of serving as a guide for contemporary issues in faith, social structure, and cultural identity. Within the framework of contemporary ethnology and religious studies, the figure of Otebai deserves broader scientific consideration as an example of transcendental authority, rooted in tradition but not confined by it. His image is a point of intersection between the sacred and the profane, between individual faith and collective identity. He continues to live in words, rituals, and, most importantly, in the ethical choices of people who find in his legacy a living source of meaning and strength.

Field Materials

FMA: Informant 1 – Kalmukhanbet Sarybayev, born in 1950, male. Interview recorded on June 18, 2024, in Karatau village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 10 – Amir Shorabekov, born in 1943, male. Interview recorded on June 25, 2024, in Sholakqorgan village, Turkistan Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 2 – Januzak Tøkenov, born in 1955, male. Interview recorded on June 19, 2024, in Qumkent village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 3 – Doszhan Kenzhebeyev, born in 1948, male. Interview recorded on June 20, 2024, in Saudakent village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 4 – Qystaubai Bidauletov, born in 1949, male. Interview recorded on June 22, 2024, in Tanatar village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 5 – Bakhytzhan Suleimenov, born in 1960, male. Interview recorded on June 23, 2024, in Sozak village, Turkistan Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 6 – Seitkhan Abilmazhinov, born in 1952, male. Interview recorded on June 24, 2024, in Zhartytobe village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 7 – Aidarkhan Yesengeldi, born in 1968, male. Interview recorded on June 19, 2024, in Qumkent village, Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 8 – Qurman Dosymbekov, born in 1947, male. Interview recorded on June 25, 2024, in Sholakqorgan village, Turkistan Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

FMA: Informant 9 – Uzbeke Duissenbayev, born in 1959, male. Interview recorded on August 4, 2024, in Saryagash District, Turkistan Region, Republic of Kazakhstan.

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