

# **THE REBIRTH OF AN OLD LANGUAGE: ISSUES OF GENDER EQUALITY IN KAZAKHSTAN**

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## **Summary:**

The existing language situation in Kazakhstan, while peaceful, is not without some tension. We propose to analyze here some questions we consider relevant in the frame of cultural globalization and gender equality, such as: free from Russian imperialism, could Kazakhstan become an easy prey of Turkey's "imperialist dream"? Could these traditionally Muslim people be soon facing the end of religious tolerance and gender equality, becoming this *new* old language an easy instrument for the infiltration in the country of fundamentalism (it has already crossed the borders of Uzbekistan), leading to a gradual deterioration of its rich multicultural relations? The present structure of the language is still very fragile: there are three main dialects and many academics defend the re-introduction of the Latin alphabet, thus enlarging the possibility of cultural "contamination" by making the transmission of fundamentalist ideas still easier through neighbour countries like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (their languages belong to the same sub-group of Common Turkic), where the Latin alphabet is already in use, and where the ground for such ideas shown itself very fruitful.

## **Palavras-chave**

Língua; Género; Igualdade; Cazaquistão; Multiculturalidade; Fundamentalismo.

## **Key Words**

Language; Gender; Equality; Kasakhstan; Multiculturality; Fundamentalism.

## **1. Introduction**

It is quite difficult to speak about issues of gender equality in Kazakhstan, since there is not much literature about the development of this state throughout the centuries, due to reasons connected, in my opinion, with the Western mostly ethnocentric approaches to all subjects related with Central Asia. The goals and values that have

been central to Western civilization can no longer be considered universal. While a student of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of St. Petersburg, I became aware, for the first time in my life, of how true this statement is. In fact only then did I really understand that the Middle Ages were not to be considered just as a period in Western History but that this period had been much richer and more flourishing in some countries of Asia and Africa. The concept of “difference”, negatively used to define only borders and divisions of all kinds, as it happens in any ethnocentric approach to History, was the main reason for my ignorance.

The present analysis of gender issues in Kazakhstan was mainly based upon information found in official and non-official sites of Kazakhstan and Russia, on information of organizations such as the CIA, the FSB, the Amnesty International, the Human Rights Watch Organization and the Soros Foundation, as well as upon Western literature on gender studies and Arabic literature about Islam.

To complete this brief approach to the problems of fundamentalism in this region of the world and its potential influence on the social situation and role of women in the countries of Central Asia, I have taken some interviews with Kazakh citizens, women and men, working in Portugal, mainly of Kazakh, Russian and Tartar nationality, Orthodox and Muslims by religion. Though they knew me and though I was accompanied by a Kazakh citizen during the interviews, they did not feel as free as to state, for instance, their whole identity or where exactly they came from, and they did not quite believe that the information given to me would be used just as a source for a research on the issue of gender equality and potential development of fundamentalism in their country. They were very careful and cautious in their answers, a fact that I explain as a sign of fear towards the present situation in their country, as well as towards Portuguese authorities, because immigrants from Eastern countries continue to be just tolerated and seen by most people as second-hand citizens, much more than Portuguese-speaking Africans or Brazilians. I hope, I was able to hear and *listen* correctly to their messages.

Apart from having visited part of this huge country, which is almost five times larger than France, I am constantly in contact with its people living in Portugal, to whom I give support in order to solve bureaucratic problems, not to mention that I follow regularly the programs of Caspionet, a Kazakh International Television Broadcasting Corporation, in order to be informed about the evolution of the situation in this country.

In order to better understand the ongoing changes in the country, which may determine decisively the present and future situation of women in society, I will begin by examining briefly some historical and social facts which, I believe, can enhance our awareness of the present economic, political and social context that allows us to infer that these transformations may mean a serious deterioration of social relations in terms of gender equality.

## **2. Some facts on Kazakhstan**

### **2.1 Historical facts**

For obvious reasons, this is not an exhaustive analysis of all facts connected with the formation of the state, its language and religion. By mentioning some of the main steps in the consolidation of the Kazakh state and culture, my purpose is to give a short image of the main aspects of the evolution of this Central Asian country, which saw its political and social structure change rapidly from a feudal nomadic state into a multicultural socialist republic.

Let us begin by the very name of the country: Kazakhstan. Etymologically speaking, the word *сман* means, in Russian, encampment, while in Greek, a language which has influenced Russian – one should not forget that it was Cyril, a Greek Orthodox monk, who created the Cyrillic alphabet – the word *στάνη* means sheepfold. If we think about the names of other neighbour countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, it seems to me, one may, probably, conclude that Kazakhstan means the place where Kazakhs, that is, a mainly nomadic cattle-breeding, caravan-trader group of people, used to stay for the winter. Therefore the borders of the territory were always difficult to determine.

Due to different invasions and the difficult economic and political situation, Kazakhstan decided to join Russia at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which implied for Kazakhstan a peaceful and military colonization and a straightforward conquest by Russia. The total incorporation of Kazakhstan in the Russian Empire happened in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the administration of the territory remained feudal. It was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the establishment of Soviet power, that Kazakhstan really saw its cities, industries and secular education being developed. Suddenly, the country had to speed up from

feudalism to socialism and, for the first time, such issues like gender equality were being discussed in worker's committees and in newspapers.

At the end of the II World War, some Autonomous Republics of the USSR, such as the German Autonomous Republic of the Volga, the Tartar and the Chechen Autonomous Republics were suppressed for political reasons. In fact, the network of Gulag camps was extended to Kazakhstan. During the 40s and the 50s, many people from other nationalities (Germans from the Volga, German prisoners of war, Georgians, Chechens, Ingushis, Ukrainians, Greeks, Koreans) were deported to Kazakhstan, which turned it into a melting-pot of cultures and an example of tolerance in the USSR. After the end of the war, the situation of women and their role in society, especially in the cities, had improved greatly, partly due to mixed marriages and to their role in politics and production.

In December 1991, Kazakhstan proclaimed its independence, adopting its first Constitution in January 1993, and becoming a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), whose main objectives are to form a common economic space grounded on the free movement of goods, services, labour force and capital; to elaborate a coordinated external economic policy; and to bring together methods of regulating economic activity, thus creating favourable conditions for the development of direct production relations.

## **2.2 Religion**

For centuries, Kazakhstan was part of the trade route known as the Silk Road, a place where two different civilizations came into contact, those of the East and those of the West, with their specific cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Therefore, in terms of religion, Kazakhstan suffered different influences throughout the centuries. At first, there was an effort to introduce Buddhism as the state religion. There is also evidence of some expanding of Zoroastrianism and Shamanism in different periods of its history. But after the incursions of Arabs in Central Asia and Kazakhstan and the Turkic-Mongol invasions, Islam became the main religion, in spite of late attempts by the Orthodox Church to convert Kazakhs to Christianity. Thus, by tradition, Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims. The adoption of Islam was gradual, with complete conversion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today Muslims make up 57% of the population of Kazakhstan.

## **2.3 Ethnic groups**

According to data of the official site of Kazakhstan, the present population of the country, which is over 15 million people, includes 45% of Kazakhs, 35% of Russians, and 20% of over 100 of other nationalities, such as Tartars, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Germans, Koreans, etc<sup>1</sup>. After independence, the number of Russians decreased substantially due to the fact that they were given the possibility, for a period of three years, to opt between the Kazakh and the Russian citizenship.

After independence, the so-called Germans of the Volga, as well as Germans descending from German prisoners of war, also began to leave the country. Nevertheless, there are still many Germans living in Kazakhstan. The Greeks were another national group whose reduction was significant after independence. In spite of these changes, the number of citizens from other nationalities is still higher than the number of Kazakhs (about 55% of the population).

## **2.4 Language**

The Kazakh language is part of the Aralo-Caspian group, a sub-group of Common Turkic, which also includes Turkish, Azerbaijani, Tartar, Uzbek, etc. Kazakh, as it exists today, began to take shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the Modern Turkic Period, the last period of development in the Turkic languages. It possesses a rich and ancient tradition of oral poetry, but did not exist in any standard written form until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kazakh and the other Turkic languages are closely related to one another and there is a very high degree of mutual intelligibility among them.

Kazakh was written in the Arabic script till 1929 and with the Latin alphabet from 1929 to 1940, influenced by the changes introduced in the Turkish language by Kemal Ataturk. From 1940, and in order to facilitate the exchanges with Russia and the learning of the language by people living in Kazakhstan, the Cyrillic alphabet was adopted. Today, the Kazakh alphabet includes 33 Russian letters plus nine Kazakh additional symbols. The quite peaceful and easy change from one script to another may be explained by the people's low level of literacy at this period. This explains as well the many borrowings from Russian, but in contrast to this language, Kazakh is an agglutinative language, with no prepositions or gender categories, whose functions are substituted by the use of a large number of affixes.

Considering that languages do not simply name existing categories, that they are not plain nomenclatures for a set of universal concepts, I will try to analyse the question

of how far the reintroduction of a new alphabet and the imposing of one and only official language may in fact mean a reorganization of the country's social structure and the deterioration of the country's multiculturalism.

### **3. Issues of gender equality**

#### **3.1 Language and labour**

In 1989, Kazakh became the official language of the country, while Russian remained as an interethnic communication language in business and, partly, in education. The existing language situation, while peaceful, is not without some tension. If the example of Finland had been followed here, perhaps many situations of discrimination cited below could have been avoided.

In the last ten years, the degradation of the social situation in the country has been quite clear. Many Russians and members of other nationalities felt themselves forced to return to Russia, Ukraine, etc., or to emigrate to countries like Portugal, since they could not find a relatively well-paid job in Kazakhstan. Many people, especially women, with or without higher education, but who do not speak and/or write well in Kazakh, even if they are Kazakhs by nationality, are excluded from many jobs where, for instance, documents have to be filled up both in Russian and Kazakh. During my interviews in Portugal, this was one of the main reasons mentioned by young people with higher education (e.g. chemical engineers and civil engineers) for leaving Kazakhstan and looking for better working chances in a foreign country. While visiting Kazakhstan, I have met many women who, because of their age and their lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language, could not find a stable, decent job, though in Article 7 of the Constitution it is possible to read that, in state institutions and local-administrative bodies, the Russian language should be officially used on equal grounds along with Kazakh<sup>2</sup>. But this, unfortunately, does not concern the right to a job. For example, if a woman is over 40, she will not find a job easily, due to the new phenomenon of unemployment, unknown in Kazakhstan till 1989 and which affects about 10% of the population, and to the fact that, today, once again, preference is given to male workforce in some economic areas, such as industry, building construction, etc. According to data of the CIA, 26% of the population lives below poverty line, in a country where the inflation surpasses the rate of 7%. One of the most dramatic consequences of the present economic situation is the increasing domestic violence, an

entrenched problem across Central Asian countries, as reported by the Human Rights Watch Organization, and which victimizes specially women. As a matter of fact, unemployment and alcoholism, as well as the difficulties in finding a new place to live, are some of the reasons why people remain together in spite of constant domestic violence.

On the other hand, non-Kazakhs are discriminated in many working areas. While visiting Kazakhstan, I have not really met many non-Kazakhs in police stations, airports, army, banks or official departments. Furthermore, it was quite evident that Kazakhs do nourish a special love for ‘uniforms’ and ‘leather briefcases’, symbols of power for them. Nevertheless, we still can meet some women in these job areas, though almost all of them Kazakhs.

The more astonishing thing, however, is that most students in the primary and secondary education are still taught in Russian, though it is more and more difficult to be accepted at the University if one does not speak and write well in Kazakh, what immediately discriminates non-Kazakh speaking citizens, who have to look for a place at a private university, where fees are almost as high as in Portugal. This is one of the reasons which explains the fact that the number of non-Kazakh students, especially girls, is constantly decreasing at institutions of high-level education.

An explanation for this paradoxical situation may be the fact that, when Russians began to settle in Kazakhstan during the 50s and 60s, in order to help the development of the Republic, many schools and universities were open. Russian was the teaching language, because there were not many Kazakh-speaking teachers and even the educated Kazakhs preferred the Russian language. As a result of this effort, the degree of literacy of the population in 1989 was of 98% (99% of the men and 96% of the women).

In spite of all our criticism towards the Soviet regime, the fact is that according to article 121 of its Constitution, all citizens were entitled to the right of instruction in schools in the native language. Even Lenin, in his article “Critical notes on the national question”, wrote that in Russia there were no reasons for any language to have special privileges over others<sup>3</sup>. And this was a fact. In the Armenian Republic, for instance, teaching was in Armenian at all levels of education. The reason why this was not the case in Kazakhstan was the lack of Kazakh-speaking teachers and the fact that, between the 50s and the 90s, the most part of the population was from other nationalities, what made of Russian an interethnic language.

Finally, though Article 14 of the Constitution of Kazakhstan states that “no one shall be subjected to any discrimination for reasons of origin, social and property status, occupation, sex, race, nationality, language, attitude towards religion, convictions, place of residence or any other circumstances”<sup>4</sup>, the fact is that there are already clear signs of discrimination in terms of nationality, sex, age and language, which are especially evident in the labour market, as explained above.

### **3.2 Language and religion**

Could Kazakhstan be facing today the end of religious tolerance and gender equality? It is not possible to answer this question and to analyse the influence of Islam in the country without speaking about some issues linked with the language itself.

According to a study on religious tolerance laid by Vanessa Liertz, published in the German *Cicero Magazin für politische Kultur*, in August 2004, Kazakhstan appears as a country where people are discriminated according to their religious beliefs. As far as I could understand from the interviews, there is still no serious reason to speak about religious intolerance. For example, in the city of Pavlodar, all main religions have their own temples (Muslims, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Jews and several Evangelical groups), and people are free to practice their own religion. According to data of the official site of Kazakhstan, the number of religious groups has increased approximately three times in the last ten years. There are currently, so they say, almost 2,300 religious organizations in the country, representing 46 different religious groups<sup>5</sup>.

The only significant difference is that the activity of the Mosque, and of Muslims in general, is much more important in social terms, that is, they have a larger number of schools, colleges, newspapers and foundations, which help their members economically and play a decisive role in the renaissance of religious traditions. This explains why they are much more conscious of their religious duties than any other group. The President of the Republic, Nursultan Nazarbaev, clearly understood this reality when he passed a law giving Kazakh Muslims the possibility of having up to four wives, if they have the economic power to maintain the same number of households. Considering that we are talking about a multi-religious and a multicultural country with secular power, this civil enactment dealing with religious matters and giving privileges to a certain religious group may have serious consequences in the future, as it can be understood by Muslims as a privilege, and as an official agreement



with their idea on women's role in society. This might become a first step to deeper changes to the detriment of gender equality.

From what has been said about the Kazakh language, it is easy to conclude that the present structure of the language is still fragile at both lexical and syntactic levels. There is an urgent need to create new terminology for specific areas like law, business, science and technology. Inês Oseki-Dépré, from the University of Aix-en-Provence, referred recently in a Conference on "Translation and Interculturalism", in Lisbon, that the renaissance of 'old' languages is quite problematic, in the sense that it is difficult to build up a written cultural capital to work upon. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Russian is still in use as far as business is concerned. But it is also one of the reasons why many important Kazakh academics, like e.g. Abduali Haidari, defend the re-introduction of the Latin alphabet, thus making it easier to borrow words from the Turkish language, which, of course, would enlarge the already strong influence of Turkey in the area. It is not a coincidence that one of the first foreign universities to be opened in Kazakhstan is a subsidiary of a Turkish University. Turkey is well aware that it is through language, a form of action that, according to Duranti, both presupposes and at the same time brings about ways of being in the world, that its power will become much stronger in Central Asia, bringing profound changes into society. In fact, Turkish Islamists consider language as an important vehicle for the transmission of their own ways of being in the world. Therefore, the question is whether Kazakhstan could be soon facing the end of multiculturalism, religious tolerance and gender equality, where language will become an instrument for the infiltration of fundamentalism in the country.

With the exodus from the country of many Russians, Germans and people from other nationalities and with the return of Kazakhs from Mongolia and Uzbekistan, the percentage of the Muslim population is now of 57%<sup>6</sup>. The introduction of the Latin alphabet, as defended by the academic Abduali Haidari<sup>7</sup>, will give the possibility to all Turkic-speaking countries in the world to get tight united and to Kazakhs the opportunity to surpass the feeling that they still depend on the Russian language. Last but not the least, it will oblige all citizens, including many Kazakhs, to speak in what was once the language of their ancestors. In 1994, a Conference of academics from all Turkic-speaking countries took place in Turkey, in order to introduce such changes, especially in the former Republics of the Soviet Union. In the last ten years, Azerbaijan,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, as well as Tartarstan have already taken decisive steps in order to change into the Latin alphabet<sup>8</sup>.

From all these academic discussions we could perhaps conclude that Kazakhstan is at a crossroads: free from Russian imperialism, Kazakhstan is perhaps about to become an easy prey for Turkey's 'imperialistic dream'. Akbar Ahmed, in his book about the Islam, affirms that we will be the witnesses of a great transformation in the countries of Central Asia (2001: 250), where Turkey will play a great role, as well as Iran and Pakistan, and this because in Central Asia, where many Turks have their ethnic roots, Turkey is seen as a respectable leader, as an example to follow. For many people, Turkey is the heir of the Ottoman Empire, to which these Central Asian countries were tightly linked, and where the Turkish 'self' finds its own historical identity in the 'other', receiving cultural inspiration from it.

As far as women are concerned, what could be then the impact of Turkey's influence in the region? To answer to this question, let us first look closer, but briefly, at the present situation in Turkey.

Though, politically speaking, Turkey has always tried to give the image of a secular state, the truth is that, since the 90s, we have been assisting to a strong Islamic revivalism. The *adab* is being carefully followed by many young people as a way to affirm the rediscovery of their Muslim identity. Many women are wearing the *hijab*, though, according to the information of a Turkish journalist, these are mainly poor women, who are paid to do so. The approach to Central Asian countries is supported by Islamic organizations all over the world. They give money to open new mosques and *madrassahs*, thus accelerating the rhythm of penetration of the Islam in the area. It is not astonishing, therefore, that Saudi Arabia was the first country to open a bank in Almata, and that all Central Asian Republics are already part of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

When I visited Kazakhstan, I have not seen a single woman wearing the *hijab*, but outside the cities, in quite small villages of the South, it is already possible to see it. On the other hand, and because women suffered the most with the 'perestroika' in terms of labour market, it is highly likely that, as in Turkey, they would not mind wearing the *hijab*, just in order to receive some money in exchange.

This process will be much easier if the alphabet changes into Latin, because it will make it possible to distribute by thousands books in Turkish, Uzbek or Kazakh

about the Islam, which will have an effective impact on people, since the languages are very similar<sup>9</sup>.

In order to understand the potential changes concerning gender equality in Kazakhstan, it is worth to have a look at the present situation in Uzbekistan.

### **3.2.1 The case of Uzbekistan**

In spite of all persecutions against Islamic fundamentalism for state and safety reasons, the influence of Islamic groups in Uzbekistan has not stopped to grow, since the Latin alphabet was introduced in this country in 1994<sup>10</sup>. An interesting fact to mention, as well, is that these groups raise money for their cause in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. According to Akbar Ahmed, Turkey, while “carrying the Koran in one hand and a personal computer in the other” (2001: 246), is the most interesting example of development for the intellectual population of Uzbekistan. As a matter of fact, the economy of the country is underdeveloped, though its subsoil is rich in gold and gas and the quality of its cotton is worldwide known. The medium salary does not reach USD 25 per month and the unemployment among young people, especially women, surpasses 50% in some regions of the country. Due to the difficult economic situation, it was easy for the Islamic Movement to grow and for fundamentalism to cross the borders of the country. The first bomb-woman in the history of Central Asia was a nineteen-year-old Uzbek girl. Her sister disappeared because of sharing the same ideas. They converted at the age of 17 to the Islam, learned Arab and the Koran, and they wore the *hijab*. Many young people, especially women, have been recruited by a group called Islamic Djihad, an organization supported by Pakistan. In August 2004, several terror human-bombs exploded in several parts of Taschkent. Islamic proselytizers from different Islamic countries have indeed found a fruitful soil for their ideas in Uzbekistan. The results are to be seen now. It took only ten years to change a peaceful country into a barrel of dynamite. Even Imam Gafurdschon Rasakov<sup>11</sup>, from the Great Mosque of Buchara, declares that the situation could become that of Afghanistan. The majority of these young people want a religious state and defend the introduction of the *shariah*.

But what could explain the fact that so many terrorists are women? The answer is not at all easy, though, if we think for a moment about the Chechen Muslim customs, we may probably find an answer. In fact, Chechens, as many other Muslim national groups, consider women as a possession of the husband or father and believe that they

should do what they are told by the male members of their family, though according to Akbar Ahmed this is a tribal, not a Muslim practice. Perhaps this is the main reason why so many human-bombs are women. Other reasons could be the high rate of unemployment among young women, the fact that they receive economic help from the organizations, or simply because they do believe fanatically in a fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran, something that is very difficult to confirm.

#### **4. The future: is there a field for the development of fundamentalism in Kazakhstan?**

On November 11th, the Russian Television Channel RTVi announced that Kazakh security forces had broken up a terrorist group in Kazakhstan with links to Al-Qaeda. Nine Kazakh citizens and four Uzbeks, as well as four Kazakh women allegedly trained to be suicide bombers were arrested. The so-called Mujahidin Group of Central Asia was linked to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a group with known Al-Qaeda ties. According to their information, the group managed to recruit 50 Uzbeks and 50 Kazakh citizens over the last two years. Weapons, large quantities of extremist propaganda and videotapes of addresses by Osama Bin-Laden were confiscated by the authorities.

Though in Article 5 of the Kazakh Constitution it is clearly stated that “activities of foreign religious associations on the territory of the Republic as well as appointment of heads of religious associations in the Republic by foreign religious centers shall be carried out in coordination with the respective state institutions of the Republic”<sup>12</sup>, the degree of unemployment and corruption, which was the subject of a special report of the Human Rights Watch on the deterioration of human rights and civil freedom in Kazakhstan<sup>13</sup>; a President in power since 1991; and the ‘family-tycoon’ structure of power, which in itself is already a curious interpretation of the Constitution, does not help stopping the underground work, infiltration and flourishing of fundamentalist Islamic groups in this country.

During my interviews, most part of Russian Kazakhs were of the opinion that the introduction of Kazakh as the only official state language in the country had opened the door for Islamic groups to work in the field. They consider that, behind the national and social differences, it is especially women who are the main present and future victims of discrimination at all levels and in every field of social and political life. As they say, to destroy acquired rights is much easier than to get them. As for Kazakh and

Tartar Muslims I have interviewed, they were more cautious about their statements. First of all, they consider Kazakhs to be quite different from Uzbeks, Afghans or Azerbaijanis. They were all of the opinion that the role of women in society will not suffer big changes, though they were all in favour of the law allowing Muslim men to have up to four women, a law they interpret as a kind of ‘help’ to women and to society in general. Nevertheless, some, especially women, were of the opinion that fundamentalism could become a problem not for their generation but for that of their children.

Teresa Mosquete, in her essay about “La Geografía de Género: Aportación a los Estudios”, is of the opinion that the changes caused by the end of the communist regime in countries like the USSR affected particularly women. According to this author, women in these new countries have more than anyone else to carry the heavy burden resulting from the quick and uncontrolled changes in the economic system, from the lack of state social and health support, from unemployment and from sexual abuse and exploitation. On the other hand, women have lost much of their political influence in society: for instance, in Azerbaijan, the percentage of women at Parliament was of 40% in 1985, and in 1995 their presence did barely surpass 6%. I could not find any exact data about the number of women at Parliament in Kazakhstan, but it is possible that it is slightly higher than in Azerbaijan.

As a matter of fact, in the Constitution of the USSR, whatever opinion we may have about the regime, it was clearly stated in Article 122 that:

Women in the USSR shall be accorded equal rights with men in economic, government, cultural, political and other public activities. These rights shall be ensured by women being accorded the same rights as men in work, remuneration, rest and leisure, social insurance and education, and by state protection of the interests of mother and child, state aid to mothers of large families and to unmarried mothers, maternity leave with full pay, and by provision of a large number of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.<sup>14</sup>

No Constitution of any of the new republics is really so clear and specific about women’s rights. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the role of women in the former USSR was far more important than it is today. And this is true for all the new countries, including Russia. Anyway, the more Kazakhstan tries, culturally and politically, to get some distance from Russia, the greater will be the probability of coming to disastrous results. There are no ‘pure’, ‘static’ cultures. Trying to go back in time can be

dangerous, if that means to impose a 'new' old language, as well as ancient buried traditions and customs. As a matter of fact, considering that Kazakhstan is a multicultural melting-pot, it will be very difficult to 'purify' their culture<sup>15</sup>. Paraphrasing Mia Couto, identity is a house furnished by us, but both the house and the furniture were often built by other people. Let us take an example from gastronomy. Many Kazakhs, when they eat 'galubtzi' they think it is a Russian or Kazakh dish, when indeed it is a Greek dish. But it is the way they cook this dish that makes it part of their culture. So why should someone just reject his/her inheritance when he/she can use it, introducing changes and thus creating his/her 'own' culture?

Unfortunately, many people believe that identity means the negation of others' identity. As Roger Portal states in his book about the Slavic nations, religion was never forbidden in Russia, what was forbidden was to proselytise one's beliefs (1968: 426-7). And proselytism is a characteristic that Muslims have in common with Christianity. The only difference is that, though Prof. Akbar Ahmed wants us to believe otherwise, Islam, either we speak about Sunnis or Shiites, is too much attached to an ideal 'static' image of its own culture and religion. Many Islamists believe that their mission is to change the relation of Western Countries towards Islam, by imposing their own *Weltanschauung* / *world view*, from the *sunnah* (daily practices associated with the Prophet) to the *adab* (Muslim costumes) or the *shariah* (the law based in the Koran), even if, for that purpose, they have to carry out the *jihad*, euphemistically designed by Akbar Ahmed as the spiritual fight against the Devil. It is not a coincidence that when Akbar Ahmed was visiting Uzbekistan some years ago, he regretted not having met camels, tents and men and women wearing traditional clothes (2001: 241). Would this really make a difference? It seems that for fundamentalists it does. But if he visited Uzbekistan today, he would finally meet women wearing the *hijab*.

It took only ten years for Uzbekistan to become a 'time bomb'. Kazakhstan could be the next step of the Turkish Islamic Dream of recovering its roots, of revisiting its origins and of getting vital space and oil as well.

## **5. Conclusion**

At the moment, major world companies are opening representations in Kazakhstan. There is an intensive increase in the number of joint ventures to implement projects of joint development. The tremendous natural resources of Kazakhstan make this region one of the most attractive objects of capital investment, among other

republics of the late Soviet Union. Probably, if Kazakhstan was not such a rich country in terms of oil, coal and iron production, not to speak of all other metals, from zinc to silver, which may be found in its subsoil, there would be no real danger coming from fundamentalist Islamic groups.

Most part of the oil production is in the hands of Kazakh-American joint-ventures (e.g. Chevron-Texaco, ExxonMobil) and it is being delivered to the international markets through the Black Sea (via Russia) and the Persian Gulf (via swaps with Iran).

I mention these facts because I do believe that if Kazakhstan was not such a rich country with such a small population, that is, and paraphrasing Chomsky, if Kazakhstan was but a big radish field, probably the problems connected with Islamic power in the country, as well as the degradation of the workers' social situation, especially that of women's, would not be so dramatic.

Kazakhstan had all the conditions to be the 'Finland' of Central Asia, but as DAWN (the Forum for Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) underlines, women have never been in such a difficult crossroads: on the one hand, the social and economic results of globalization mobilize regressive forces against women, and on the other hand, in the name of the opposition to Western hegemony, fundamentalist governments, struggling against globalization, do everything they can to attack women in their political and private rights and even to institutionalize violence against them (Chejter, 2002: 61).

Language is essential for the constitution of the social world, it is a set of cultural practices, a system of communication that allows representations of the social order, a set of symbolic resources that enter the constitution of the social fabric and the individual representation of actual worlds. Each language articulates and organizes the world differently. By imposing a 'brand new' old language, with a rich oral inheritance, but which did not follow the quick social and political development of the world, there are surely many concepts linked with the evolution of the modern world which are not reflected in the Kazakh language. On the contrary, the remnants of old traditional conservative representations of the world in this 'new' old language may in fact legitimate the reintroduction of conservative cultural constructions concerning women and their place and rights in society and facilitate the way to the revivalism of old Islamic customs. These customs will shake the interpsychological representations of the social order, the normal process of socialization and the cultural construction of the

‘self’, particularly as far as women are concerned. Women will be – or have already been – condemned to lose their ‘voice’ and their ‘space’ in society.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. data in [www.kazakhstan-gateway.kz/](http://www.kazakhstan-gateway.kz/).

<sup>2</sup> See the English version of the Constitution of Kazakhstan in [www.president.kz/articles/state/state](http://www.president.kz/articles/state/state)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. В. И. Ленин (1972), *Критический заметки по национальному вопросу*, Москва, Издательство Политической Литературы, p. 24-26.

<sup>4</sup> See n. 3 above.

<sup>5</sup> See n. 2 above.

<sup>6</sup> See article “Демографические изменения в Казахстане показывают что будущее страны - за казахским языком” ([www.kazakh.ru/news/articles](http://www.kazakh.ru/news/articles)).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. article by Ернур Аканбай (2004), “О преимуществах ‘латиницы’ - академик Абдули Хайдар”, in Казинформ ([www.kazakh.ru/news/articles](http://www.kazakh.ru/news/articles)).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Akbar S. Ahmed (2002), *O Islão*, Lisboa, Bertrand Editora, pp. 242-6.

<sup>10</sup> See above n. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Walter Mayr (2004), “Im Land der bartlosen Propheten”, *Der Spiegel*, n.º 33/2004, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> See n. 3 above.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the report “Kazakhstan – Human Rights Developments” in [www.hrw.org/wr2k/Eca-12.htm](http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/Eca-12.htm).

<sup>14</sup> See the English version of the Constitution of USSR, Moscow, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> According to Akbar Ahmed, there is already an Islamic Movement in Kazakhstan, the Alash, that believes that all Russian nationals, though Kazakh citizens, should return back to Russia. Cf. op. cit., p. 243.

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