

## **Boy dancers and men on horses**

*Post-colonial identity and gender policy in modern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan*

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the interactions between the process of constructing national identity in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and contemporary gender policy in both states. Despite trying to establish unique post-Soviet and anti-colonial national identities, modern politicians are forced to use the borders, identities, and narratives manufactured by the Soviet Union, creating historical dis/continuities and blurring the line between pre-colonial, Soviet, and post-Soviet in each of the republics. Both countries have turned to their history of Islam to make up a central part of their self-image, and modern discourses around LGBTQ rights often use a dichotomy between “Western” and “Muslim” to justify their positions. However, strategies for ignoring queerness and social “deviance” in Central Asian cultural heritage have more similarities to Soviet practice than wholly religious influence. For these Central Asian republics, identity construction cannot truly rely on an idea of a “pre-Soviet” Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. In their attempts to build independent, unified national identities in the void left by the fall of the Soviet Union, politicians and civilians find themselves (intentionally or unintentionally) unable to create an image of their pre-colonial history without relying on the definitions generated by the Soviet colonial project — and LGBTQ individuals and communities in both countries are taking the hit.

## **Introduction**

In 2015, influenced by the growing global popularity of K-pop music and industry, Kazakh boys group Ninety One debuted with what would soon be dubbed “Q-pop,” referencing the new romanization of Kazakhstan as Qazaqstan (Danabayev et al. 2021). With aesthetic presentation typical of the K-pop genre, including “dyed hair, pastel-colored clothes, accessories such as earrings and flexible dance moves,” the group enraged traditionalists in the country who saw the band as an affront to Kazakh masculinity — which should instead be exemplified by “brave heroes riding on horses,” (Kabylova 2022). A large number of protests broke out in cities where Ninety One was set to play concerts, and the events had to be canceled. This outcry from the traditionalist sect of Kazakhstani society represents a larger tension between national identity and heritage, and a globalizing world. In Kazakhstan, like in many other countries around the world, LGBTQ rights and recognition are a major field upon which this battle is taking place.

This paper addresses the interactions between the process of constructing national identity in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and contemporary gender policy in both states. In a lot of ways, these countries mimic the same post-colonial nation building strategies as their post-Soviet peers: Georgia and Ukraine both turned to their respective national churches after the fall to find an anti-colonial (anti-Russia) method of national identification, and Polish Catholicism continued to be a part of independent Polish identity even after the success of the Solidarity movement (Shevtsova 2023). Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have both turned toward their respective populations’ Muslim histories, even as both nations also try to maintain an official policy of secularity and separation of church and state. Out of fear of Islamic extremism, such as that of the Taliban which has taken over control in nearby Afghanistan, both states have placed grave importance on defining acceptable and unacceptable forms of Islam. Acceptable Islam is usually considered as such through the label of “traditional” Islam, in reference to historical cultural practices of Islam in daily life for the titular populations of each country. The result is the drawing of very hard lines by government policy around what is and is not Kazakhstani or Uzbekistani behavior in all parts of life. Just as skinny jeans meant an affront to the horse-riding ancestors of the Kazakh people, hijabs are not allowed in schools in Uzbekistan, and girls must instead wear a style of veil that the government has decided has more associations with Uzbek cultural traditions (“Uzbekistan: Hijabs may be worn, but not in schools”).

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, like their Central Asian neighbors, are post-Soviet Muslim-majority countries where ethnicity and religion are conceptualized as interlinked. Uzbeks and Kazakhs are imagined to be “de facto Muslims” by their own communities (Peyrouse 2004). Therefore, both governments have used this level of homogeneity as the basis for social unity in their postcolonial contexts. Both maintained their respective Communist Party leadership after the fall of the Soviet Union, turning those same politicians into the presidents and representatives of their new, independent nations. They are presently developing programs to increase English language education in their countries: the trilingual country project in Kazakhstan and the English-Speaking Nation project in Uzbekistan. While independent

Uzbekistan maintained the Soviet law criminalizing homosexuality, Kazakhstan decriminalized homosexual relations in 1998, though it has failed to pass any other supporting legislation.

I use both countries as points of comparison for the other, as well as to demonstrate that neither is entirely unique in its relation to Soviet colonialism. It is easy to assume that the essential piece in understanding the difference in policies between the two countries is a conflict between “Western” and “Muslim” values – especially when focusing on LGBTQ rights and liberties. And indeed, there are times when politicians and residents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan invest in the dichotomy to justify a prejudicial system. However, the machinations behind the present status of gender policy in both countries is made up of their histories with Islam as much as it is their histories with the Soviet Union — but they are also more than the sum of these parts. Through an understanding of these nations as postcolonial actors, I want to resist the popular urge to identify nations as *regressive* or *backwards* and/or in need of a Westernizing, modernizing mission. This is particularly important for audiences in the United States, which is consistently invested in juxtaposing ‘Western’ ideas with Muslim ones. As this paper attempts to contribute to the growing field at the intersection of nationalism and sexuality, it is important to be intentional not to use LGBTQ rights as a “hegemonic and ‘orientalising’ manifestation of power relations between the ‘West’ and ‘the rest of the world’” (Kulpa 2004). This remains true despite, or indeed because of, the ways that homophobia and transphobia in the region is “rooted in nationalism and propelled by anti-western anti-imperialist sentiments,” (Wiedlack 2023).

It is important to note that there are far fewer sources about Uzbekistan than Kazakhstan because the former has been, since the 1990s, much more closed off to foreign researchers and has tighter control over its internet and media. Although there have been more openings in recent years, we are still seeing the effects of the closed-off period in the lack of literature concerning Uzbekistani society.

## **Historical Context**

Although it was tsarist Russia that first made colonial claims to the region of Central Asia, it wasn’t until the Soviet era that Russia concerned itself with most facets of daily life. During the Soviet era, Soviet administrators saw themselves as “bearers of modern European cultural norms” on what was more or less an imperial civilizing mission in the classical sense (Northrop 2004). Distinct from the strategies of other Western colonial powers, however, was the Soviet goal of making Central Asians into Soviet citizens — images of the New Soviet Man and Woman, rather than colonial subjects. Through government initiatives, education, and other linguistic and cultural interventions, the Central Asian republics would turn from colonial acquisitions into centers of Soviet citizenship in their own right. The orientalist image of the East as backward, incorrect, and in need of Western assistance was similar, but the image of success was quite distinct from other colonial relations.

The Soviet Union drew borders between the nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan with focus on centers of different ethnic populations. The borders were not entirely without basis, but were largely arbitrary — there are Tajik-majority cities in Uzbekistan, Uzbek-majority cities in Kazakhstan and so forth. Central Asia was not considered a complete monolith — the government in each republic focused on the “un-Soviet” traits of their identified ethnic group. Despite Stalin’s general policies of ignoring women’s issues in most of the Soviet Union, women’s councils, or *Zhenotdel*, were permitted to remain in place in Central Asia due to their Islamic histories and cultural practices (Northrop 2004). In Uzbekistan, the focus became culturally specific practices of veiling and seclusion for women. In Kazakhstan, the Soviet administration identified sedentarization through collective farms, rather any specific gendered practice, as a more pertinent goal — though they still targeted, policed, and restricted Islamic practice in the name of gender equality (Kane and Gorbenko 2016).

In Uzbekistan, Soviets found that Uzbeks by and large did not identify themselves with the class position of the proletariat. Unable to assert the use of socialist analysis to a population who did not see themselves as an oppressed worker class, regional administrators turned to women as an underclass and “surrogate proletariat” (Northrop 2004). They outlawed practices such as polygyny, brideprice, forced marriage, and female seclusion. However, they were fixated on the visibility of the veil as a symbol of the repression and backwardness of Islam and Uzbek culture and arranged multiple mass de-veiling events known collectively as *hujum*, or an attack on the old ways. Counter to Soviet goals, though, making the head-to-toe *paranji* the image of Uzbek backwardness also constructed it as a symbol of resistance to Soviet intervention for the Uzbek public. For Uzbek women, “wearing a veil became more than a narrowly religious or moral matter; for many people it also became an act of political and national resistance to an outside colonial power,” (Northrop 2004). Women who did not veil could face mob justice that saw punishing them (as far as murdering them) as a form of resistance to Soviet colonialism. Paradoxically, the *paranji* was not common practice before the Soviet Union took up arms against the veil. By establishing it as the antithesis of Soviet citizenship in Uzbekistan, however, they inadvertently popularized the veil, fundamentally changing the fabric and content of Uzbek national and ethnic identity.

As previously mentioned, the veil in Kazakhstan was never problematized by the Soviet Union en masse as it was in Uzbekistan. Instead, the government placed more emphasis on settling citizens on collective farms, considering this to be the characteristic non-Soviet trait of Kazakh cultural practice. The process was deeply traumatic on a national and generational scale; 90% of all cattle died, and the ensuing massive famines are considered genocide by Kazakh historians (Kane and Gorbenko 2016). As a result, millions of Kazakhs died or emigrated, and the newly vacant lands were promoted for resettlement by other citizens of the Soviet Union by Stalin’s government. These attacks on nomadism “generated a collective consciousness of being colonized” that differed greatly from Uzbek identification with certain aspects of Islamic practice

(Kane and Gorbenko 2016). They also dissolved existing Kazakh social structures. Ties that used to be built around regional and kinship bonds were now torn apart and replaced with individual connections, fundamentally changing how Kazakhs related to themselves and their communities. During the Soviet era, for example, Kazakhstan had the greatest rate of interethnic marriage of all the Central Asian republics, largely due to the large-scale immigration of Europeans in combination with the decimated indigenous Kazakh population. Although sedentarization policies were motivated primarily by collectivization goals, the transformation of the previously existing social fabric resulted in changes to attitudes around family and relationships.

### **Contemporary LGBTQ Policy**

Understanding the above differences in how Islam was practiced before the Soviet Union and how it was treated during Soviet rule is necessary to understand differences between the present conditions for LGBTQ communities between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. While Uzbekistan has maintained the Soviet law criminalizing both forced and consensual homosexual relations between men, Kazakhstan decriminalized same-sex relations in 1998 but still lacks any anti-discrimination or protective legislation. Medical and legal gender transition is possible in Kazakhstan, although the law is very restrictive; citizens 21 and older seeking changes to the identity on their official documents must submit themselves to 30 days in a psychiatric facility for observation by a list of specialists, deemed relevant by the government, to determine if they will undergo hormone therapy (Dairova 2021). Undergoing hormone therapy and forced sterilization are legally mandated before they can apply to a government commission that ultimately decides if they can make the necessary changes to their name and sex markers. In 2020, the government added a time limit of six months to this final part of the process, which has sped up the process somewhat (Dairova 2021).

On the other hand, as with their laws on homosexuality, Uzbekistan has maintained Soviet-era laws that allow legal and medical sex changes under psychiatric evaluation and recommendation. Although this seems similar to Kazakhstan's process in concept, getting through the necessary steps is much less clear and more difficult to accomplish because the law is antiquated and the officials who theoretically are in charge of the process are unfamiliar with it due to disuse (Mirovalev 2023). Additionally, in Kazakhstan, where LGBTQ rights groups are permitted to exist, activists play a large role in getting transgender citizens through the system, helping them find doctors and sympathetic officials, and providing general support and direction that would be impossible in Uzbekistan (Sekerbayeva 2022).

### **Nationalism, religion, and anti-LGBTQ sentiment in Uzbekistan**

In *De-Centering Western Sexualities*, Robert Kulpa elaborates the use of time in national narratives; as these countries try to establish themselves as independent entities, "the Present is a way to achieve a 'golden future', when the 'golden past' will be reinstalled anew" (Kulpa 2014). Kulpa refers here to the common use of an idealized version of a nation's history to justify policy

in the present that will in turn determine the future. Although Kulpa was writing about Central and Eastern European post-socialist countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan clearly mimic similar strategies in their conflation of religious, nationalist, and heterosexist discourses.

Uzbekistan “capitalized on the cultural symbolism of Islam” and has incorporated it into the grouping of characteristics the government has selected as sufficiently Uzbekistani (Lenz-Raymann 183). Relying on this association, the government actively takes the position that “same-sex desire is incompatible with Islamic and Uzbek traditional values,” (Aripova 2022). A dichotomy is constructed, with Uzbekness and Islam on one side, and the West and non-heterosexual ways of being on the other. In this way, modern Uzbek homophobia imitates Russian styles of homophobia, with its own law similar to the notorious Russian law prohibiting education on non-heterosexual identities for minors. Mirziyoyev, the current president of Uzbekistan who was elected in 2016 as the second ever president of an independent Uzbekistan, has told the United Nations directly that he will not decriminalize homosexuality because doing so is “irrelevant” to Uzbek society. The “absence of any discourse of same-sex desire under Soviet rule” continues in Uzbekistan through official and unofficial policy (Aripova 2022).

Here there appears a specific colonial irony in the relationship between post-Soviet Uzbek nationalism and discourses around LGBTQ people that is unique to Uzbekistan. Identity-building in the post-Soviet era has relied on rejecting “Soviet-ness” as a marker of colonial history and turning to “pre-Soviet national heritage,” yet it was the Soviet Union that first criminalized homosexuality in Uzbekistan (Yemelianova 2014) (Aripova 2022). Although the indigenous Islamic *Jadid* movement from the end of the tsarist and beginning of the Soviet period also denounced same-sex acts, that was a position that was fundamentally contrary to the wider social conditions in the area, where same-sex male relations were common (Aripova 2022).

The area that is now Uzbekistan had a long history of *bachi*, or boy dancers, who would dress in feminine clothing and perform for an all-male audience, with whom they would sometimes have sexual or romantic relations. Despite this widespread evidence of pre-revolutionary same-sex desire, the post-colonial government of Uzbekistan looks to the version of its history that was written during its colonial era to determine what it defines as anti-colonial positioning. This “top-down homophobia” uses a false image of “traditional values” that mimics foreign Muslim and Russian patriarchal and heteronormative orders to construct an ethnic and national identity that is removed from the country’s pre-colonial past (Aripova 2022).

Russia first set about eliminating homosexual practices in the country to impose what they believed to be Europeanness — yet now, it is queer and transgender identities that are constructed as a form of Westernization. The government of Uzbekistan, constituted by the same politicians it had before the dissolution of the USSR, still ultimately identifies itself as adjacent to Russia in some respects, which is clear here. The image of Uzbekistan utilized by policy creators in the country was developed through Soviet education, which erased any mentions of homosexuality in Uzbek religious and cultural practice. Therefore, “Russian” no longer bears the

marker of “Western,” and a wide swath of policies that used to be considered impositions of Soviet colonialism are now accepted parts of culture and politics in Uzbekistan. Access to Uzbekistan’s pre-colonial history is prevented by the impacts and transformations of Soviet society and policy — past, present, and future “collapse” on top of each other, and only certain histories that serve the purposes of the state can become canonized (Kulpa 2012).

### **National Identity, Religion, and Silence in Kazakhstani LGBTQ Discourse**

For all that legislation is more open in Kazakhstan concerning LGBTQ identities, the nationalist focus on preserving traditions from pre-Soviet times and transferring them into modern Kazakhstani lives — similar to Uzbekistan’s strategies — continues to reject expansive understandings of gender or sexuality. The versions of morality and tradition that the government promotes “confirm the supremacy of specific ethnic traditions and norms,” especially regarding family-related discourse, establishing a “hierarchy of gendered behaviors” that punishes deviant sexual and gender expressions (Arystanbek 2021). Although Kazakhstan has no required sexual education courses, they do have a state-approved program that acts as a tool to teach children how to have moral and healthy relationships, referencing national culture as the ultimate truth. The textbook uses silence to erase non-heterosexual relationships and desire and implicitly establish them as deviant, all with the lens of preserving culture and history (Levitanus 2022). The governing politicians of Kazakhstan usually play into its multi-ethnic history and present, but the image of morality that is presented in these textbooks clearly uses conceptions of Kazakh norms as a point of reference.

Another dynamic in the treatment of LGBTQ Kazakhstani is that of *uyat*, which uses a sense of dedication to the community, the state, and their values to motivate punishing those who step out of line with shaming (Thibault and Caron 2022). Globalization and urbanization in Kazakhstan have reduced the frequency with which Kazakhstani generally allow *uyat* to impact their opinions and actions, but talking about sexual matters, including alternative sexualities and relationships, remains taboo (Thibault and Caron 2022). This too is connected to nationalist discourses, which perceive the Kazakh language as too pure to be used to talk about such subjects. In fact, when conversations about sex and sexuality are had, they are overwhelmingly held in Russian rather than Kazakh (Levitanus 2022). This is especially important to note because of the popularity of Russian television and internet in Kazakhstan, which allows for homophobic Russian discourses to play a large part in Kazakh conversations concerning the issue. There is also a significant holdover from Soviet rhetoric around homosexuality and gender deviance. In her interviews with queer and transgender Kazakhs, Mariya Levitanus found that many of them named the source of the silence around LGBTQ existence in Kazakhstan to be Soviet attitudes and policy. Levitanus posits that both *uyat*-imposed silence and Soviet cultural values of silence surrounding sex may be building on each other to create the complications of non-heteronormative life in Kazakhstan (Levitanus 2022).

Kazakhstan, like its neighbors, maintains Islam as an essential part of national identity and uses it as a tool in the post-Soviet context. Although Uzbekistan is more repressive in their policies toward “non-traditional” Islam, both countries share similar religious regulation strategies with muftiates and government boards that work closely together. Just after independence, every major party in Kazakhstan cited Islam as an “integral component of the Kazakh nation” (Yemelianova 2014). Kazakhstan had its own Islamic revival after independence, and it would be false to say that religious leadership within the country does not impact social opinion. The head of the muftiate, which controls all the official registered mosques in the country, declared homosexuality and bisexuality one of the greatest sins a person can commit (Sekerbayeva 8). In total, the superimposition of Soviet and Muslim narratives of Kazakh/stani history has removed any room for sexual and gender deviance and manufactures the perception of Kazakhstan as a particularly virtuous nation, within which conversations about things such as sex should not be discussed (Thibault and Caron 2022). In the process, the nation inevitably reconstructs the same discourses (or lack thereof) that existed during the Soviet epoch. In trying to form a future around a specifically selected image of the past, the country exists instead in a state of dis/continuity, constantly undergoing transition and yet also static in the versions of themselves that existed up to a century ago. Here, the line between colonial and postcolonial becomes blurred.

## **Conclusion**

The intersection of religion, nation, and LGBTQ rights in the post-Soviet context is unique, but it ultimately has the power to tell us more about what “nation” is, what it means, and what it does. I intend this piece to be in conversation with works such as Maryna Shevtsova’s *Religion, Nation, State, and Anti-Gender Politics in Georgia and Ukraine* which discusses the relationship between two countries with their own historical Orthodox Christian churches and how their pre-Soviet and Soviet histories have created contemporary conditions for anti-LGBTQ and anti-feminist discourses. I expected similar conditions in Central Asia: Countries with strong associations between ethnicity and religion forced into atheism during the Soviet period rebound into religious identity in the absence of the USSR, even as they struggle to appease the international community with (neo)liberal gender policies. I was, to a certain extent, correct. However, I underestimated the impact that the artificial nature of the national borders in the area would play on this process. For the Central Asian republics, identity construction cannot rely on a true idea of a “pre-Soviet” Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan. Instead, modern politicians are forced to use the borders, identities, and histories constructed by the Soviet Union, creating dis/continuities and blurring the line between pre-colonial, Soviet, and post-Soviet in each of the republics.

Although tension between ideas of the “West” and Islam in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is used to motivate conservative discourses, it is the propensity for silence instilled in 70 years of Soviet control that drives the insistence that queerness and social deviance aren’t part of Central



Asian cultural heritage rather than wholly religious influence. The region reveals the fragility of the theoretical division between Soviet and post-Soviet, acting as a living critique of “transition” as a paradigm for political and economic developments in post-socialist nations (Gal and Kilgman 2000).

In their attempts to build independent, unified national identities in the void left by the fall of the Soviet Union, anti-colonial sentiments drive politicians to center their messaging on what their countries were before Russia. Yet, they find themselves (intentionally or unintentionally) unable to create an image of their pre-colonial history without relying on the identity definitions generated by the Soviet colonial project — and LGBTQ individuals and communities in both countries are taking the hit.

New laws in Russia declaring all LGBTQ rights activism as anti-governmental terrorism will inevitably release a ripple effect on countries like those in Central Asia which still find themselves culturally, politically, and economically connected to the country. For all the contradictions in Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani policies and attitudes regarding Russia, Russian language media, news, and internet are significant players in national discourses for both countries. Further research on the continuing interactions between nation, identity, religion, and history is more important than ever as we wait to see the potentially international impacts of this legislation. Caution is necessary, however, to ensure that scholars, especially scholars from the Global North and imperial core such as myself, do not attempt to fill these gaps in historical knowledge for the purpose of uncovering some truer version of the past. As Tjasa Kancler posits in their article “Body Politics, Trans\* Imaginary, and Decoloniality,” while it is worthwhile to challenge these national narratives that are often upheld at the expense of minority populations, forming a “new truth, which is coming from the past,” (Kancler 2020) a better future must involve reinterpreting the past without relying on any single version of history on its own. Instead, the map created through considering the intersections between different histories is the tool we need to deconstruct the impacts of colonial and imperial social, economic, and political structures.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are nations with many rich histories which may appear confusing and paradoxical without the full consideration of a decolonial lens. Recognizing what is and is not “true” in the grand narratives of these countries is only useful insofar as it allows us to open our eyes to the impossibility of capturing the full scope of “truth” for any nation.

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