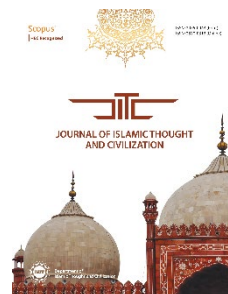
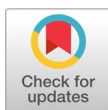


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Portable Qur'ānic Inscriptions in Kazakh Culture: From Daily Use to Museum and Library Collections

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Abstract

Studies of traditional Kazakh culture often portray their customs, rituals, and worldview as being closely linked with Islam. In these works, the elements of the Islamic faith are treated as a cultural layer adapted to the nomadic way of life. However, the specific ways in which Qur'ānic texts were applied in daily life of Kazakhs – particularly their material, apotropaic, and sacred functions – have not been thoroughly researched. Among the various influences on Kazakh folk art, Islam and its sacred text, the Qur'ān, occupy a particularly a significant role. The article examines material objects of traditional Kazakh culture which contain Qur'ānic text. These artefacts differ from other items also held in libraries and museums in Kazakhstan in their portability – that is, they were carried by their owners. A second distinctive is their connection to Islam. Thirdly, they are practical items which saw regular use and served a dual function, usually possessing an apotropaic feature. The first group of artifacts consists of miniature Qur'āns, and the second contains personal items, inscribed passages from the Qur'ān. Despite the Soviet Union's atheistic policy, these artifacts were preserved through that period and transferred to state institutions for safekeeping. In addition to the primary functions of these artifacts – educational, aesthetic, or military – this study identified an additional function of healing and protecting. Serving an apotropaic purpose, they combined every day and ritual significance. All the examined wearable items were made of durable materials suitable for constant use and adapted to the local nomadic culture.

Keywords: apotropaic purpose, Arabic, artifacts, Islamic culture, Kazakh culture, miniature Qur'ān, Qur'ānic Inscriptions,

Introduction

Examining Islam in the life of traditional Kazakh society solely through the lenses of Sharia norms and religious institutions fails to fully capture its historical and cultural complexity. In addition to these lenses, a richer understanding of how Islam was adopted and how religious practices were integrated into the daily life of nomads can be gained by studying the various forms in which the

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Qur'ān was transmitted and preserved across the geographical regions of modern Kazakhstan. Items found in library, museum, and private collections not only reveal the nature of Islam's spread across the Kazakh steppe but also shed light on its influence on cultural life.

The purpose of the research is the analysis of the characteristics of Qur'ānic inscription usage in previously portable cultural objects of the Kazakhs. The research objectives are:

- To provide an overview and classification of portable objects which contain either full or partial Qur'ānic texts
- To identify and analyse the religious inscriptions on these objects
- To describe the sacred and apotropaic functions of religious texts within traditional Kazakh culture.

The central focus of this study is miniature Qur'āns. On the one hand – in spite of their small size – these are texts which convey written information. On the other hand, they are religious objects functioning as talismans in a nomadic culture. Such objects must be analysed not only through the lens of religion or culture, but in their combined form. The first category covers all written sources, including manuscripts, whose primary value lies in their textual content, whereas the second category consists of material culture objects whose main functions were aesthetic, therapeutic, protective.¹

Providing a comprehensive literature review is challenging for a subject which has been scarcely studied. The topic of this research – namely, the rituals, attributes, and associated artifacts of Kazakh Islamic culture that survived the Soviet period's religious prohibitions, with a particular focus on portable objects such as miniature Qur'āns – has largely been overlooked.

Nevertheless, there are pioneers who must be mentioned who engaged with the intersection of Kazakh culture, history, Islam, and ethnography. The study of religion has also been advanced by the development of the academic disciplines of material culture studies and visual culture studies.² Therefore, Meyer et al. describe material religion as having a “threefold parentage – material culture studies, visual culture studies, and museums” – and emphasize that it is crucial to focus on the “lives of objects” and their relationships with users.³ McGuire discusses this aspect more broadly, seeing religion not merely as dogma or institution, but instead understanding it as a phenomenon shaped by social and cultural contexts, manifested through bodily and emotional practices (experiences); a perspective referred to as “lived religion” – in this case “lived Islam.”⁴ Orsi also adopts a comprehensive approach to lived religion, viewing it as a complex combination of people, texts, rituals, practices, and beliefs.⁵

According to one of the first scholars to examine the spread of Islam among the Kazakhs Ch.Valikhanov, the Kazakh people adopted Islam not as a complete system of Sharia law, but in combination with their traditional worldview and thus Islam developed in the nomadic environment

¹Figen Balamir, and Selman Yılmaz, “Religious Healing in the Modern World: Faith, Culture, and Social Dynamics,” *Religions* 16, no. 7 (2025): 883, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070883>

²Birgit Meyer et al., “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2010): 207–211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010>

³Meyer et al., “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” 207.

⁴Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?,” Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2003): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.t01-1-00170>

in a unique, syncretic manner. He also noted the coexistence of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs in the Kazakh worldview: "Islam has not yet become part of our flesh and blood... We are now in a period of dual faith in the steppe."⁶ Later, Bekmakhanov noted that "the nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakhs hindered the establishment of Islam in the steppe, as the Kazakhs had few mosques, madrasas, or other religious institutions, and Muslim preachers were therefore scarce."⁷ Thus, a form of Islam with a national character emerged, known as "folk Islam."

Privratsky, devoting an entire chapter to "Kazakh religion," cites various terms in addition to "Kazakh Islam," including "folk," "popular," "ritual," "doctrinal," "less than real Islam."⁸ Alkey Margulan noted that "Kazakh art inherited numerous traditions from the artistic culture of pastoral tribes, preserving them to the present day while creatively reinterpreting and enriching them with new motifs."⁹ Margulan conducted a detailed survey of the types and forms of ancient Kazakh folk crafts, drawing on materials from the collections of the Hermitage (St. Petersburg, Russia) and the state anthropological and ethnographic museums of Kazakhstan.

Khalel Argynbayev argued: "The Kazakh people are the direct heirs of an ancient culture that has long existed across the vast territory of the republic, and they are responsible for developing, reviving, and enriching this tradition. This process has been shaped by the culture of nomadic tribes and peoples who arrived in Kazakhstan from various regions, as well as by the cultures of the peoples of Southern Siberia, Central Asia, and Russia. Ultimately, the local ancient culture absorbed waves of external cultural elements and was continuously refined and modernized."¹⁰ According to Argynbayev, throughout its entire existence, ancient Kazakh culture not only absorbed various ethnocultural influences in their original form but also adapted them to fit its cultural character. In this context, Islam and the written tradition, which arrived in the steppe in the eighth century, can be understood as one of the cultural layers present in the region.

Alongside the new religion, its writing system was gradually integrated into traditional Kazakh society. Islam and its written elements, continuously interacting with local customs, acquired distinct characteristics in material culture. In his study *The History of Kazakh Culture*, Chinese historian and scholar Su Bihai examines the role of Islam in the formation of Kazakh culture within a broad historical context. He also confirms that, during its spread across the Kazakh steppe, Islam developed in parallel with local traditions and ancient beliefs.¹¹

In the chapters of their study devoted to the medieval period, Sergei Klyashtorny and Tursun Sultanov examine the transformations in the religious landscape of what is now Kazakhstan. The authors argue that, as a result of political and cultural contact with Turkic, Persian, and Arab centres, the religious environment of the steppes underwent significant changes, namely that traditional shamanic and Tengrian practices gradually gave way to the influence of Islam and Islamic

⁶Chokan Valikhanov, "O musul'manstve v stepi" [On Islam in the Steppe], in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Almaty: Alatau, 2018), 84.

⁷Ermukhan Bekmakhanov, *Kazakhstan v 20–40 gody XIX veka* [Kazakhstan in the 1820s-1840s] (Almaty: Kazakh University, 1992), 96.

⁸Bruce Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315028293>

⁹Alkey Kh. Margulan, *Kazakhskoye narodnoe prikladnoe iskusstvo* [Kazakh Folk Applied Art] (Alma-Ata: Oner, 1986), 55.

¹⁰Khalel Argynbayev, *Qazaq xalqynyñ qolöneri* [The Art of the Kazakh People] (Almaty: Oner, 1987), 5.

¹¹Bihai Su, *Qazaq madenietinin tarihy* [History of Kazakh Culture] (Almaty: Daur-Kitap, 2013).

literature.¹²

Hereby, Islam in the Kazakh steppe is the synthesis of all historical, religious, cultural, social, and demographic processes and their outcomes that the Kazakh steppe has faced throughout its history. It is also important to note that nearly all of the works mentioned above were published during the Soviet era (1922-1991), a period marked by the prohibition of religion, including Islam, and the promotion of atheism.¹³ This context is detailed in post-Soviet Kazakhstani studies, particularly those by Nazira Nurtazina: “Throughout the Soviet era religion was removed from all spheres of national life; with regard to the scholarly study of Islam in the history of Kazakhstan, there existed an ideological taboo. Traces of Islam and the influence of Arab-Persian elements were systematically removed from the literary, folkloric, and historical-ethnographic heritage. In the official historical scholarship of Soviet Kazakhstan, the thesis of ‘religious syncretism’ and ‘inferior Islam’ among the Kazakh nomads prevailed.”¹⁴ However, after gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan began striving for a cultural revival, and one of the steps taken was the revival of religion with the development of a localized form of religious practice or “Islamic revival with elements of culture.”¹⁵ It was first and foremost expressed through the exhibition of sacred items that had been carefully safeguarded.¹⁶

2. Methodology

The initial phase of research focused on miniature Qur'āns held in the rare books and manuscripts collections of the Central Scientific Library and the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan, both located in southeastern Kazakhstan in Almaty. The next selection of miniature Qur'āns were found in the National Academic Library in the current capital, Astana, in north-central Kazakhstan. Further research revealed that Islamic religious texts can be found not only in the Qur'āns themselves but also on cultural artifacts, particularly those regularly worn and carried, including helmets,¹⁷ jewellery.¹⁸ Many such artifacts were found using Kazakhstan's virtual museum

¹²Sergey G. Klyashtorny, and Tursun I. Sultanov, *Kazakhstan. Letopis' trekh tysyacheletii* [Kazakhstan. Chronicle of Three Millennia] (Almaty: Rauan, 1992), 161.

¹³Talgat Zholdassuly, “A Practice Against Islam in the Soviet Kazakhstan: The League of Militant Atheists,” *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, no. 96 (2020): 531–556, <https://doi.org/10.34189/hbv.96.024>.

¹⁴Nazira D. Nurtazina, “Islam in the History of Kazakhstan: New Approaches and Findings from 30 Years of Independence (1991–2021),” *Journal of History* 102, no. 3 (2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.26577/JH.2021.v102.i3.01>.

¹⁵Anar Mustafayeva, Yktyyar Paltore, Meruyert Pernekulova, and Meirim Issakhanova, “Islamic Higher Education as a Part of Kazakhs' Cultural Revival,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (2023): 103–127, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1515>; Alisher K. Muminov, “Kazakh Khojas,” *Shygys*, no. 1 (2004): 229; Anar Mustafayeva, Shynar Kaliyeva, Rashid Mukhitdinov, and Yktyyar Paltore, “The Formation and Evolution of Islamic Studies Educational Program in Kazakhstan through the Integration of Local Culture and Secular Principles,” *Ulumuna* 29, no. 1 (2025): 545, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v29i1.1458>.

¹⁶Dilafroz Kurbanova, Zukhra Dosmetova, Usmon Karabaev, Eshmamat Khaitov, Noila Nabieva, and Gulkhayo Abdullaeva, “Museum Artifacts as Linguistic Archives: Exploring Linguistic Insights from Timurid Artifacts,” *Jurnal Arbitrer* 12, no. 4 (2025): 628–647, <https://doi.org/10.25077/ar.12.4.628-647.2025>

¹⁷Otkirbay M. Agatay et al., “Battle Helmets in Kazakh Heroic Epics,” *Bylye Gody* 20, no. 4 (2025): 1625–1636, <https://doi.org/10.13187/bg.2025.4.1625>.

¹⁸Svetlana V. Suslova and Larisa N. Donina, “Yuvelirnye ukrasheniya volgo-uralskikh tatar v kontekste etnokulturnykh traditsii Evrazii: itogi etnologo-tehnologicheskogo issledovaniya” [Jewelry of the Volga-Ural Tatars in the Context of the Ethnocultural Traditions of Eurasia: Results

portal, <https://e-museum.kz>, which is continuously updated with new materials. Using this e-museum, it was possible to discover which museums house artifacts meeting the criteria for this study: portability (the items could be carried or worn), Qur'ānic¹⁹ inscriptions,²⁰ practicality or cultural utility (they were used by their owners on a regular basis), functionality (they most likely served a dual function, with the secondary function providing an apotropaic feature), and currently in a state repository, such as library and museum collections.

The second stage began with drafting formal letters to the administration of museums²¹ located outside of Almaty, specifically the National Academic Library and local history museums in the cities of *Semey* (east), *Petropavl* (north), and *Oral* (west), to request photographs for subsequent publication. After obtaining approval from the museum administrations, negotiations were conducted with the curators, who then photographed and sent the artifacts' images. The materials from Almaty examined in this study are housed in the Central Scientific Library, the National Library, and the National Central Museum. These items were obtained during a personal visit by the first author. Thus, the material used for this research has been collected from across the country and in addition to miniature Qur'āns, includes some artifacts used for educational, aesthetic, and military purposes.

The three key methods employed in this study include first, artifact analysis, specifically of items bearing religious (Islamic) symbols, which allows for a functional understanding of the artifacts, including their utilitarian or decorative roles, primary and secondary functions, and their relationship to religion in theory versus lived religion or practice. Additionally, a cultural-anthropological analysis is applied to reveal the typology of the users and patterns of use – that is, to answer the questions of by whom, how, and for what purpose – and to situate the artifacts within their broader cultural context. Finally, an iconographic analysis focuses on the inscriptions themselves and their meaning.

3. Results

The practice of carrying the sacred text reinforces its symbolic and ritual significance and underscores the influence of faith on the protective power of the Qur'ān. In traditional Kazakh society, a special oath ritual was observed in cases of unjust accusations or slander, drawing on the sacred authority of the Qur'ān. During this ritual, a person seeking to prove their innocence would hold the Holy Qur'ān in their hand and recite the oath: “*If I am guilty of this, may the Qur'ān curse me*”. This custom, known as ‘Qur'ān ustau’ in Kazakh (literally ‘holding the Qur'ān’), was regarded as the highest form of affirmation of the truthfulness of a person’s words. The invocation of the Qur'ān in this context reflected beliefs in its sacred power and served both a moral and religious guarantee of the sincerity of the oath before the Almighty.²² The practice of taking such an oath could be both informal and formally recognized, as it might be conducted as a ceremonial act. In judicial

of an Ethnological and Technological Study], *Narody i religii Evrazii* 30, no. 2 (2025): 40–58, [https://doi.org/10.14258/nreur\(2025\)2-02](https://doi.org/10.14258/nreur(2025)2-02)

¹⁹Sheila S. Blair, “Inscribing God’s Word: Qur’ānic Texts on Architecture, Objects, and Other Solid Supports,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 244, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.013.15>.

²⁰Sheila Blair, and Jonathan Bloom, “Inscriptions in Art and Architecture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 163–178, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521831601.009>.

²¹Abay Satubaldin, and Kunikey Sakhiyeva, “The Museum System of Modern Kazakhstan: Classification and Typology of Museums,” *Muzeológia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo* 9, no. 2 (2021): 79–89, <https://doi.org/10.46284/mkd.2021.9.2.5>.

²²Seit Kenzheakhmetuly, *Kazakh Customs and Traditions* (Almaty: Atamura, 2013), 235.

contexts, various ritual gestures were employed to emphasize the sacredness of the oath with the holy text, including bowing one's head before the Qur'ān, placing one's hand on the book, touching it with one's forehead and kissing it, drinking water over which the Qur'ān had been recited, leaping from a specially dug grave or pit while holding the Qur'ān, and eating bread.

Miniature copies of the Qur'ān are preserved today in the rare collections of libraries and museums in Kazakhstan, as well as in private collections. Historically, these miniature Qur'āns existed alongside larger copies as objects of personal religious practice. They were primarily brought by pilgrims from abroad and, like other Islamic books, were maintained as sacred texts and even family talismans, passed down from generation to generation. Myrvold and Miller, emphasizing the apotropaic functions of religious books in miniature form, note their practicality for travel: "collectors have emphasized the practical function of texts that take up little space and can easily travel, lest we think that they exist only for humans' fascination with and appreciation for the craftsmanship required to produce tiny books."²³

Miniature versions of the Qur'ān were commonly produced in India, Iraq, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire. They were made primarily in rectangular – though occasionally hexagonal or octagonal – forms, with leather or paper covers. Metal cases were specially crafted for their protection and ease of transport. For use as amulets, artisans created cases of silver and gold, often adorned with precious stones. The presence of a magnifying glass with each miniature Qur'ān demonstrates their practical significance: if able to read, the owner of a talismanic Qur'ān could consult the sacred text, for example, to recall a particular *surah*.

From the late nineteenth century on, lithograph printing increased the popularity of miniature Qur'āns, particularly in military contexts, as standard-bearers (*sancakdar*) were known to attach mini-Qur'āns to banners. In the early twentieth century, the Scottish publisher David Bryce (1845-1923), who specialized in miniature books, began mass-producing and selling mini-Mushafs, which subsequently entered military use and were supplied to Muslim soldiers of Indian origin in the British Army during World War I.²⁴ As Myrvold and Johansson note, "During the First World War Muslim soldiers from India made up a significant part of the British forces. Attempts to satisfy the soldiers' religious needs became a British strategy to maintain military discipline among the soldiers in Europe and to avoid public unease and discontent in colonial India. Based on archival material, their article examines how the British tried to identify the religious needs of the Indian soldiers and how letters written by Muslim soldiers emphasized the importance of the Qur'ān."²⁵ Following the success of Bryce's miniature Qur'āns, the Czech publisher Hans Steinbrener also produced a similar mini-Qur'ān, differing only slightly in size.

Regarding the use of the Qur'ān, including its miniature form, Nazira Nurtazina concludes, "By Kazakh batyrs during warfare miniature copies of the Muslim Holy Book, highly sought after on the steppe, were carried up one's sleeve in specially designed inner pockets. Special talismans and amulets, known as '*boytumar*', containing pieces of paper inscribed with Qur'ānic āyat, were an

²³Kristina Myrvold and Dorina M. Parmenter, "Religious Miniature Books: Introduction and Overview". *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 9, no. 2-3 (2019): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1558/post.37754.93>

²⁴Myrvold, and Parmenter, "Religious Miniature Books," 99-100; Zahra Kazani, "Between the Foreign and the Familiar: A Qur'an Manuscript and Its Later English Annotations at the East India Company," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 11, no. 3 (2020): 373-409, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1878464X-01103004>

²⁵Kristina Myrvold, and Anna Johansson, "Miniature Qurans in the First World War: Religious Comforts for Indian Muslim Soldiers," *Postscripts, The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 9, no. 2-3 (2019): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1558/post.35862>.

essential component of Kazakh military attire.”²⁶ This account is fully supported by the physical condition of the cases for miniature Qur'āns, which indicate their frequent contact with clothing – a point also emphasized by Heather Coffey, who highlights their ‘textual intimacy’, ‘miniaturization’, and ‘amuletic capacity’, the latter associated with the presence of one or more stones on the cases.²⁷

4.1. The Central Scientific Library

The Central Scientific Library houses a valuable collection of miniature Qur'āns (see Figure 1). The following items were acquired for the library's manuscript collection over the years:

- A Qur'ān measuring 2×2.8 cm; year and place of publication unknown; purchased on September 5, 1967 for 15 rubbles. Inventory number 8289. It is housed in a metal case decorated with semi-precious stones. The case features a hole for a chain, it was designed to be worn as an amulet.
- A Qur'ān measuring 2×3.3 cm, bound in red leather decorated with gold ornamentation. Lithograph, printed in Istanbul by the Saadat (سعادات) publishing house. Its cover resembles miniature Qur'ān produced by David Bryce and Hans Steinbrener. Inventory number 6040; purchased on 4 October 1960 from a second-hand bookstore for 250 rubbles. 819 pages.
- A Qur'ān measuring 2×2.8 cm. Inventory number 469; purchased on 25 January 1947 for 25 rubbles. Likely printed in Kazan. 609 pages. One page is in the Tatar language written in Arabic script, stating “This Holy Qur'ān was printed in 1323 (h. – authors) with funds provided by Muhammad Alim Maksudov.”

The lack of reliable information regarding these artifacts' owners, how they were used, or even the time and circumstances under which they entered the rare book collection, while nevertheless being housed in a specialized collection of rare books and manuscripts, attests to their high cultural and sacred value. This also indirectly reflects the reverent attitude of their former owners toward the sacred text.



Figure 1. The Collection of Miniature Qur'āns at the Central Scientific Library

²⁶Nazira D. Nurtazina, *Islam i genezis kazakhskoi musul'manskoitraditsii* [Islam and the Genesis of the Kazakh Muslim Tradition] (Astana: Muftiyat, 2024), 367.

²⁷Heather Coffey, “Between Amulet and Devotion: Islamic Miniature Books in the Lilly Library,” in the *Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Collections*, ed. Christiane J. Gruber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307j.ctt2005ssv>.

The collection of miniature Qur'āns at the National Library of Kazakhstan (see Figure 2)

- A Qur'ān measuring 2.5×3.5 cm. Inventory number 14669. A photocopy of a handwritten Qur'ān transcribed by Hafiz Osman Efendi 1094/1683. Istanbul, early 20th century. Purchased on 20 January 1988 for 100 rubbles. Housed in a box with a small magnifying glass. Every word and letter were verified and stamped by reciters and *hafiz* to confirm its accuracy.
- A Qur'ān measuring 2.5×3.5 cm. Inventory number 16796. Istanbul, 1890. In perfect condition and housed in a small metal case. Acquired by the collection on January 20 1988.
- A Qur'ān and prayers, measuring 2.8×2 cm. No catalogue number. Istanbul: Adion Turkan Publishing House, early 20th century. Housed in a very small silver box; pages are incomplete.
- A Qur'ān, measuring 3.8×2.5 cm. Inventory number 16791. Cairo: Amiriya Publishing House, 1348/1929. Printed and edited by Sheikh Muhammad bin Ali bin Khalaf al-Hussein. Housed in a red case. Acquired on 20 January 1988 for 75 rubbles.
- A Qur'ān, measuring 3.8×2.5 cm. Inventory number 16792. Cairo: Amiriya Publishing House, 1348/1929. Housed in a red case. Acquired on 20 January 1988 for 75 rubbles.



Figure 2. The Collection of Miniature Qur'āns at the National Library of Kazakhstan

4.2. National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan

- A Qur'ān, octagonal (see Figure 3), measuring 6×5 cm, with each side 2.5 cm. Inventory number G2023/786. 604 pages. Year and place of publication unknown; experts date it to the early 20th century. Lithographic edition. Some pages are damaged; condition: fair.
- A Qur'ān, measuring 2.5×1.8 cm. Inventory number G2025/785. Year and place of publication unknown. Lithographic edition. Some pages are missing, with the last pages are glued together.
- A Qur'ān, measuring 3×2 cm. Inventory number G.2023/784. Year and place of publication unknown. Lithographic edition. Condition: fair.



Figure 3. An Octagonal Miniature Qur'ān at the National Academic Library

4.3. West Kazakhstan Regional Museum of History and Local Lore

Another miniature Qur'ān, housed in a silver case featuring a small magnifying glass (see Figure 4). The case includes a hole for attachment to a chain. Donated in 1978 by Bibi Dzharmukhanova, who reported that her great-grandfather brought it back from a pilgrimage to Mecca in the 19th century. Inventory number 3817.



Figure 4. A Miniature Qur'ān (West Kazakhstan)

In order to classify a Qur'ān as “miniature” in size, the authors of this study follow the definition proposed by Anne Bromer and Julian Edison: “if a book can fit roughly in the palm of a hand it is a miniature.”²⁸ This study also has taken into consideration other portable objects bearing Qur'ānic inscriptions, some which consist solely of inscriptions and others which had non-religious or dual functions.²⁹

Islam prohibits the use of various objects as talismans or amulets; Schaefer notes a single exception: “The only way that Islamic magic could be practiced... was by invoking the word of Allah. This was taken to mean that only when talismans contained *āyāt* [verses], or *sūrāhs* [chapters], from

²⁸Anne C. Bromer, and Julian I. Edison, *Miniature Books: 4 000 Years of Tiny Treasures* (New York: Henry N. Abrams in Association with The Grolier Club, 2007), 51.

²⁹François Déroche, and Claire Juvin, “Introduction,” *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26666286-12340037>.

the Qur'ān could they call forth the power necessary to achieve the effect desired. Exactly how much Qur'ānic text is necessary to make an amulet “valid” is unclear but the examples we have at hand indicate that, at a minimum, at least one *āya* or two must be included”.³⁰

Kiyanrad, citing *ḥadīths*, also permits the wearing of such amulets: “According to the *ḥadīths*, only Qur'ānic – that is, amulets with Qur'ānic citations (and, for special purposes, such as protection against serpent bites or the evil eye) – were considered permissible; amulets bearing non-Qur'ānic texts or iconography presumably were viewed with suspicion, at least by certain religious authorities.”³¹ Nieber discusses the healing function of the Qur'ānic text.³² Alternately, Hamed argues that an object containing text from the Qur'ān is not necessarily associated with a protective function: “Not every papyrus (or paper, or other piece of material) that contains Qur'ānic verses was necessarily meant to be a magical text. Most scholars who came across pieces of material with some Qur'ānic text or other (Islamic) religious content marked the pieces as ‘magical’ and moved on to topics of interest to them that mostly did not cover the field of magical documents in any way.”³³ Keane also acknowledges that objects may change from their original function over time when placed in new contexts; the purpose intended by the original owner may differ from that of a subsequent owner, and even the creator's intention may diverge from that of the user.³⁴

Qur'ānic texts found their everyday and ritual uses engaging in a wide variety of life events, including the birth of a child, circumcision, marriage (*nikah*), embarking on a long journey, entering battle, treating the sick, and burying the deceased, all of which made extensive use of Islamic symbols and attributes. Among these, a particular emphasis was placed on the apotropaic (protective) function of the Qur'ānic text. Inscribed artifacts could take many forms, as outlined by Déroche and Juvin, “the spectrum of inscribed objects: everyday objects of common use, precious and collectable objects, furniture objects, utilitarian objects, instruments of action or objects of contemplation and meditation.”³⁵ One noteworthy Kazakh jewellery item is the *tumar* (amulet) which is typically worn around the neck. It is crafted from silver in a cylindrical or triangular shape and attached to an ornamental chain (see Figure 5). *Tumars* are hollow inside, with a prayer (*du'ā*) or Qur'ānic verse (*āyat*) written on paper placed within. Among illiterate people the *tumar* was believed to protect the wearer from misfortune, impurities, and the evil eye, and thus it originally served dual purposes: decorative and protective. Today, the *tumar* remains an integral part of the Kazakh national costume, serving as a decorative object rather than as a *talisman*.³⁶

³⁰Karl. R. Schaefer, “The Material Nature of Block Printed Amulets: What Makes Them Amulets?” in *Amulets and Talismans of the Middle East and North Africa in Context*. (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 188, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471481_009.

³¹Sarah Kiyanrad, “Sasanian Amulet Practices and their Survival in Islamic Iran and Beyond”. *Der Islam* 95, no. 1 (2018): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2018-0003>.

³²Hanna Nieber, “Authority with Textual Materials – Power of the Written Qur'an,” *Material Religion* 20, no. 1 (2024): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2024.2303905>.

³³Ursula Hamed, “Arabic Magical Texts in Original Documents: A Papyrologist Answers Five Questions You Always Wanted to Ask” in *Amulets and Talismans of the Middle East and North Africa in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2022): 220, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471481_010%20211-229.

³⁴Webb Keane, “The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (2008): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00496.x>.

³⁵Déroche and Juvin, “Introduction”, 1–2.

³⁶Argynbayev, *Qazaq xalqynyñ qolõneri*, 64.



Figure 5. *Tumars* (amulets) (National Central Museum KP26729/10, Regional Museum of Local History of the City of Semey CKM1114)

4.4. National Central Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan

The National Central Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in addition to the aforementioned *tumars*, houses other rare artifacts of significant usefulness for studying the function of the Qur'ān in a nomadic environment. Zhasulan Beltanov, a research fellow at the museum, analysed the Arabic inscriptions found on ancient relics in the museum's collection.³⁷ Beginning by organizing them along thematic and chronological lines, he then identifies the distinctive features of ancient artifacts bearing Arabic inscriptions, made from various materials, including bone, wood, and iron, and highlights their similarities in content and context. Artifacts from the museum's collection include wooden amulet plaques (four items), educational materials for learning Arabic in mosques and madrasas – specifically horse scapulae inscribed with the Arabic alphabet (two items) – as well as weapons, such as a sword and an axe (in Kazakh: *aibalta*) (see Figure 6). Myrvold and Parmenter note that a variety of materials have been used for writing, including palm leaves, bones, wood, silk, and even nutshells.³⁸ In Kazakh culture, in addition to metals,³⁹ animal bones were frequently used not only for writing but for making musical instruments (such as whistles), handicraft tools (such as knitting needles), children's toys, and other utilitarian objects. As Beltanov notes, the wooden amulet molds likely functioned as seal amulets: the inscriptions on them are written in mirror image, indicating that they could only be read with the aid of a mirror. The texts inscribed on the amulets include *āyat* from the Qur'ān, the names of prophets, righteous caliphs, saints, and angels, as well as prayers for healing from illness. The belief that such texts possessed sacred power to protect from disease and various forms of evil was common among the Turkic peoples.⁴⁰

³⁷Zhasulan Beltanov, “Arabographic Epigraphic Data on Old Relics (Based on the Materials of the CSM of the RK),” *History of the Homeland* 99, no. 3 (2022): 5–18, https://doi.org/10.51943/1814-6961_2022_3_5.

³⁸Myrvold, and Parmenter, “Religious Miniature Books: Introduction and Overview. Postscripts.”

³⁹Ilaria Calgaro, Antonina Sergeevna Yermolayeva, and Miljana Radivojević, “In the Heat of the Furnaces: 300 Years of Metalmaking at Bronze Age Taldysai, Central Kazakhstan,” *Antiquity* (2026): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10390>

⁴⁰Beltanov, “History of the Homeland / Marabographic Epigraphic Data on Old Relics”



Figure 6. A Seal, a Horse Scapula, a Sword and an Axe

4.5. Regional Museum of Local History of the City of Semey

A bracelet (*bilezik*) is a traditional piece of jewellery of Kazakh women, made from silver and gold. Bracelets were decorated with precious stones and national patterns, sometimes featuring an image of a totem animal or beast. In everyday life, they served a cultural and social function. This element of national dress was worn by young girls for protection from the evil eye, and by middle-aged and elderly women for healing purposes. The patterns conveyed information about the wearer's status, such as age, origin, and gender. Under the influence of Islam, Arabic inscriptions began to be applied to bracelets (see Figure 7) to enhance their sacred meaning. These could include verses, religious formulas, or even the person's name. The jewellery was then passed down as a significant heirloom from generation to generation.



Figure 7. A Bracelet. CKM 1114

4.6. North Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History

Since 1930, the museum has housed a helmet (see Figure 8), the origin of which remains unknown. The local historians believe that the given artifact was made specifically for a tall person, as its diameter is 22 cm, corresponding to a head size of 66. The gilded helmet bears an Arabic inscription with the *āyat al-Kursi* from Surah *Al-Baqarah*, along with marks from bladed weapons and restoration. These data demonstrate its extensive use, confirming its apotropaic and military function. According to historian Leonid Bobrov, the artifact dates to the late 17th to early 18th centuries and belonged to a high-status warrior⁴¹ from Mavarannahr (Transoxiana), Eastern Turkestan, or cities near the Syrdarya River.



Figure 8. A Helmet. North Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History. Of. 455

4.7. West Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History

A helmet (see Figure 9) with the 100th surah from the Qur'ān al-Adiyat from the Zhangir Khan Historical and Ethnographic Museum in the West Kazakhstan Region collection was donated for safekeeping by Yestai Daubayev in 2008. The helmet is 28 cm tall, and there is a protective mesh. The artifact is relatively well preserved; the inscription is clearly legible, and as a piece of military armour, it has been under-researched.

⁴¹Leonid A. Bobrov and Daniyar Ismailov, "A Central Asian Helmet from the Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum," *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 47, no. 1 (2019): 113–118, <https://doi.org/10.17746/1563-0110.2019.47.1.113-118>.



Figure 9. A Helmet. West Kazakhstan Regional Museum of Local History

5. Discussion

The library and museum objects studied, containing Qur'ānic inscriptions and now considered cultural relics, highlight their value to Kazakh society, which has long gone beyond the bounds of religious rituals. Museum exhibits and items from private collections reveal the diverse roles which religious texts played in steppe history, from their widespread use in rituals to their apotropaic and sacred functions in daily life. This diversity reflects a form of Islamic practice comprehensively adapted to a nomadic way of life. The presence of Qur'ānic *āyat* and prayers on a wide range of materials provides a valuable source for understanding the practical dimensions of Islam, or “lived Islam,” as it spread across the Kazakh steppe.

Miniature Qur'āns in printed format appeared relatively late. As early as the fifteenth century the Ottoman Empire prohibited the printing of the Holy Book, making handwritten manuscripts the exclusive form of replication.⁴² Therefore, of the Qur'āns examined in this study, the earliest printed copies – mainly using lithography – appeared only in the late 19th century in the Ottoman Empire. Initially Istanbul is identifiable as the primary source, with Cairo and India subsequently following.

With the arrival of Islam among the nomadic population, both Kazakh society and its art changed, particularly through the influence of Arabic calligraphy, which is primarily associated with verses from the Qur'ān and subsequently replaced some traditional designs. Regularly used suras of the Qur'ān began to gain additional protective and healing content. For the nomadic Kazakhs, the text of the Qur'ān was associated with religious practice, as well as with the function of protection and healing in everyday life as an apotropaic object. The amulet-case, still worn today, called a *tumar* in Kazakh, discussed in the Results section (see Figure 5), is one striking example of how local

⁴²Fred Leemhuis, “From Palm Leaves to the Internet,” in the *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 151.

society syncretizes the Qur'ānic text into its culture. Ultimately, Kazakh society has adopted a rather syncretic model of Islam by adapting elements of classical Islam to Kazakh traditions, despite the abolition or modification of some of them. Blair notes, "As with monumental inscriptions, Arabic was the major language used for inscriptions on objects made in the Islamic lands"⁴³ and Persian, Turkic were the minor languages.⁴⁴ Among the four graphic systems adopted by the Kazakh language was Arabic (*tote zhazu*), adapted to Kazakh phonetics and still used by ethnic Kazakhs in China. However, the Qur'ānic inscriptions were always written in their original language – Arabic, which was entirely natural and justified.

Among the artefacts once widely used in Kazakh culture, objects with Qur'ānic inscriptions especially stand out, demonstrating the significance of the Muslim religion in society. The presence of Arabic texts on a variety of household items reflects not only the steppe inhabitants' attitude toward Islam but also, to some extent, their level of religious devotion. Despite official adoption of Islam, the dissemination of the Qur'ān among the population was closely tied to proficiency in Arabic and overall religious literacy. Although the Arabic script was official and common, the Arabic language was extraneous for Kazakhs from phonetical, lexical, and grammatical perspectives; therefore, for wearable objects of the local culture, the possible shortest text was widely used – *āya* from Surah al-Baqarah, short surahs of the Qur'ān (*al-Fatiha*, *al-Ikhlās*, *al-Falaq*, *an-Nas*), beautiful names of Allah, and formulas (*basmala*, *hamdala*, *shahada*). Even without being able to read the text on a wearable, its wearer believed in the healing and protective properties of its contents.

Sacred inscriptions first appeared on mosques; then, with the spread of the religion, Kazakhs began to use them more frequently in daily practice, literally from birth to death. For example, a *tumar* with a surah from the Qur'ān was tied to the bow of a child's cradle, and after death, at least the *basmala* and *shahada* were carved on a person's tombstone. The nomadic lifestyle precluded the possibility of visiting a regular mosque; therefore, it is possible that nomadic Kazakhs 'carried' and 'kept' all religious practices with them, thus syncretizing Islamic and Kazakh nomadic practices, which found application in wearable items bearing Islamic inscriptions. In this context, the concepts such as everyday 'lived Islam' or 'material religion' allow us to analyse the use of Qur'ānic *āyat* and prayers in Kazakh society not merely as folkloric or ethnographic data, but as evidence of Islam practiced in daily life through wearing and carrying sacred objects. As Déroche and Juvin emphasize, it is portability of these objects – the Qur'ān, a *tumar*, a bracelet – that links them to social practices and highlights the functional and protective role of the sacred text.⁴⁵

Islam developed a distinctive way on the Kazakh steppe. Given the nomadic lifestyle, religious literacy and the study of Arabic did not immediately become widespread. As a result, in everyday life, it became common to use individual *surahs* and *āyat* of the Qur'ān in written form, rather than reading or memorizing full texts. Throughout the history of Islam, the sacred text has been disseminated in various forms depending on the context. It is important to note the full text of the Qur'ān was not accessible to every inhabitant of the steppe, regardless of location. Manuscripts and books were rare in the nomadic way of life, and Islamic educational centres were far away. Consequently, the most convenient and accessible means of disseminating the religious texts were short surahs, individual *āyat*, prayer books, collections, or handwritten sheets, often displayed within the nomad's dwelling. Among the various forms of Qur'ānic texts circulating throughout the Kazakh

⁴³Sheila S. Blair, "Islamic Inscriptions". (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrq3p>

⁴⁴A. C. S. Peacock, "The Rise of New Epigraphic Languages in the Medieval Islamic East: The Interplay of Persian, Turkish and Arabic on Inscriptions," in *Inscriptions of the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Bernard O'Kane, A. C. S. Peacock, and Mark Muehlhaeusler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 283–323, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474489461-017>.

⁴⁵Déroche and Juvin, "Introduction," 2.

people, miniature Qur'āns and amulet Qur'āns (*tumar*) are of particular interest.

5.1. Conclusion

Islam and its texts occupied a special place in the daily lives of Kazakh people, fulfilling important functions in various spheres. The use of the sacred meaning of the Qur'ān in everyday life indicates a more practical than dogmatic understanding of it. Beyond its fundamental religious significance, the Qur'ān held great power and significance for nomadic people, providing protection and blessing, serving as a reference point for moral norms. The place of religious texts in the cultural life of Kazakh people is determined by their universality, simultaneously reflecting spiritual values, worldview, customs, and traditions. Islam did not change the historical and cultural traditions of the people; nor did it hinder their preservation and development. On the contrary, it enriched and deepened local culture with new forms, harmoniously combining Sharī'a norms with ancient customs.

With the arrival of Islam, centuries-old formal beliefs acquired new content and meaning, expanding the spiritual world of the nomadic Kazakh. So, in the Kazakh steppe, Islam not only adapted to local culture, but also contributed to the emergence and strengthening of its own regional concept. With the adoption of Islam, the Kazakh people underwent a deep process of self-identification, and new art objects emerged in ethnography, reflecting the religious worldview and transmitting it to future generations.

The examined materials have demonstrated that the museum collections and library funds of the Republic of Kazakhstan contain sources of scholarly value for studying and understanding the spread of Islam and the use of religious texts in the spiritual and cultural life of the region. Future studies need to compare the practice of using Qur'ān texts on paper and on different household items made from wood, leather, metal, and other materials by the representatives of sedentary life and nomads. It is important to note that, historically, Islam has always had regional characteristics and therefore, determining the religiosity of residents of different regions of Kazakhstan within its territorial scope remains relevant. This requires cataloging, systematization, and typological and semantic analysis.

Author Contribution

Shynar Kaliyeva: conceptualization, supervision, writing – original draft; **Anar Mustafayeva:** methodology, writing – review & editing; **Yktyiar Paltore:** writing – review & editing; **Yerkinbek Shokay:** formal analysis; visualization.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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